

Alcohol and Drug Use Among People Who Began Commercial Sexual Activity Before 18 years old.

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Abstract

This study explores the factors leading to young people's initiation into underage prostitution and subsequent use of alcohol and drugs. Sex workers who began prostitution before 18 years of age were asked about their initiation into commercial sexual activity and their use of alcohol and drugs prior and subsequent to that time. Study participants were recruited in the Auckland/Northland and Waikato regions. Forty-seven sex workers who began prostitution before 18 years of age were surveyed. The results suggest an association between alcohol and drug use and underage initiation into commercial sexual activity.

Introduction

It is illegal for anyone under the age of 18 years old to be prostituted (Prostitution Reform Act 2003 Sections 20 -23). It is also illegal for anyone under the age of 18 years old to buy alcohol. Early onset of alcohol use is a predictor of higher levels of alcohol consumption and alcohol related problems later in life (Ministry of Health, 1997). The National Drug Policy identifies young people, from primary school age through to young adulthood, as a key group to focus on in the prevention of alcohol-related harm (Ministry of Health, 1998). In 2002, the Ministry of Health reported that approximately 79% of 14 to 17 year olds drank alcohol. About 31% of those aged 14 to 17 years drink alcohol every week and about one third of this group drink heavily

A number of overseas studies found a higher use of alcohol among sex workers than controls (Adalf & Zdanowicz, 1999; Bagley & Young, 1987; Minichiello, 2003; Pederson & Hegna, 2002; Potterat, Rothenberg, Muth, Darrow & Phillips-Plummer, 1998). A Norwegian study, comparing young people who were paid for sex with a control group, found there was more personal drug use among those engaged in commercial sexual activity (Gibbs, Van Brunshot & Brannigan, 1998). Furthermore they found that the parents of study participants were more likely to have alcohol and drug problems (Gibbs, Van Brunshot & Brannigan, 1998). The use of drugs have been found to be "extremely prevalent among those with sex-sale experiences" (Pederson & Hegna, 2002 p 15; Adalf & Zdanowicz, 1999). In Norway there has been a higher use of recreational drugs among females involved in commercial sexual activity and a greater use of heroin among male teens. Pederson & Hegna, (2002) noted that increased sex sale activity among boys and men correlated to the increased prevalence of heroin use in Norway in the last ten years.

In the ECPAT¹ Australia study of 451 completed questionnaires, Martyn (1998) talks of how respondents described:

“the *culture of substance abuse, overdose, and the use of alcohol and other drugs as a coping strategy*. Drugs and alcohol were viewed as an inherent part of the lifestyle surrounding commercial sexual activity and could contribute to serious health problems and also contributed to on-going commercial sexual activity.” (p. 44).

In New Zealand, there are approximately 130-150 alcohol related deaths each year. There has been an 11% increase in drunkenness among women since 1995 (Field & Casswell, 2002). In the *Youth 2000 Survey* of adolescent health and wellbeing in New Zealand 17% of adolescents drank alcohol at least once a week (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2003). In South Auckland, 32% reported at least one episode of binge drinking.

ECPAT (NZ) conducted a national survey of counsellors and welfare agencies and found over 195 known cases of young people under 18 years old, including 145 under 16 years old, who were engaged in commercial sexual activity (Saphira, 2001). Of these there was a known association with drugs in some cases. A study in the South Island of 303 female sex workers where a third had begun before the age of 18 years old found that 76% of those on the street used illegal drugs compared with a third of indoor workers. About half the women said they used alcohol when engaged in commercial sexual activity. A recent study of males involved in commercial sexual activities found that 50% of sexual encounters involved alcohol (Minichiello, Marino, Khan & Browne, 2003.)

Method

This was an exploratory study designed to investigate the factors surrounding the initiation of young people under 18 years of age in to sex work. A questionnaire was developed in consultation with medical and psychological researchers, sex workers and Maori community workers in South Auckland. The questionnaires were distributed to and returned from massage parlours, escort agencies, private sex workers and New Zealand Prostitutes Collective drop-in centres. A number of former workers were recruited via a snowballing technique where one participant referred another and some street workers were approached directly. Most of the questionnaires were self-completed. Some questionnaires were completed by the researcher who interviewed respondents face-to-face.

