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## SIX

YOUTH SEX WORKERS ON THE U.S.-MEXICO  
BORDER<sup>1</sup>**Yasmina Katsulis<sup>2</sup>**

**Abstract:** The everyday lives of youth sex workers remain largely ignored in global debates about the impact of criminalization and policing on sex workers. Youth sex workers are often portrayed as victims of commercial child sexual exploitation, with little acknowledgement of their everyday worlds. Using data from a mixed method study with youth and adult sex workers in Tijuana, this paper will explore the occupational experiences of youth sex workers within a social context where many adult sex workers have obtained a quasi-legal status, as well as the consequences of age status with respect to occupational risks and hazards.

**Introduction**

Roberto, age 15, has been crossing the border between the U.S. and Mexico on his own since he was seven years old. Although he used to run across, en masse, with other youth seeking entry to the U.S., tightened border restrictions have made this impossible. Now, he usually offers sex to a *coyote* (smuggler) in exchange for help crossing into California. He has lost count of the number of times he has been deported. When he gets deported, he is left at the border terminal in Tijuana, usually with no money for food or a place to sleep. He travels extensively; he says the men like to have sex with new boys they haven't seen before. When it's cold outside, he likes to be in the U.S., where he can find shelter and free food more easily. Roberto is proud that he doesn't steal or hurt others in order to survive on the streets. At age 15, he sees himself as a role-model for other street kids who have less experience. When asked what it was like when he first engaged in commercial sex, Roberto responded:

[I started] because of need, hunger. First it was for food, then money, later purely for drugs. More for drugs than money. I was seven years old when I started. I slept outside of churches, drunks would arrive to sleep there, first they sought me out and later I sought them out. In cities where there was no gay cruising (*ambiente*) I started it. I told them this was how you made easy money. I did not steal. I told them, “Give pleasure and charge for it”.

Similarly, in describing their entry into commercial sex activities, fourteen year old Juan and seventeen year old Rico stated the following:

The first time it was to try what it felt like and to see if I could earn money that way. It was at the home of someone I knew who had offered me money for sex. He gave me 20 dollars for almost an hour. Later I tried to get more from them. I would play the fool until they offered me more and then I would go [with them] (Juan).

I was on the streets. I was fifteen and I had sex with a 27-year-old man who was a neighbor and we went to the hill<sup>3</sup> the first time. Later I needed money and I started to ask him [for it]. Then later I had sex with other people and I would charge them (Rico).

Like other Mexican youth living in poverty in the border region, youth sex workers<sup>4</sup> navigate a host of general health risks, such as malnutrition, contaminated water, tuberculosis, industrial pollutants and toxins, accidents, lack of shelter, and violence. Those who utilize sex work as a strategy to eventually escape these circumstances also face the occupational hazards brought by sex work itself, such as increased exposure to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), client violence, social ostracism, and increased use of alcohol and drugs as a way to cope with their particular circumstances. However, if one simply takes into account the brief

narratives described above, it is clear that these youth are active agents who, despite their limited circumstances, engage in potentially risky commercial sex exchange (as well as survival sex), as a way to exert some small amount of control over their personal circumstances, as well as meet their basic needs. Absent in these narratives are any notion of themselves as a victim, a stark contrast to the way that youth are portrayed in media accounts of child prostitution. Given the complexity of their circumstances, these youth should be considered neither agents, nor victims, but both. That is, they are victims of structural constraints, but not of one individual perpetrator. Their ability to act as autonomous agents is circumscribed by the social context of work in a specific setting.

To suggest that youth perceive some degree of agency and autonomy related to commercial sex transactions is not to suggest that adults don't exploit youth during these transactions. Rather, I argue that all sexual transactions are shaped by complex interplays of power and exploitation on both sides. Personal agency is a continuum that we must grapple with and assess on a case-by-case basis. The degree of agency that one has is dependent on one's background and current circumstances, and is highly variable from one encounter to another, as well as over the life course. Sex work must be understood as part of a complex strategy for survival and mobility within a particular environment, one that is constrained and maintained by macro-social forces. As I demonstrate in this paper, the current response to youth sex work in Mexico (incarceration) is both inadequate and potentially harmful to youth who are already vulnerable as a result of their circumstances.

