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# Sex Trafficking of Women and Girls in a Southern Ontario Region: Police File Review Exploring Victim Characteristics, Trafficking Experiences, and the Intersection With Child Welfare

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Domestic sex trafficking is a growing crime in Canada, with the majority of victims being children and youth. Youth involved with Child Welfare (CW) are vastly over-represented among sex trafficking victims. Yet, it is poorly understood why these youth are so vulnerable, particularly within the Canadian context. The goal of the current study was to increase our understanding of the elevated risk status of CW involved youth who are victimized by sex traffickers, as well as explore routes into sex trafficking. To address this goal, researchers collaborated with local CW and police agencies to conduct a secondary data analysis of sex trafficking cases from 2008 to 2016. In total, data were included on 223 victims, 52 of these cases were involved with CW. Findings underscore the high-risk status of CW youth victimized by sex trafficking. All CW involved sex trafficking victims were recruited under the age of 18. CW victims were more likely to use alcohol, cocaine, and crystal methamphetamine; live in a group home; and experience childhood maltreatment. Traffickers utilized online platforms and relationships to recruit youth. Results from this study suggest early identification of high-risk status should be a priority for CW agencies. Moreover, professionals working with youth in various capacities such as, schools, hospitals, and mental health centers should be knowledgeable about risk, recruitment by traffickers, and warning signs of victimization.

## **Public Significance Statement**

Youth in care of child welfare are at enhanced risk of being recruited into sex trafficking. CW victims are alarmingly young and present with complex psychosocial histories. Traffickers utilize online platforms and preexisting relationships in recruitment and employ grooming strategies rather than violence or threats in the process of recruitment.

*Keywords:* child welfare, sex trafficking, exploitation, recruitment, law enforcement

Sex trafficking consists of the recruitment and exploitation of an individual through use of threats, force, coercion, deception or abuse of power for the purpose of a commercial sex act (United Nation's Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2014). It is one of the most common forms of human trafficking and involves the selling of persons for sex domestically, within country borders, and internationally, across country borders. The majority of avail-

able research is on the international industry, leaving gaps in our understanding for the exploitation of domestic individuals (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Hepburn & Simon, 2010). Although the exact numbers of sex trafficking victims<sup>1</sup> are unknown (Public Safety Canada, 2012), the International Labour Office (ILO) reports approximately 4.5 million people worldwide are trafficked for sex (ILO, 2012). The province of Ontario has been identified as a major hub for sex trafficking, with 75% of Ontario's cases occurring within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA; RCMP, 2014). Growing public awareness and concern on issues of Canadian sex trafficking of youth (under age 18) has led to both Federal and

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<sup>1</sup> In the literature on sex trafficking, terminology is a contentious issue. The words "victim" and "survivor" are two words that are used to describe individuals who have been trafficked. The term "victim" is often used when referring to an individual who is in the process of being recruited or currently being trafficked/exploited, while "survivor" is used when referring to an individual who is no longer being trafficked. The current study accessed participant data through a criminal lens on women and girls who were, at the time, being exploited. Thus, we view these individuals as victims of a crime and use the term "victim" throughout the paper.

Provincial antitrafficking task forces and with these initiatives comes the call for relevant research to inform best practices.

By virtue of age, youth from all sectors of the population are at risk of involvement in sex trafficking. In fact, the majority of victims are recruited as minors between ages 12 and 14 (Jordan, Patel, & Rapp, 2013; Smith, Healy Vardaman, & Snow, 2009). The developmental vulnerabilities of youth such as identity formation, the need for belonging, desire for autonomy, desire for romantic relationships and poor problem-solving skills prime this population as a target for psychological coercion and manipulation (Schwartz, 2015). In addition, youth are highly accessible online via social media platforms, making it easy for traffickers to connect with them and build relationships anonymously (Greenbaum, Crawford-Jakubiak, & the Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2015). However, some populations of youth are at greater risk for recruitment than others. A particularly robust finding in the literature is that youth involved with child welfare (CW) are at an elevated risk for being victimized for sex trafficking (Landers, McGrath, Johnson, Armstrong, & Dollard, 2017). Likewise, CW agencies, are becoming increasingly concerned about how to improve the protection of their vulnerable youth in an empirically supported way (O'Brien, White, & Rizo, 2017). Unfortunately, there is limited Canadian empirical research available to inform antisex trafficking initiatives. Using Canadian definitions of sex trafficking, the current study seeks to investigate a sample of sex trafficked youth within an Ontario district in order to compare those with and without CW involvement on age of recruitment, exposure to child maltreatment, substance use, criminal behavior and trafficking experiences.