The data was analysed using Excel Version 97 SR-2. Descriptive statistics and some cross-tabs were performed on the quantitative data. The qualitative data was subjected to theme analysis and was used to explain the quantitative responses.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Health Funding Authority Auckland for the study to be conducted in the Auckland, Northland and Waikato regions.

Results

Forty seven respondents participated in the study. They ranged in age from 15 to 47 years old with the average age of the participants being 24 years old. Thirty seven participants identified as female, 3 as male and 7 participants self identified as transgendered. Nearly equal numbers of participants were Pakeha (20) and Maori (19). Five participants identified as Pacific Islander and three were European immigrants.

Most were living away from family when they were first paid to have sex. The average age when they were first paid for sex was 13 and a half years old and ranged from under ten years old to 17 years old. Most of the respondents had the price arranged by some one else the first

¹ ECPAT is a non-government organisation and part of a global network. The acronym stands for End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and the Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes.

time they were paid for sex. This was usually the person who had suggested for them to have sex for payment.

Table I Alcohol Consumption when Paid for Sex by Age of Initiation into Commercial Sexual Activity

	<i>A lot Consumed</i>	<i>Occasionally</i>	<i>Seldom</i>	<i>No Alcohol</i>	<i>Total</i>
Under 14 years old	5			1	6
14 & 15 years old	13	5	2	1	21
16 to 17 years old	13	1	4	2	20
Total	31	6	6	4	47

Two-thirds (66%) of the participants reported drinking “lots” when they were having sex for money (see Table 1). Only four (9%) respondents said they did not drink alcohol when they were having sex for money. There was a tendency for those who were older when they started commercial sexual activity to drink less. About one fifth (21%) of participants had not used alcohol before they began commercial sexual activity and six out of the ten non drinkers started drinking subsequent to their initiation in to commercial sexual activity (see Table II). There is an increase in the amount of alcohol consumed (from 38% to 66%) subsequent to initiation in to commercial sexual activities.

Table II Alcohol Consumption before Initiation into Commercial Sexual Activity

	<i>A lot Consumed</i>	<i>Occasional</i>	<i>Seldom</i>	<i>No Alcohol</i>	<i>Total</i>
Under 14 years old	1	1	3	1	6
14 & 15 years old	12	4		5	21
16 to 17 years old	5	8	3	4	20
Total	18	13	6	10	47

All participants who were initiated in to commercial sexual activity under 16 years of age used drugs on an occasional or frequent basis during the time they were paid for sex (see Table III). Sixty eight percent were regular users of drugs, and only two (4%) had not used drugs at all while involved in commercial sexual activity.

Table III Drug Use when Paid for Sex by Age of Initiation into Commercial Sexual Activity

	<i>Frequent Drug Use</i>	<i>Occasionally</i>	<i>Seldom</i>	<i>No Drugs used</i>	<i>Total</i>
Under 14 years old	5	1			6
14 & 15 years old	16	5			21
16 to 17 years old	11	5	2	2	20
Total	32	11	2	2	47

Prior to initiation into commercial sexual activity, a little over a third of participants were regular drug users (38%). Twenty three percent of participants had not tried drugs before being paid for sex. There is an increase in the use of drugs and the amount consumed after initiation in to commercial sexual activities.

Table IV Drug Use before Initiation into Commercial Sexual Activity

	<i>Frequent Drug Use</i>	<i>Occasionally</i>	<i>Seldom</i>	<i>No Drugs used</i>	<i>Total</i>
Under 14 years old	1	2	2	1	6
14 & 15 years old	12	5	1	3	21
16 to 17 years old	5	6	2	7	20
Total	18	13	5	11	47

Those who drank or used drugs less were more likely to use condoms when engaged in commercial sexual activity, though condom use was high in participants who recalled drinking to excess also. Half of participants who drank “lots” always used condoms when they were paid for sex and a further eight nearly always used condoms (see Table V & Table VI).

Table V Use of Condoms and Alcohol Consumption when Involved in Commercial Sexual Activity

<i>Use of Condoms</i>	<i>A lot Consumed</i>	<i>Occasional</i>	<i>Seldom</i>	<i>No Alcohol</i>	<i>Total</i>
Never	2			1	3
Seldom	2				2
Sometimes	4				4
Nearly Always	8	2	3		13
Always	15	4	3	3	25
Total	31	6	6	4	47

Over half of those who frequently used drugs when being paid for sex, also reported using condoms every time.