Commercial sex work consists of a wide variety of sexual activities, work sites, and methods of solicitation, including: street work, hustling, stripping, table dancing, *fichera* dancing (couples dancing for tips), massage parlors, escort/call services, private brothels – each of which include differing expectations for compensation, negotiation, sexual practices, and condom use.

Although many youth engage in sex work to meet their basic needs, a great many also use their earnings to buy cell phones, computers, televisions, sunglasses, CD players, trendy clothing and make-up. Youth sex work is not only a survival strategy of the poor, but is consistent with the use of capitalist consumer practices in constructing social identities.

As Miles (2000) notes, there is a progressively larger gap between media representations of youth and the everyday realities of very limited economic opportunity. Appadurai (1996), Sykes (2003), and Jankowski (1991), for example, have each demonstrated the importance of youth employment as a class-based strategy for social mobility and the construction of a desired social identity by those who would otherwise lack access. Within this framework, sex work activities enable cultural production among youth working within a limited range of options. These youth are still able to participate in an increasingly globalized set of aesthetics that adds to their symbolic capital among their peers. The symbolic capital acquired by participating in this sphere can also have its material benefits, something youth sex workers are certainly aware of and able to use to their advantage.

Outside of the burgeoning interest in victims of trafficking in media,<sup>5</sup> governmental and non-governmental entities, and even scholars, the everyday lives of youth sex workers remain largely ignored.<sup>6</sup> This has been particularly true of the academic debates about the impact of criminalization and policing of adult sex workers worldwide. Instead, youth sex workers are often portrayed as victims of “commercial child sexual exploitation”, with little acknowledgement of their everyday worlds, including their own understandings of themselves as entrepreneurial agents. The criminal justice approach, which seeks to identify and prosecute perpetrators and traffickers, as well as incarcerate those who solicit customers illegally, represents a narrow vision on the problem, and makes no attempt to address the structural factors

that make youth, or adults, vulnerable to exploitation in the first place.<sup>7</sup>

Though the terms “child” and “exploitation” help elicit sympathy and resources, they make any agency or strategic activities engaged in by young people less visible, analytically speaking.<sup>8</sup> None of the youth I met during my fieldwork saw themselves as an exploited child; in fact, exaggerated illustrations of bravery and cunning were common when I observed them among their peers. Put more plainly, they see themselves as keen survivors, as the manipulators of others who would seek to exploit them. Though they recognize themselves as objects of desire by others, they see themselves as subjects, or autonomous agents, within their negotiations. Some adeptly cultivate longer-term relationships with older men so that they have a place to stay, food to eat, and someone to take care of them; a few were able to maintain these relationships for several months at a time. Their perception of themselves as strategic actors is important, as is the way they narrate stories of survival with their peers. While it is crucial to recognize the very difficult circumstances of their lives that make them vulnerable to exploitation by others, it is just as important to recognize their perspectives and experience of the world if they are to play a role in making a positive change in those circumstances.<sup>9</sup>

Although adult sex work activists have worked hard to shape the debate about sex work in terms of labor rights and working conditions for adults, they have been reluctant to advocate for the labor rights of youth. And, even in areas where adult commercial sexual exchange is legal, there is fear that the legalization of sex work performed by minors would promote, and in some sense condone, child prostitution. However, there have been few efforts to recognize the ways in which youth view themselves and their commercial sex activities; and little recognition that the occupational experiences of youth sex workers often parallel those of adult sex workers. Youth sex workers are vulnerable to exploitation by customers; however, this is also true of all

commercial sex interactions where there is a difference of power, whether in age, wealth, citizenship or other factors. Youth sex workers navigate a host of occupational hazards; however, in some settings, they are made doubly vulnerable by the fact that their age status prevents them from utilizing services and protections available to adult sex workers.