### **Sex Trafficking and Victim Involvement in Child Welfare**

Previous research has repeatedly highlighted that among sex trafficked youth, CW involvement is elevated (Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Estes & Weiner, 2001; Fong & Berger Cardoso, 2010; Gragg, Petta, Bernstein, Eisen, & Quinn, 2007; Williams & Frederick, 2009). One report indicated that 85% of trafficked youth have a history of involvement with CW and 75% have lived in foster care (Gragg et al., 2007). Researchers have speculated on why sex trafficked youth are overrepresented in CW. Risk based research has highlighted the overwhelming rates of childhood maltreatment experiences among trafficked individuals, particularly exposure to childhood sexual abuse (Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Farley, Lynne, & Cotton, 2005; Fedina, Williamson, & Perdue, 2016; Grace, Starck, Potenza, Kenney, & Sheetz, 2012; Havlicek, Huston, Boughton, & Zhang, 2016; Kotrla, 2010; Moore, Houck, Hirway, Barron, & Goldberg, 2017; Raymond, Hughes, & Gomez, 2001; Roe-Sepowitz, 2012). Many youth come into the care of CW due to experiences of childhood maltreatment, while others are referred for experiences of childhood adversity (Simmons-Horton, 2017). Additionally, not all youth who experience childhood maltreatment are involved with CW due to issues such as, underreporting of maltreatment incidents, lack of follow-up on cases, differences in the definition and interpretation of what "maltreatment" is by service and care providers. Nonetheless, the ruptured familial relationships and experiences of childhood adversity are circumstances that place CW youth at heightened risk for exploitation because traffickers target

these youths' unmet needs for positive caregiver relationships, love and belonging. In addition, CW youth are more likely to exhibit runaway behaviors that place them at risk for recruitment on the streets (Landers et al., 2017). Despite a growing body of literature on risk for sex trafficking, there is limited empirical research available examining the shared and unique characteristics and experiences of sex trafficked youth involved with CW compared to non-CW involved youth. Given the overlap between CW involvement and sex trafficking involvement, understanding the unique characteristics of this exploited group of youth might allow for early identification of risk for recruitment and special considerations for the placement of at-risk youth in care.

### **Recruitment and Entrapment**

Recruitment refers the targeting of locations where traffickers find their potential victims. Youth are recruited across all geographic regions including metropolitan, micropolitan, and rural communities (Cole & Sprang, 2015). Traffickers focus on locations where vulnerable youth spend unmonitored time. With the insurgence of social media usage among youth and the anonymity afforded with online connections, recruitment is increasingly taking place on sites like Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter (Greenbaum, Crawford-Jakubiak, & the Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2015; Latonero, 2011), as well as on dating applications like Tinder. In fact, one study found that between 41.7% and 52.0% of traffickers use the Internet to recruit youth (Cole & Sprang, 2015). Recruitment also takes place on the streets in malls, in and around schools (middle/high), bus stations, courthouses, bars, parks, restaurants, and playgrounds (Boxill & Richardson, 2007; Moore et al., 2017; Smith, Healy Vardaman, & Snow, 2009). Typically, traffickers have greater success in recruiting vulnerable youth who are homeless, involved with gangs, in transitional or unstable housing, suffering from drug and alcohol addictions, and residing in abusive households (Saewyc, MacKay, Anderson, & Drozda, 2008). While researchers have cited that youth involved with CW are targets while in care (Choi, 2015; Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Fong & Berger Cardoso, 2010; O'Brien et al., 2017; Williams & Frederick, 2009), there is no research examining whether there are specific trends in the targeting and recruitment of youth who reside in foster and group homes. Likewise, it is unclear how traffickers proceed to entrap these youth once they have recruited them.

Entrapment refers to the strategies traffickers use to engage youth once they have made contact with them. Trafficker strategies to entrap youth can be divided into two categories, grooming and aversive strategies. Grooming involves providing the target youth with basic needs (e.g., shelter, food) and desires, including showering her with presents, attention, money, and even drugs (Raphael, Reichert, & Powers, 2010; Schwartz, 2015). The trafficker's grooming process often includes meeting the youth's need for safety, security, love, and belonging by taking on the role of a caring, available, and attentive boyfriend (Schwartz, 2015). Comparatively, aversive strategies include threats, physical violence, or pressure from the trafficker or others involved (Kennedy, Klein, Bristowe, Cooper, & Yuille, 2007; Williamson & Prior, 2009). Victims may be entrapped in more than one way (e.g., love and violence) and both grooming and/or aversive methods may be used prior to recruitment into sex trafficking or at the time of recruit-

ment and thereafter (Kennedy et al., 2007). A trafficker's recruitment strategy intersects with the vulnerability of the youth who is victimized. For example, a youth with a drug addiction may be offered "free" drugs by the trafficker in the grooming process and a homeless youth seeking shelter may be offered a "free" room at a hotel. Unfortunately, "free" offerings become debt and the youth is then asked to work to pay it back (Estes & Weiner, 2001; Kennedy et al., 2007; Williamson & Prior, 2009).