Table VI Use of Condoms and Drug Use when involved in Commercial Sexual Activity

<i>Use of Condoms</i>	<i>Frequent Drug Use</i>	<i>Occasionally</i>	<i>Seldom</i>	<i>No Drugs used</i>	<i>Total</i>
Never	2			1	3
Seldom	2				2
Sometimes	3	1			4
Nearly Always	9	2	1	1	13
Always	16	8	1		25
Total	32	11	2	2	47

Over half (27) of the participants disclosed that they had not consented to sex the first time it occurred.

Table VII Childhood Sexual Abuse and Alcohol Consumption when paid for sex

	<i>A lot Consumed</i>	<i>Occasional</i>	<i>Seldom</i>	<i>No Alcohol</i>	<i>Total</i>
First sex consensual	11	5	1	3	20
Sexually abused as child	20	1	5	1	27
Total	31	6	6	4	47

The participants who disclosed childhood sexual abuse were more likely to consume a lot of alcohol and drugs when they were later engaged in commercial sexual activity (74%) than participants who did not disclose childhood sexual abuse (55%) (see Tables VII and VIII).

Table VIII Childhood Sexual Abuse and Drug Consumption when paid for sex

	<i>Frequent Drug Use</i>	<i>Occasionally</i>	<i>Seldom</i>	<i>No Drugs used</i>	<i>Total</i>
First sex consensual	12	5	2	1	20
Sexually abused as child	20	6		1	27
Total	32	11	2	2	47

The earlier participants began having consensual sex the more likely they were to have commenced heavier alcohol consumption at an earlier age (see Table IX). Table X shows an increase in the number of participants consuming more alcohol subsequent to initiation in to commercial sexual activity. Drug use once involved in commercial sexual activity was more frequent at earlier ages when first consensual sex was earlier (see Table XI).

Table IX Age of First Consensual Sexual Event by Alcohol Use Prior to Initiation in to commercial sexual activity.

	<i>A lot Consumed</i>	<i>Occasional</i>	<i>Seldom</i>	<i>No Alcohol</i>	<i>Total</i>
Under 12 Years Old			1	3	4
12 years old	7	3	2		12
13 years old	6	3			9
14 years old	2	1		3	6
15 years old	1	5	2	1	9
16 years old	1	1		1	3
17 years old	1		1	2	4
Total	18	13	6	10	47

Table X Age of First Consensual Sexual Event by Alcohol Use when Paid for Sex

	<i>A lot Consumed</i>	<i>Occasional</i>	<i>Seldom</i>	<i>No Alcohol</i>	<i>Total</i>
Under 12 Years Old	1	1	1	1	4
12 years old	9	2	1		12
13 years old	7	1		1	9
14 years old	3	2	1		6
15 years old	5		3	1	9
16 years old	2			1	3
17 years old	4				4
Total	31	6	6	4	47

Table XI Age of First Consensual Sexual Experience by Drug Use when Paid for Sex

	<i>Frequent Drug Use</i>	<i>Occasional</i>	<i>Seldom</i>	<i>No Drugs used</i>	<i>Total</i>
Under 12 Years Old	2	1	1		4
12 years old	10	2			12
13 years old	7	1		1	9
14 years old	2	4			6
15 years old	6	2		1	9
16 years old	3				3
17 years old	2	1	1		4
Total	32	11	2	2	47

Consumption of alcohol and drugs subsequent to initiation in to commercial sexual activity increased regardless of ethnicity.

Discussion

The small number of participants reflected the difficulty recruiting from a discrete and largely closed population used to maintaining a high level of secrecy about their activities. Despite the small sample size, the results provided valuable insights into a topic that has seldom appeared in the literature.

The percentage of participants who drank alcohol prior to their initiation into commercial sexual activity was similar to national prevalence statistics quoted for 14-17 year olds, that is, 79%. This sample, however reported heavier consumption than the national norm for this age group with 41% reporting heavy consumption whereas only 10% of the national population drank heavily.