### **Methods**

This paper will describe the social context of commercial sex work activities in Tijuana, Mexico, particularly as it relates to those who work prior to the age of 18. First, I will set the stage for the social context of commercial sex work activities along the border more generally. Then, I will discuss the important role of the law in shaping the social context of work, including both the barriers to legal work among youth, and the potential consequences of these barriers. Finally, I end the paper by discussing how our own approaches to the problem of youth sex work might be better informed in light of this evidence.

This paper is based on primary and secondary data on the social context of commercial sex activities among youth, special challenges related to labor conditions and occupational health risks, and the impact of legal regulations on youth sex work activities and health outcomes. This paper provides a review of the literature as it relates to youth sex work in Tijuana, as well as a comparison between what Oralia Loza and colleagues (2010) have termed “early initiators”, those who started paid sexual activities prior to the age of 18, and “late initiators”, those who started paid sexual activities while 18 or older. This data is provided in Table 1, and is drawn from interviews with a purposive, cross-sectional sample of 197 female, male, and transgender sex workers.<sup>10</sup> While only four participants were under the age of 18 at the time of the study, fifty-nine had started working prior to the age of 18. Of these, the earliest age of entry was 7.

**Setting: Youth Sex Work on the U.S. – Mexico Border**

Up to 2.4 million minors are currently involved in sex work in the U.S., with a substantial portion working in the American Southwest and along major migration routes such as Los Angeles, San Diego, Chicago, and New York City (Estes & Weiner, 2001; UNICEF, 1997).<sup>11</sup> Some of the minors involved in commercial sex workers in the US have migrated there from Mexico: the supply of sex workers comes from a population that includes approximately 60,000 children living in the streets of urban Mexico, and over 9 million children living in absolute poverty (UNICEF, 1997).<sup>12</sup> These youth engage in commercial sexual exchange for money, as well as food, a place to stay for the night, and sometimes transportation to the U.S. with the hopes of entering into another form of work, or at least making more money (Azaola, 2000).<sup>13</sup>

Tijuana is one of the primary sites for internal, northward Mexican migration, as well as the busiest international crossing point in the world (Ganster, 2000). Northward migration toward the U.S., and toward the money to be made along its border, has meant rapid urbanization of catchment areas, including Tijuana, Mexicali and Ciudad Juarez, and the ensuing creation of micro-environments characterized by structural violence. Although the vast majority of clientele in Tijuana's sex industry are local residents and migrant workers, Tijuana also caters to clientele from the U.S., Canada, Europe, and Asia. The general socioeconomic climate of Tijuana has been profoundly shaped by a variety of factors, including pan-American economic policies, foreign debt, U.S. immigration policy, migration, and the rapid trend towards globalization that has been encouraged by these dynamics. Latin American economic policies, including capital-intensive development schemes and structural adjustment plans, have increasingly marginalized the rural peasant labor force, and generated rapid rural to urban migration, social disintegration, urban poverty, and high rates of unemployment.<sup>14</sup> American immigration policies



(such as the *bracero* program and the revolving door of guest work visas) have acted as a strong incentive to pull migrants from central and southern Mexico into the United States through the Tijuana corridor.

Many migrants are trapped in Tijuana, unable to cross the border, whereas others cross successfully only to be deported back into Tijuana. The global trend towards the “internationalization of labor” has also affected this process. This trend demands a fragmented, global production process wherein product design, production, assembly, and distribution occur in separate locations in order to increase profits. In this context, the border area in Mexico initially became an attractive site for multi-national companies because of extremely low “real” wages,<sup>15</sup> lax occupational and environmental regulations and enforcement, a highly flexible, non-unionized labor force, a large labor pool of unskilled workers, and a host of tax and tariff advantages provided by the Mexican government to attract foreign capital (Pastor, 1994; Peña, 1997; Shaiken, 1994; Sklair, 1993). Tijuana therefore acts as a center of commerce between two nations, as well as a catchment area for migrants who are often isolated, displaced, and destitute.