### Research Approaches to Sex Trafficking

Given the covert and transient nature of sex trafficking, exceptional challenges exist in research (Hom & Woods, 2013). One of the most challenging factors is accessing victimized individuals for research. Involvement in sex trafficking often includes involvement in illegal behaviors (e.g., theft, drug trafficking), stigmatization from the public, and risk to the victim, all of which impacts individuals' willingness to participate in research and an increased likelihood of unreliable answers for privacy protection (Tyldum & Brunovskis, 2005). There is an added challenge in researching youth victims of trafficking, as researchers have reporting obligations to child welfare (Zimmerman & Watts, 2003), which may deter youth engagement in this research. Challenges in accessing this hidden population for research has led to specific methodologies for studying sex trafficking, most of which present a host of limitations in the generalizability of the data obtained. Sex trafficking research has largely relied upon participant self-identification, retrospective accounts and convenience sampling (e.g., Lederer & Wetzel, 2014; Moore et al., 2017; O'Brien et al., 2017; Raphael et al., 2010; Reid & Piquero, 2014), all of which yield a range of sampling biases. Without corroborating information from other sources, the simplistic questions used for self-identification (e.g., "In the past 6 months, have you been paid for having sexual relations with someone?"; O'Brien et al., 2017) do not gather enough information to accurately determine if individuals' exploitive experiences align with legal definitions of sex trafficking. Additionally, there are known challenges for victim participation in research including mistrust of others, fear of their trafficker, and denial of being a victim of a crime (Pearce, 2009). Therefore, we can assume that those who identify themselves as a victim of sex trafficking for participation in research are likely not representative of victims who do not. Another common method for accessing participants is within treatment or community programs (e.g., homeless outreach programs, sex trafficking community intervention programs; Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Landers et al., 2017; Roe-Sepowitz, 2012; Twill, Green, & Traylor, 2010). While these studies provide valuable insights into issues of sex trafficking, there are inherent biases in their samples, as victimized individuals who have access to programs, likely also live in urban areas and have access to resources, support, and perhaps the financial means to make it easier to connect with treatment programs. Thus, the assumption can be made that individuals who self-identify, seek or obtain access to treatment are systematically different from those who do not.

The current study utilizes a unique approach for gathering data on sex trafficked individuals. Through collaboration with police services, researchers were able to examine chart data on all sex trafficked individuals police opened investigations for between 2008 and 2016. Partnering with police services allowed for the

data to bypass obligatory reporting issues, as all underage victims have already been brought to the attention of child welfare, therefore allowing the inclusion of younger victims in the sample. Using corroborating information from family members, the victim and other sources, these individuals were identified under Canadian law as being trafficked, whether or not the individual themselves self-identified as a victim. In addition, a local CW agency provided information about victim CW involvement allowing for the comparison of victims with and without CW involvement. The current study offers a novel and important exploration into the constellation of characteristics and trafficking experiences of sex trafficked victims within the Canadian context.

### Study Objectives

The current study is a secondary data analysis of police and CW files that aims to enhance the understanding of the characteristics of trafficked females in an Ontario district by conducting a comparison of those with and without CW involvement. Based on the literature reviewed, it was hypothesized that CW victims will more likely be domestic (i.e., Canada as their country of origin), will have been recruited at a younger age, will be more likely to experience childhood maltreatment, more likely to use alcohol and drugs, and the time between recruitment and police investigation initiation would be shorter compared to non-CW victims. With regards to recruitment and entrapment, it was expected that compared to non-CW victims, CW victims will be more likely to experience multiple grooming and entrapment strategies, live in a group home while being trafficked and meet their trafficker online.

### Method

The current study was completed in collaboration with a local police agency (York Regional Police) and child welfare agency (York Region Children's Aid Society), who requested assistance in understanding sex trafficking of underage youth in their vicinity. These two agencies had a preexisting relationship facilitated by a specific human trafficking protocol the two agencies cocreated, that involves CW workers reporting suspected sex trafficking cases to police and police notifying CW when a minor is identified as being at-risk for or is currently being exploited. The geographic area serviced by these agencies spans approximately 1,700 square kilometers in the Greater Toronto Area. It is one of Canada's fastest growing suburban municipalities with 1.2 million residents. The region contains high ethnocultural diversity with 78% identifying as a visible minority and 47% born outside of Canada. Crime in the region has risen 8% over the past five years, with human trafficking related offenses being one of the highest rates in Ontario (RCMP, 2014; Statistics Canada, 2017).

York Regional Police staff members on the Human Trafficking Team reviewed 275 sex trafficking case files which were investigated between May 2008 through December 2016. Sex trafficking in these investigations came to the attention of the police for various reasons including, but not limited to, victims seeking police assistance, cases with victim cooperation and charges against the accused trafficker, cases without victim cooperation, proactive cases where tips were provided, and police involvement for other reasons (e.g., responding to reported violence). Due to issues of confidentiality and privacy, researchers were not given

direct access to case files and all data were de-identified. The research team consulted with police to determine variables of interest to extract from the case files. Data were collected from police reports, police notes, investigative summaries, audio or video interviews, statements from victims or their families, and information gathered from police staff involved in the investigation. Some of the data provided to the researchers by the police were qualitative and later organized into coherent categories. The coded data was later reviewed by the Detective Sergeant to ensure accuracy. A senior supervisor at York Region Children's Aid Society then reviewed the identified victims to determine which have current or past involvement with a Canadian child welfare agency in any capacity (e.g., crown ward, temporary care custody, society wards).

The researchers provided the police with a template containing variables of interest to be extracted from the case files. Data were obtained on age of recruitment and age when sex trafficking investigation was initiated. The latter variable is important in order to obtain the length of time victims are exploited prior to police investigation. In addition, country of origin was determined in order to establish whether victims were domestic (i.e., from Canada) or international (i.e., from another country). Data were also obtained on CW involvement, exposure to child maltreatment, substance use, criminal behavior, and victim trafficking experiences. Victim trafficking experiences were broken down into where the victim was living at time of investigation initiation, as this is indicative of where they were living while being trafficked, as well as various modes of recruitment (e.g., Facebook, through a romantic relationship, strip club), and methods of entrapment by trafficker (e.g., use of grooming and aversive strategies). Information regarding the methods of recruitment and grooming strategies used by traffickers were coded into conceptually similar modes of recruitment (e.g., use of media, place of employment).