Prior to initiation into commercial sexual activity, a little over a third of participants were regular drug users (38%) compared with between 2% and 16% of adolescents reported using marijuana at least once a week in the *Youth 2000 Survey* (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2003).

The prevalence and consumption of drug and alcohol use among this sample reportedly increased subsequent to their initiation in to commercial sexual activity. Just over a third (38%) were heavy users of alcohol and drugs prior to their initiation in to commercial sexual activity and after being paid for sex two thirds of the respondents reported a high drug and alcohol consumption.

Frequent alcohol consumption by adolescent drinkers has been found to be associated with early onset of sexual activity (Fergusson in Ministry of Health, 2002). The results of this study also found that heavier drug and alcohol consumption prior to initiation in to commercial sexual activity was associated with younger age at first consensual sex. However, despite the age of participants at their first consensual sexual experience, their drug and alcohol consumption still increased subsequent to initiation into commercial sexual activity.

Some of this increase in the numbers of participants drinking could be accounted for by the rising age of participants. Kalafatelis and Fryer (2001) (in Ministry of Health, 2002) in their study of 14 to 17 year olds showed that uptake of alcohol increases with age with most people actually having started to drink by age 15 (34%).

The results supported previous findings in that higher rates of childhood sexual abuse were found among women involved in commercial sexual activity in Dunedin than in a control group (Potter, Martin, & Romans, 1999). Childhood sexual abuse has been correlated with an increased risk for a wide range of mental health problems (including suicidal behaviour, substance abuse and eating disorders), even when an allowance has been made for family dysfunction (Mullens, Martin, Anderson, Romans & Herbison, 1993). The prevalence of childhood sexual abuse prior to initiation into commercial sexual activity was investigated as this could account for earlier commencement and heavier consumption of alcohol and drug use. Participants who disclosed that their first sexual experience was a forced one were more likely to drink and use drugs and were more likely to be heavier drug and alcohol users once they began to be paid for sex than participants who had consented to their first sexual experience.

Already at greater risk for contracting sexually transmitted diseases due to their involvement in commercial sexual activity, early sexual activity and multiple partners (Lemmey & Tice, 2000) the results suggest that higher prevalence and more frequent consumption of alcohol

and drugs increases this risk further for this group. Whilst, condom use during commercial sexual activity was high, heavier alcohol and drug use was associated with lower frequency of condom use.

Conclusion

This study supports previous research that suggests that childhood sexual abuse increases vulnerability to a range of at risk behaviours, such as, early commencement of and heavier alcohol and drug use. The results suggest that initiation into commercial sexual activity before 18 years of age is associated with earlier onset of alcohol and drug use and heavier consumption of alcohol and drugs. The distinction between childhood sexual abuse and being paid for sex before age 18 is difficult to differentiate. Young people who have experienced a high rate of abuse and who lack the guidance and security of a stable home could be very susceptible to suggestion from other people. Such young people have strong attachment needs (Brannigan & Gibbs Van Brunschot, 1997). The earlier trauma and disrupted psycho-social development of these young people would make them vulnerable when confronted with the social experience and predatory intentions of the sexual exploiter (Davidson, 2001).

Assumptions of young people's cognitive maturity to have choice and consent override the realities of family breakdown, child abuse, life on the street, life with an addiction and personal damage. The notion of choice puts the responsibility for underage commercial sexual activity on to the young person rather than the client/exploiter. There may be too few available and alternative options to choose from when faced with compelling persuasion.

Barry (1995) suggests that in a liberal idea of consent "it confines sex to a matter of consent and will and does not consider how sex is used, how it is experienced and how it is constructed into power." However, young people often feel they have made a free choice as the alternative is to lose their self respect. There is often a long history of physical and sexual violence, emotional pressure, coercion, hunger and desperation before a young person may get to working in the sex trade. As MacKinnon (1989) pointed out, when faced with no alternative, the strategy to acquire self respect and pride is: I chose it.

This study suggests that under 18 year olds engaged in commercial sexual activity could represent a subset of young excessive drinkers. There was more excessive alcohol use among those who disclosed childhood sexual abuse. Prevention of childhood sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation of children could have positive effects on reducing child and adolescent uptake of alcohol and drugs and subsequent heavier consumption and vice versa.

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