As a result, rapid migration into Tijuana has resulted in seriously substandard living and working conditions for the poor on both sides of the border and a lack of access to quality health services. The growth along the border has provided many residents and migrants with new economic opportunities; however, the rapid expansion of the population has also brought with it many problems<sup>16</sup>. Although the Mexican side of the border has felt the greatest impact in terms of how rapid population growth has outstripped local infrastructure (resulting in insufficient housing, lack of potable water and sewage systems), work on or near the border can be difficult for many local residents. For example, many of those who work on the U.S. side of the border must travel to and from Mexico each day, as the cost of living on the U.S. side of the border is unaffordable. Additionally, a substantial informal

sector means that many who work or live in the U.S. do not have access to affordable health insurance; those who are Mexican residents must also rely upon an eroding public health infrastructure. Tijuana's proximity to the United States, the rise of the manufacturing industry, its proximity to U.S. military bases, its reliance upon the service sector and tourism, the availability and promotion of prostitution, the strong socio-economic ties between inhabitants on both sides of the border, and the economic vulnerability of its inhabitants, all contribute to the rise in youth sex work on the U.S. – Mexico border.<sup>17</sup>

As the most vulnerable population of young people in Tijuana, impoverished migrant youth are at highest risk for entry into commercial sex work, violence, homelessness, and substance abuse. The migrant youth population of Tijuana can be divided into 5 categories: [1] minors who migrate to Tijuana on their own; [2] minors who are actively trying to migrate to the U.S. but are unable to cross the border; [3] minors who have been deported from the U.S. back into Mexico; [4] the children of migrant families who have migrated north to Tijuana from other areas of Mexico, Central American and South America; and [5] the children of migrant families who have continued their migration northward into the U.S., but have left the children behind due to increasingly tight border restrictions. Many of the social problems created by and associated with sex work can be dealt with in much the same way one deals with other labor issues. When combined with the alienating experience of migration to urban areas, and the particular impact of globalization on the U.S. – Mexico border, it is not surprising that for youth involved in commercial sex work, issues of daily survival, the continual pressures of poverty, marginalization, and exploitation, and the desire for socio-economic mobility may outweigh the harms associated with commercial sex work. Although other, less risky, work activities tend to be tried first; many youth combine their sex work activities with other ways of making money.<sup>18</sup>

### Findings

As is noted on Table 1, early initiators were more likely than late initiators to be younger at the time of the study (22.93 vs. 26.55), 2.79 times more likely to be male, 4.75 times more likely to be transgender, and 1.19 times more likely to be married or cohabitating. They had fewer children than late initiators. Although 17% of both early and late initiators were born in Tijuana, early initiators were 1.58 times more likely to have migrated to Tijuana from another area in South or North Baja, and three times more likely to have migrated to Tijuana from Central America. The background experiences and health risks of early initiators are far more troubling and challenging than that of their counterparts. They were 2.68 times more likely to have been without a safe place to sleep, and eight times more likely to have moved three or more times in the past six months. They were 2.42 times more likely to have been incarcerated, and they were 1.21 times more likely to be working without a current, valid health card. They were 2.64 times as likely to solicit clients outdoors, a practice known to be associated with risks for sexual and drug abuse as well as work-related violence.

Such individuals had also solicited more clients than late initiators during the past week. Although they were 4.75 times more likely to have exchanged sex for alcohol, 3.56 times more likely to have exchanged sex for drugs, 12.5 times more likely to have exchanged sex for food, and 4.57 times more likely to have exchanged sex for clothing, they were as likely as late initiators to have exchanged sex for shelter. They were twice as likely to have not used a condom during their last sexual encounter with a client, and they were 3.86 times more likely to engage in passive anal sex with clients, an activity that greatly increases risk for HIV infection. Not unexpectedly, they were six times more likely to test HIV positive within the study. They were also slightly less likely to have been tested for a sexually transmitted infection during the past year. Interestingly, they were also slightly less likely to report

having had a sexually transmitted infection (STI) during the past six months, but given the range of risks associated with this population, it is likely that this self report reflects a lower degree of awareness of symptoms rather than a lower incidence of STI.