Ethics approval was obtained from York University Human Participants Review Committee for the present study. All identifying information was removed from the secondary dataset prior to providing access to the researchers. Data were inputted in an excel spreadsheet created by the authors and provided in a secure, encrypted format.

### Data Set

Data were retrieved from all sex trafficking case files ( $N = 275$ ). Of these cases, 51 were incomplete with over 90% missing data. These cases were excluded from analysis. All remaining cases ( $N = 223$ ) were identified as female in the current sample. Fifty-two were identified as being involved with a CW agency at some point in their lives, 102 had no CW involvement at all and 69 cases were unknown. Ethnic diversity was observed in the current sample, with 43% identifying as an ethnicity other than White. Six categories of ethnicity were identified within the data: White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, South Asian, and Indigenous. The majority of the sample were identified as White (57%), South Asian (17.9%) or Black/African Canadian (16.1%). No significant differences in ethnicity were observed between CW and non-CW victims.

Findings are first reported for the total sample ( $N = 223$ ) and then the file was reorganized so that comparisons could be made between CW-involved ( $N = 52$ ) and non-CW involved females

( $N = 102$ ). Given data were extracted from preexisting files and documents, missing data varied across participants and variables.

## Results

Overall group demographic variables were explored, and comparisons were made between CW and non-CW involved victims (see Table 1). Frequency and chi-squared analyses were executed to describe the characteristics of the total sample ( $N = 223$ ). Similarities and differences between the subsamples of CW and non-CW cases were then analysed using chi-squared statistics. Analyses begin first with age, followed by ethnicity, living situation prior to trafficking, childhood maltreatment experiences, substance use and criminality, and finally trafficking experiences. Effect sizes were calculated to account for unequal sample sizes using Cramer's  $V$ . All statistical assumptions were met in the present analyses.

### Age

Overall, the majority of the total sample were recruited into sex trafficking as minors ( $M = 16.77$ ,  $SD = 3.72$ ) (68.5%). In fact, all CW victims were recruited as minors (100%,  $M = 14.71$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ), whereas just over half of non-CW victims were recruited as minors (54.7%,  $M = 17.81$ ,  $SD = 4.22$ ). Thus, compared to non-CW victims, CW victims were significantly more likely to be recruited as minors ( $\chi^2(1) = 32.87$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .49$ ).

When the sex trafficking investigation was initiated, victims were, on average, over the age of 18 (66.4%,  $M = 22.82$ ,  $SD = 9.0$ ). The average time between victim recruitment into sex trafficking and the initiation of the investigation was 2.5 years ( $SD = 3.1$ ). In comparing CW and non-CW victims, approximately 80% (82.7%) of CW victims ( $M = 16.65$ ,  $SD = 2.17$ ) and a quarter (25.5%) of non-CW victims were minors at time of the investigation initiation ( $M = 21.20$ ,  $SD = 5.34$ ). This difference was statistically significant ( $\chi^2(1) = 45.57$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .54$ ). More specifically, the time (in years) between recruitment and the investigation initiation was shorter for CW victims ( $M_{years} = 1.75$ ,  $SD = 2.17$ ) than non-CW victims ( $M_{years} = 2.74$ ,  $SD = 3.28$ ), but this difference was not statistically significant.

### Country of Origin

The majority of the sample were domestic, with their country of origin being Canada (81.8%). 18% were from other countries including Europe (2.5%), Asia (11%), South America and the Caribbean (3%) and Africa (1.5%). CW victims were significantly more likely to report Canada being their country of origin (98%) than non-CW victims (85%) ( $\chi^2(1) = 5.88$ ,  $p = .01$ , Cramer's  $V = .20$ ).

### Living Situation Prior to Trafficking

Police staff extracted data on where victims were living prior to being trafficked. The majority of the sample identified coming from a single-parent household (38.5%) or a two-parent household (33.3%). The remaining 28% lived with extended family (5.8%), in group homes (12.2%), foster parents (5.8%), or with legal or adoptive parents (3.8%). CW victims were more likely to identify coming from a group home (39.6%), single-parent home (25%), or



Table 1  
Socio-Demographic Characteristics

Demographics	Full sample		CW sample		Non CW sample		$\chi^2$	p value
	(N = 223)		(n = 52)		(n = 102)			
Age when recruited into sex trafficking							32.87	.00**
Under 18	111	69%	52	100%	47	55%		
18 and over	51	32%	—	—	39	45%		
Age when investigation initiated							45.57	.00**
Under 18	75	34%	43	83%	26	26%		
18 and over	148	66%	9	17%	76	75%		
Country of origin							5.88	.01*
Canada	162	82%	50	98%	81	85%		
Other	36	18%	1	2%	14	15%		
Europe	5	2.5%	—	—	2	2%		
Asia	22	11%	—	—	5	5%		
South America and Caribbean	6	3%	1	2%	4	4%		
Africa	3	1.5%	—	—	3	3%		
Living situation prior to trafficking								
Two parent household	52	33%	4	8%	37	46%		
Single parent household	60	39%	12	25%	33	41%		
Multifamily household	1	1%	—	—	1	1%		
Legal guardian/adoptive	6	4%	1	2%	3	4%		
Foster parents	9	6%	9	19%	—	—		
Group home	19	12%	19	40%	—	—		
Extended family	9	6%	3	6%	6	8%		

Note. CW = child welfare.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

a foster home (18.8%). Of those in care of CW, 40% were designated as crown wards, meaning children who are the legal responsibility of the government.