In addition to their greater likelihood of exchanging sex for alcohol or drugs, early initiators also engaged in higher risk behaviors related to alcohol and drugs. They were three times more likely than late initiators to report a problem with alcohol, and 2.4 times more likely to report a problem with drugs. They were 1.55 times more likely to have had sex while drunk, and 2.56 more likely to have engaged in sex while on drugs. They were 2.67 times more likely to have shared needles for the purposes of injection drug use. Early initiators were also more likely to have experienced work-related violence. They were twice as likely to experience violence at the hands of clients, nine times more likely to experience violence at the hands of police, 5.4 times more likely to experience violence at the hands of strangers, and three times more likely to experience violence at the hands of an employer. Given the circumstances early initiators find themselves in, it is not surprising that they were also 2.12 times more likely to have experienced suicidal thoughts during two weeks prior to their interview.

### **Barriers to Legal Work**

Sex work in Tijuana has a quasi-legal status (that is, it is neither explicitly legal nor illegal in law), and the response to sex work activities has been mixed and varied over time. Grounded in a politics of difference that singles out some groups and geographical areas and ignores others, law enforcement and health inspectors have helped to create a sex work social hierarchy that mirrors everyday relations of power intersected by gendered, classed, and racialized differences. While the harm reduction approach popularized by public health advocates emphasizes legal regulation, licensing, registration, and mandatory health screening,

barriers to registration and licensing effectively limit the benefits of legal status to those at the top of the social hierarchy, all of whom are adults, further marginalizing those at the bottom, including youth, men who have sex with men, undocumented migrants, and those who cannot afford registration and monthly screening fees. “Crackdowns” by law enforcement fine, shut down, and imprison those who work illegally, increasing vulnerabilities, exacerbating occupational risks, and limiting the abilities of those who work illegally to respond to these risks.

Many of those who work at the margins of the sex work hierarchy are not encouraged (or allowed) to register to work legally. This includes youth, male, transgender, and undocumented workers, as well as migrants from Central and South America. Registration and monthly screenings are cost-prohibitive for many (especially those who engage in street work or only work part-time), and documentation requirements do not take into account the fact that many rural and/or migrant workers do not have birth certificates, driver’s licenses, passports, or state identification cards. Transgender workers complain that they are forced to register with their given name and previous gender, and that this makes their current lives problematic and strained. Others fear that their identity will be disclosed to their families and friends, the Mexican government, or the U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Registering as a sex worker is a social act with potentially profound personal, legal, and social consequences.

In Mexico, though the corruption of minors is against the law, there is no law prohibiting prostitution (Cevallos, 1998). Incidences of youth sex work can be prosecuted as corruption, immoral public behavior, and/or as sexual assault. However, because of the clandestine nature of their activities, prosecution is only likely to occur as the result of a complaint by a minor.<sup>19</sup> The current system of regulation is inadequate in terms of public health standards; it also does nothing to prevent those who want, or need, to work from doing so. Because they are not allowed to work

legally until they are 18, youth involved in commercial sex work are unlikely to seek support from the authorities out of fear and distrust of the justice system. Those that do attempt to access services and obtain a health card from the municipal clinic are turned away. As they do not have private health insurance, nor enough money to be able to afford private services, there is no system in place address their specific health needs.

### **Youth Sex Work as an Occupational Health Issue**

Although the vast majority of clientele in Tijuana sex industry are local residents and migrant workers, the industry also caters to clientele from the U.S., Canada, Europe, and Asia. Clients often seek younger sex workers out because of the cultural value placed upon youth and beauty, as well as the (mistaken) perception that younger sex workers are less likely to be infected with STIs. Often, customers who approach youth sex workers find it easier to negotiate the sexual exchange on their own terms (e.g., sex without a condom) than they can with a more experienced sex worker. Like other sex workers, youth sex workers in Tijuana face the occupational hazards brought by sex work itself, such as increased risk of STI (including HIV/AIDS and infertility as a consequence of untreated STI's), unsafe/illegal abortion, client violence, illicit drug use, social ostracization, and mental illness (most commonly chronic depression). Youth involved in sex work as a result of physical and sexual coercion are at even higher risk (Doll & Carballo-Diéguez, 1998).

Youth involved in commercial sex activities possess a variety of social characteristics that impact their ability to generate profits, as well as negotiate or avoid occupational risks involved in this kind of work. These youth differ extensively in terms of age, personal history, family relations, sexual abuse, drug history, mental health status, access to health care, educational background, socio-economic resources, family responsibilities, work preferences, and social skills. Each of these factors shapes their vulnerability, as

well as the likelihood of being taken advantage of during commercial transactions. Vulnerability directly translates into an individual's knowledge, attitudes and practices – and therefore their risk for – STI (including HIV/AIDS), client violence, police harassment, and targeting by city health officials.

Because of their illegal status, minors who work as sex workers face heightened vulnerability to police harassment, violence, and incarceration, and are therefore extremely reluctant to report client violence, rape, and exploitation, to access health and/or social services, or otherwise acknowledge their involvement in illegal activities to authorities. A more pragmatic approach to research, policies, and service provision would acknowledge the everyday realities of sex work practices among youth. The public health challenge is twofold, we must create policies or programs that improve their everyday circumstances, as well as design interventions that youth sex workers can identify with. Any policy that increases the ability of youth to meet their basic needs is likely to increase a young person's sense of personal agency, as well as put them on firmer ground in terms of negotiating sexual transactions. Any policy that alienates youth from outreach services, or makes it more difficult for them to meet their basic needs, will make it more likely that they will suffer the most severe forms of exploitation. Criminalization of youth involved in commercial sexual exchange is a policy that is meant to protect youth, but ultimately impacts youth health in a variety of negative ways.

In Mexico, as elsewhere, laws prohibiting sex work activities among youth have yet to reduce the incidence of commercial sex work activities among young people. The presence of legal penalties does not weave the socio-economic safety nets that young people so desperately need, nor do they provide youth with more alternatives and opportunities. There are no special services and/or programs in place to support youth involved in commercial sex activities in Tijuana. The harm reduction measures that are in

place to improve working conditions for sex workers primarily impact adults. Desperately needed programs include the provision of food, clothing, education, shelter, medical (including mental health) services, addiction services, HIV/AIDS and STI prevention education, and better police training and accountability with respect to human rights abuses and street outreach. However, public programs targeted toward sex workers have been set up as a way to contain STIs, rather than deal with poor working conditions, mental health, human rights abuses, and other quality of life issues.

### **Discussion**

The complexities of youth involvement in sex work should be examined within the context of the more general debates surrounding youth labor. Helleiner (2003), for example, argues that youth labor activities, particularly the more public forms utilized by the poor, are often characterized as cultural or parental pathology rather than outcomes of structural inequality. In the name of “child protection”, prohibitions can complicate and undermine family/household solvency and access to resources, as well as legitimate racism, discrimination, exclusion, and intrusive regulations directed toward stigmatized groups. Nieuwenhuys (1996) argues that the idealized form of modern childhood is one largely free from labor concerns. By its very nature, it excludes poor families from achieving this ideal. By appealing to a largely unattainable cultural ideal of “childhood sanctity”, elites ignore the lack of state investment and supports that would make this ideal a reality for most families.<sup>20,21</sup>

In trying to improve the lives of youth sex workers, we must take a more pragmatic approach than has been advocated thus far; an approach that includes more alternatives and opportunities for youth, better social safety nets to prevent the need for sex work as a form of survival and mobility, and harm reduction measures to improve working conditions for those with few alternatives.<sup>22</sup> My



argument in this paper is that youth sex work is not a criminal justice problem, and that the protectionist stance that criminalizes prostitution may harm youth engaged in sex work activities.<sup>23,24</sup>

We continue to focus on the identification of individual criminals and syndicates rather than work on changing the social, cultural and economic circumstances that encourage exploitation. In doing so, we are not forced to hold ourselves accountable for our role in creating those circumstances. In reality, mainstream economic interests play a significant role in shaping the social inequalities that impact youth's life chances and constrain alternative means of survival and socio-economic mobility. Laws against child labor, which are meant to protect youth during their developmental stages, may also constrain their choices and further marginalize the most vulnerable among them.