### Childhood Maltreatment

Victims disclosed high rates of childhood maltreatment predating their exploitation. Table 2 summarizes rates of childhood maltreatment for the entire sample, as well as for CW and non-CW groups. Seventy-five percent of the sample (74.6%) reported having experienced childhood maltreatment. Neglect was the most commonly reported type of childhood maltreatment (67%). Emotional abuse was reported by 65.8% of the sample, physical abuse by 38.2%, and sexual abuse by 15.5%. CW victims reported higher rates of childhood maltreatment (87.8%) compared to non-CW victims (67.6%) ( $\chi^2(1) = 6.20$ ,  $p = .009$ , Cramer's  $V = .20$ ).

Specifically, CW victims were more likely to experience emotional abuse ( $\chi^2(1) = 8.58$ ,  $p = .002$ , Cramer's  $V = .25$ ) and neglect ( $\chi^2(1) = 4.93$ ,  $p = .02$ , Cramer's  $V = .19$ ), compared to non-CW victims.

### Substance Use and Criminality

All victims of sex trafficking reported high rates of substance use, including drugs and alcohol. Seventy-eight percent of the total sample reported using substances, with 68.4% abusing alcohol and 74.9% using drugs. As shown in Table 3, marijuana was the most commonly used drug in the total sample (54.8%). Cocaine was the second most commonly reported used drug (32.3%). Overall, CW victims were significantly more likely to report using alcohol ( $\chi^2(1) = 6.32$ ,  $p = .01$ , Cramer's  $V = .21$ ). No significant differences were found for overall drug use between CW and

Table 2  
Childhood Maltreatment

Maltreatment types	Full sample		CW sample		Non CW sample		$\chi^2$	p value
	(N = 223)		(n = 52)		(n = 102)			
Yes	141	75%	43	88%	69	68%	6.20	.01*
No	48	25%	6	12%	31	31%		
Physical	63	38%	19	46%	33	36%	1.31	.17
Emotional	114	65%	38	81%	53	56%	8.58	.00**
Sexual	22	16%	6	17%	12	15%	.05	.51
Neglect	118	67%	38	79%	57	61%	4.93	.02*

Note. CW = child welfare.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 3  
*Substance Use*

Substances	Full sample		CW sample		Non CW sample		$\chi^2$	<i>p</i> value
	( <i>N</i> = 179)		( <i>n</i> = 52)		( <i>n</i> = 102)			
Alcohol use	119	68%	39	81%	58	60%	6.32	.01*
Drug use	134	75%	38	81%	66	68%	2.60	.08
Marijuana	85	55%	28	68%	43	51%	3.32	.05
Cocaine	50	32%	18	44%	19	22%	6.40	.01*
Ecstasy	11	7%	4	10%	7	8%	.10	.50
Prescription	8	5%	3	6%	4	5%	.38	.40
Heroin	11	7%	4	8%	4	5%	1.23	.23
Crystal meth	11	7%	6	15%	3	4%	5.24	.03*
Hash	1	1%	—	—	1	1%	.48	.68

Note. CW = child welfare.

\* *p* < .05.

non-CW groups, however there were significant differences for particular drug types. CW victims were significantly more likely to report using cocaine than non-CW victims ( $\chi^2(1) = 6.40, p = .01$ , Cramer's *V* = .22). CW victims were also significantly more likely to use crystal methamphetamine than non-CW victims (14.6% and 3.5% respectively) ( $\chi^2(1) = 5.24, p = .03$ , Cramer's *V* = .20). No drugs were used more by the non-CW sample of victims.

Just under half of the sample (47.6%) had a criminal record that predated their contact with the police for involvement in sex trafficking. Crimes reported were theft, drug possession, drug trafficking, assault, and being an inmate of a common bawdy house (i.e., brothel). There were no significant differences in crime rates between CW (52%) and non-CW groups (39%).

### Trafficking Experiences

**Living situation at time of the initiation of the police investigation.** At the time the victim was being trafficked, victims were most likely to live in a private residence (79.4%). Of the

remaining 20.6% of victims, 8.7% were living in a group home, 7.6% in a hotel, 3.8% in a foster home, and 0.5% in a shelter. Examining the CW group alone, 45.1% were reported to have been living in a group home or foster home when contacted by police (31.4% and 13.7% respectively). Of the remainder, 49% were living in a private residence, 3.9% in a hotel, and 2% were in a shelter.

**Recruitment.** Table 4 summarizes the recruitment mode and entrapment strategies (i.e., grooming and aversive strategies) used by traffickers during the recruitment process and contains comparative analyses between CW and non-CW samples. The data revealed five main modes of recruitment including online, through relationships, employment, nightlife, and as a stranger. Based on the current sample, the most common way victims meet their trafficker is online. Thirty-six percent of the total sample reported being recruited on websites such as, Kijiji or Craigslist, or through social media accounts such as, Instagram or Facebook. As shown in Table 4, there were no significant differences between CW and

Table 4  
*Recruitment Methods and Entrapment Strategies*

Methods and strategies	Full sample		CW sample		Non CW sample		$\chi^2$	<i>p</i> value
	( <i>N</i> = 223)		( <i>n</i> = 52)		( <i>n</i> = 102)			
Recruitment								
Online	64	36%	18	38%	33	39%	.04	.84
Relationship	50	28%	14	29%	25	30%	.01	.94
Employment	41	23%	4	8%	19	23%	4.33	.03*
Nightlife	9	5%	4	8%	2	2%	2.49	.11
Stranger	14	8%	8	17%	5	6%	3.94	.04*
Entrapment								
Grooming	152	85%	44	94%	79	81%	3.77	.04*
Attention/Gifts	88	48%	29	59%	46	47%	1.96	.11
Drugs	58	32%	19	39%	26	27%	2.31	.09
Money	109	60%	28	57%	60	61%	.23	.38
Housing	10	6%	3	6%	7	7%	.05	.56
Aversive	44	24%	12	25%	21	21%	.18	.41
Violence	20	11%	4	8%	9	9%	.07	.53
Threats	32	18%	10	20%	15	15%	.60	.29

Note. CW = child welfare.

\* *p* < .05.

non-CW groups for online recruitment. Twenty-eight percent (28.1%) of the total sample were recruited through a relationship. Examples provided by victims included: traffickers posing as a romantic partner, a friend recruiting them to work for their pimp, or a family member trafficking them. There were no significant differences between CW and non-CW groups for recruitment through a relationship. Twenty-three percent of the sample were recruited by their trafficker at their place of employment, most commonly a massage parlor. Non-CW victims were significantly more likely to be recruited at work (22.6%) compared to CW victims (8.3%) ( $\chi^2(1) = 4.33, p = .03$ , Cramer's  $V = .18$ ). Eight percent (7.9%) of the total sample reported that their trafficker was a stranger to them when they were recruited. For example, victims reported being approached at bus stops, in the mall, or on the street. CW victims were significantly more likely to be recruited by a stranger than Non-CW victims ( $\chi^2(1) = 3.94, p = .04$ , Cramer's  $V = .17$ ). Lastly, 5.1% of the sample reported being recruited at a nightlife event such as a club, bar or party. There were no significant differences between CW and non-CW groups.

**Entrapment strategies.** Overall, victims were significantly more likely to experience grooming strategies such as being given gifts, attention, drugs, money or offered housing, compared to aversive strategies such as violence and threats ( $\chi^2(1) = 133.28, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = 0.61$ ). Comparing CW and non-CW groups, CW victims were significantly more likely to experience grooming than non-CW victims ( $\chi^2(1) = 3.77, p = .04$ , Cramer's  $V = .16$ ), however there were no significant differences for specific types of grooming strategies experienced. Notably, being offered or given money during the early stages of recruitment was the most common form of grooming reported by victims (59.9%). Attention and gifts by the trafficker was the second most common form of grooming experienced (48.4%). Thirty-two percent (31.9%) of victims reported being groomed with drugs, however it is important to note that victims with prior drug use were significantly more likely to be groomed with drugs by their trafficker compared to nondrug users ( $\chi^2(1) = 27.43, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .40$ ). Finally, 5.5% of the sample reported being offered housing as a form of grooming. Experiences of aversive strategies were less common (24.3%), with threats (17.6%) being more common than violence (11%). There were no significant differences between CW and non-CW groups for aversive strategies.

## Discussion

The current study explored the characteristics of individuals victimized by sex trafficking in a region of southern Ontario that is known to be part of a large Canadian hub for sex trafficking. Utilizing data from law enforcement and CW, the central goals of the study were to examine the constellation of characteristics of Canadian victims of sex trafficking and to differentiate between CW and non-CW involved victims in order to better understand the ways in which CW youth are recruited and trafficked. Results extend previous literature by confirming victims of sex trafficking are most commonly domestic and living in Canada at the time of their recruitment, rather than international. Consistent with region demographics, victims were ethnically diverse, with nearly half identifying as being "non-white".

Previous research has highlighted that CW youth are overrepresented among sex trafficking victims and are targeted because of

their lack of supervision, poor family connections, and histories of trauma and abuse (Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Landers et al., 2017). CW's mandate is to work toward keeping families together. Thus, children and youth in foster care and group homes indubitably experienced a great amount of familial dysfunction prompting CW to remove them from their family's care. In the current sample, nearly 60% of CW victims reported growing up in foster-care or in group homes. This indirectly speaks to the level of familial dysfunction or stress that prompted these children to be removed from their family's care, placing them at risk for the kinds of grooming strategies employed by traffickers which target youth's need for familial love and belonging (Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014).