Literature regarding the effects of the legal status of sex work is part of a growing debate among social and political scientists and activists. Although such discussions originated in Western Europe and the U.S. during the turn-of-the-century reformist period (Bartley, 1999; Holloway, 2003; Pivar, 2003; Pivar, 1973), the increasing institutionalization of sex work in many countries makes these renewed debates very relevant in terms of public policy and international relations today. Debates about the ethics and efficacy of social control through regulation or criminalization are interesting, but sometimes ignore the range of lived experiences of sex workers acting within these systems. Research that brings personal experiences and daily struggles of sex workers to the fore will bring us a more accurate view of how policies impact their health and quality of life overall.

Table 1. Population Characteristics of Early (< 18) vs. Late ( $\leq$  18) Initiators

Variable	All Participants (n = 197) Mean (SD)/ %	Early Initiators (n = 59) Mean (SD)/ %	Late Initiators (n = 138) Mean (SD)/ %
Age	25.47 (8.91)	22.93 (6.54)	26.55 (9.57)
Gender			
Female	71	42	82
Male	21	39	14
Transgender	8	19	4
Marital status			
Single, divorced, or widowed	72	69	74
Married or co-habiting	28	31	26
Number of children	1.23 (1.32)	.66 (1.14)	1.47 (1.31)
Lived in Tijuana 4 or less years			
Birthplace			
Tijuana	17	17	17
An area in Baja other than Tijuana	14	19	12
An area in Mexico other than Baja	67	61	70
Central America	2	3	1
Housing insecurity			
Had been without a safe place to sleep (in past 3 years)	34	59	22
Moved $\geq$ 3 times in past 6 months	3	8	1
Had been incarcerated	37	63	26
Did not have a current, valid health card	82	92	76
Sexual Behaviors			
Solicits clients outdoors	37	66	25
Number of clients in past week	6.46 (11.51)	7.29 (14.07)	6.11 (10.26)
Ever had sex for alcohol	9	19	4
Ever had sex for drugs	16	32	9
Ever had sex for food	9	25	2
Ever had sex for clothing	14	32	7
Ever had sex for shelter	2	2	2
Did not use condom with last client*	6	8	4
Engages in passive anal sex with clients	26	54	14
STI exposure, screening and treatment			
No STI checkup in at least 1 year*	46	47	46
STI in past six months (self-report)**	23	19	24
Tested HIV positive (Orasure, Elisa blot)	5	12	2
Alcohol and drug use			
Report a problem with alcohol	8	15	5
Report a problem with drugs	16	27	11
Ever had sex while drunk	42	59	38
Ever had sex while on drugs	37	64	25
Shares needles for IV drug use	5	8	3
Work-related violence			
Client	29	44	22
Police	14	36	4
Stranger	12	27	5
Employer	2	3	1
Suicidal thoughts in past 2 weeks	23	36	17

\* Missing value – One participant refused to answer this question

\*\* Missing value – Two participants refused to answer this question

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<sup>3</sup> The hill refers to an outdoor area (literally, a hill area) for servicing clients.

<sup>4</sup> My use of the term youth sex work is meant to convey the view that the majority of these activities are more accurately understood as a form of labor; albeit one with a higher degree of risk, injury, and psychological harm than other forms of labor.