The intersection between sex trafficking and child welfare are twofold, youth who are extracted from trafficking are often placed in child welfare to enhance their protection and youth involved in child welfare are at risk for recruitment while in-care (Bounds, Julion, & Delaney, 2015; Fong & Berger Cardoso, 2010). Based on the current study, it is evident that a significant majority of CW youth were living in a group or foster home while being trafficked. Nearly half of the CW sample were reported to be living in a group or foster home when the police opened the trafficking investigation; a time during which the youth was being exploited. Although it is unknown if CW involvement predated exploitation, knowing where youth were living during exploitation paints a picture of the level of monitoring they received. It is also informative of the place where prevention and intervention efforts should be directed. According to these findings, CW agencies should target their protection efforts within group and foster homes. Recent preliminary evidence has demonstrated the efficacy of specialized models of care for victims of sex trafficking involved in the child welfare system, such as therapeutic foster care (Landers et al., 2017; Shuker, 2015) and residential treatment programs guided through motivational interviewing (Thomson, Hirshberg, Corbett, Valila, & Howley, 2011). However, future research is needed to examine mechanisms of change and long-term outcomes in these treatment models.

The current study is consistent with prior research in finding that victims of sex trafficking are young and most often minors (under age 18), when recruited. When comparing CW and non-CW victims, it was found that all CW victims were recruited as minors, and in fact, three years younger compared to non-CW victims. A novel finding of the current study was that CW victims were younger when sex trafficking investigations were initiated. This is likely reflective of the fact that CW victims were trafficked at a younger age, but may also be indicative of the human trafficking reporting protocol between the CW and policing agencies, whereby police are directed to cases of youth victims of sex trafficking by CW. As a result, these CW victims are drawn to the attention of police sooner than victims without CW agency involvement. Although the specifics of why CW youth are recruited at a younger age than non-CW youth is unknown, we can deduce that being under the age of 16 and involved with CW are a significant factor for recruitment and these youths need special considerations with regards to placement in group homes or foster homes.

Risk based research has identified several factors that contribute to youth victimization in sex trafficking. In particular, previous research has noted child maltreatment to be the leading risk factor



for sex trafficking victimization among youth (e.g., Choi, 2015; Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Havlicek et al., 2016). Victims of the current study experienced high rates of all subtypes of child maltreatment (i.e., neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse). CW victims in particular had elevated rates compared to non-CW victims, specifically emotional abuse and neglect. However, it is important to note that experiences of childhood maltreatment are also one of the leading reasons youth are involved with CW and thus childhood maltreatment may be underreported among the non-CW victims in our study. As such, these findings should be interpreted cautiously. With regards to experiences of childhood maltreatment, our findings suggest CW victims of sex trafficking are a distinct group of youth in child welfare. Consistent with this possibility, a 2015 study by Fallon and colleagues (Fallon et al., 2015) obtained rates of substantiated child maltreatment among Ontario families investigated by child welfare in 2013. They reported 13% experienced physical abuse, 2% sexual abuse, 24% neglect and 13% emotional abuse. Comparatively, across CW involved victims of sex trafficking in the current study, 46% reported physical abuse, 17% sexual abuse, 79% neglect, and 81% emotional abuse. The high rates of child maltreatment among sex trafficking victims indicate CW agencies should be targeting prevention and intervention efforts toward children and youth who enter their care with maltreatment trauma experiences.

The current study found drug and alcohol use, and criminal history to be common across the total sample of victims. CW victims reported higher rates of using alcohol and using cocaine and crystal meth than non-CW victims. Although we were unable to determine whether substance use originated prior, during, and/or after exploitation, those who reported using drugs were likely to be offered drugs by their trafficker during the recruitment process. Previous literature describes this form of grooming as a way of creating a dependency on the trafficker to obtain drugs (Kennedy et al., 2007). The current findings suggest CW youth are particularly vulnerable to this kind of grooming compared to non-CW youth and highlight the need for CW agencies to address substance use and addiction among their youth.

To our knowledge this is the first study to describe and compare the recruitment and entrapment strategies experienced by CW victims compared to non-CW victims. The data revealed five main modes of recruitment by traffickers; online meeting, through a relationship (e.g., friendship, romantic relationship), through place of employment, at a nightlife event, and being approached by a stranger. Consistent with prior research, traffickers are largely recruiting their target online on websites such as, Kijiji or Craigslist, or through social media accounts such as, Instagram or Facebook. However, we are not able to make inferences about who initiated contact on these platforms, namely the victim or the trafficker. The second most common way traffickers recruit targets is through a relationship. For example, they may pose as a loving and attentive boyfriend, or befriend the young woman platonically. Non-CW victims were more likely to be recruited at their place of employment than CW victims. This is likely due to the older age bracket of the non-CW sample and the freedoms that they are afforded by not being in care of CW. On the other hand, CW victims were more likely to be recruited by a stranger and approached in malls, bus shelters, or on the street. Although we did not obtain data on runaway behaviors, we speculate that the high number of CW youth recruited by strangers is due to running away

from their placement, visibility on the streets (e.g., outside late at night, loitering etc.), and poor monitoring by group and foster homes.

Entrapment strategies were divided into two categories, grooming and aversive. Previous research suggests that grooming strategies are more commonly used by traffickers than aversive strategies, simply because violence does not promote loyalty and attachment to the trafficker (Kennedy et al., 2007). Similarly, victims in the current study were significantly more likely to experience grooming strategies such as being given gifts, attention, drugs, money or offered housing, compared to aversive strategies such as violence and threats. Money, attention and gifts were the most common forms of grooming experienced by victims. CW victims were more likely to experience grooming than non-CW victims, however there were no specific differences in the type of grooming experienced.

### Limitations

Findings from the current study should be considered in the context of certain limitations. First, all victims in the current sample had police involvement and are likely not representative of all sex trafficked individuals, particularly those without police involvement. It is possible that victims without police involvement are groomed and entrapped in different ways that isolate them from police access. In addition, the victims in the sample are from a region in Southern Ontario and perhaps represent a unique cohort of trafficked individuals. For example, previous research suggests indigenous populations are at heightened risk for recruitment and are overrepresented among trafficked individuals (Sethi, 2007), however, only 5% of the current sample were identified as Indigenous. Another important limitation of the study is that the CW agency was unable to corroborate information regarding CW involvement for all victims leading to a large amount of missing data on that variable. Consequently, it is possible the rate of CW involvement was underreported in the current study. Lastly, variables of interest were extracted from each police file, however, not all variables were available in each file leading to high rates of missing data across variables.

### Implications

Despite limitations, the current study offers novel information on the characteristics of Canadian CW youth and their routes into sex trafficking. The findings highlight the urgency for CW agencies to enhance their care of at-risk youth by targeting prevention initiatives to those most at risk and increasing support and protection in CW placements. This study also illustrates the exemplary way CW and police agencies can collaborate in effectively addressing issues of sex trafficking in their shared community of service. Additionally, this study provides a Canadian specific lens to the issue of domestic sex trafficking. The results of this study will directly inform the development and use of a risk protocol used by frontline CW staff at a local agency, designed to aid staff in identifying youth in their care who are most at risk of being recruited. Moreover, this article is helping inform the prevention and intervention initiatives of CW agencies in a region of southern Ontario who are interested in providing sex trafficking specific placements and services to victims in care of CW.

## Conclusion

Taken together, the current study has truly illustrated the complex psychosocial history of victims of sex trafficking. Some of the identified characteristics and vulnerabilities of victims in the current study are: CW involvement, being underage, using substances, engaging in criminal activity, and experiencing childhood maltreatment. While research and discussions around sex trafficking victimization is overwhelmingly focused on risk and vulnerability, it is equally important to discuss resiliency. Risk and vulnerability cannot be erased from a young person's narrative, however prevention and intervention initiatives for sex trafficking should also focus on fostering youths' resiliency by providing programs and services aimed at meeting their needs for love, belonging, and connection. Likewise, training for service providers across multiple sectors is important in efforts to combat sex trafficking. Victims present in many contexts such as schools, hospitals, and community mental health centers and professionals working in these settings need to be knowledgeable about risk, vulnerability, recruitment by traffickers and warning signs of victimization (Baldwin, Eisenman, Sayles, Ryan, & Chuang, 2011; Greenbaum, Crawford-Jakubiak, & the Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2015).

Moreover, service workers interacting with victims must be aware of evidence-based methods for serving these clients including trauma-based, victim-centered and gender-sensitive frameworks (Stoklosa, Grace, & Littenberg, 2015). Along this vein, future research is needed to explore the knowledge of Canadian service providers on issues of sex trafficking among the youth they work with and to assess gaps in knowledge, as well as opportunities for programming.

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## Résumé

Le trafic sexuel domestique est un crime en hausse au Canada, qui touche majoritairement des enfants et des jeunes. Les jeunes recevant des services de protection de l'enfance sont surreprésentés parmi les victimes de trafic sexuel. Pourtant, on comprend mal pourquoi ces jeunes sont si vulnérables, particulièrement dans le contexte canadien. La présente étude visait à mieux comprendre pourquoi les jeunes recevant des services de protection de l'enfance sont plus à risque de devenir des victimes de trafic sexuel, et à explorer les voies menant au trafic sexuel. Afin d'atteindre cet objectif, les chercheurs ont collaboré avec les services de protection de l'enfance et des services de police locaux pour mener une analyse de données secondaires des cas de trafic sexuel recensés entre 2008 et 2016. Au total, des données ont été recueillies sur 223 victimes; 52 d'entre elles recevaient des services de protection de l'enfance. Les constatations soulignent que les jeunes recevant des services de protection de l'enfance sont plus à risque de devenir des victimes de trafic sexuel. Toutes les victimes de trafic sexuel recevant des services de protection de l'enfance avaient été recrutées avant l'âge de 18 ans. Les victimes recevant des services de protection de l'enfance étaient plus susceptibles de consommer de l'alcool, de la cocaïne et de la méthamphétamine en cristaux, de vivre dans un foyer collectif et d'avoir vécu des expériences de maltraitance pendant l'enfance. Les trafiquants avaient recours aux plates-formes et aux relations en ligne pour recruter leurs jeunes victimes. Les résultats émanant de cette étude laissent croire qu'une identification précoce d'une

telle vulnérabilité accrue devrait être une priorité pour les organismes de protection de l'enfance. De plus, les professionnels qui travaillent avec des jeunes à divers titres, notamment dans des écoles, des hôpitaux et des centres de santé mentale, devraient connaître les risques, les modes de recrutement des trafiquants et les signes avant-coureurs de victimisation.

**Mots-clés :** protection de l'enfance, trafic sexuel, exploitation, recrutement, répression criminelle.

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