<sup>5</sup> Media interest in trafficking has burgeoned over the last decade, playing a profound role in the ways in which sex work is presented in popular discourse. Further, as Soderlund (2005, p. 76) notes: "[I]f news reports and policy documents are any indication, there appear to be few ways to talk about sex trafficking that do not include dramatic readings of the captivity narrative's well-rehearsed scripts: the prison-like brothel, the lured or deceived female victim, and her heroic rescuers. These features not only become ritually invoked and necessary aspects of such narratives by indexing sex slavery, but they also define the rhetorical limits of what can be said about the phenomenon on a popular level." In this panic to address trafficking, solutions have largely focused on victim assistance programs and the prosecution of traffickers, to the detriment of a coordinated focus on prevention. In many cases, "prevention measures have been nonexistent...As a result, the measures taken...fall short...current prosecutions offer minimal deterrence when compared to incentives for traffickers, and assistance to victims often ends early and fails to address systemic issues, leaving those 'assisted' children vulnerable to repeated exploitation" (Todres 2010, p. 4).

<sup>6</sup> A very important exception includes Montgomery's (2007) work with youth sex workers in Thailand. For example, Montgomery notes that the Thai interpretation of youth sex work as a form of filial piety, for example, challenges the "modern Western ideal" of family relations, wherein "parents are expected



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to make sacrifices for their children; the child is vulnerable, in need of protection from adults, has the right to an education, should not work and should be protected from sexual relations either with other children or adults before the age of 16.” (p. 416). Montgomery further notes that “the idea that child prostitution constitutes a form of adult abuse of children [is]... at odds with children’s descriptions of, and understandings about, their relations with Western men” (p. 416). These children, instead, see their activities as a “means to an end”, a way for them to support their families and fulfill their duties towards them (p. 419). Finally, these youth did not refer to themselves as child prostitutes, as label deemed deeply insulting, demeaning, and hurtful. Relationships with long-term clients, often Western foreigners, were, in this context, reframed as friendships with important reciprocal obligations, whereas an abusive client was one who refused to enter into the complex social obligations of the family and local community, treating each sexual encounter as a discrete financial transaction.

<sup>7</sup> As has been increasingly noted, contemporary struggles against sex trafficking (e.g., the ‘rescue industry’) have created many new problems, both theoretical and practical (Agustin, 2007; Kempadoo, et al. 2005; Zheng, 2010). For example, as Soderlund (2005, pp. 65-66) argues: “Central to such rhetoric is the construction of captivity and freedom as diametrically opposed states of existence...While the stories abolitionists tell about their interventions tend to focus on the moment of the raid and the successful delivery of the rescued slaves to safe houses...[i]t appears that while some women use brothel raids and closures as an opportunity to leave the sex industry, others perceive the rehabilitation process itself as a punitive form of imprisonment thereby complicating the captivity/freedom binary asserted by abolitionists.” Soderlund also notes that an additional challenge limiting progress in this area is that “sex worker rights advocates [are] cast as supporters of child prostitution and...groups supporting harm reduction and decriminalization were threatened with public exposure as supporting child molesters and their advocates” (p. 74). The rhetorical strategies deployed against sex worker rights advocates in the context of trafficking discourse have significant political consequences for those who work with adult sex workers. The study of youth sex workers is not particularly viable within this context.

<sup>8</sup> Montgomery (2007, p. 422) notes that “one of the main tenets of child-centered anthropology that children are the best informants of their own lives; they can and should have a voice and that voice is relevant and authentic.”

<sup>9</sup> Many feminist scholars have also advocated for the portrayal of women as strategic agents rather than victims. However, the capacity for agency continues to be denied to youth, many of whom survive only because of their ability to take strategic action in spite of the most challenging circumstances. The criminalization of sex work permits corruption, selective prosecution, and the

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denial of the right to work. This further hampers a person's chances to work in safety – whether they be an adult or under the age of 18. The feminist literature on sex work written by sex worker/labor rights activists demonstrates the problems criminalization creates for adult sex workers (Chapkis, 1997, Delacoste & Alexander, 1998, Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998; Nagle, 1997; Pheterson, 1996); it is time to extend this paradigm to youth.

<sup>10</sup> A more comprehensive ethnographic picture of the Tijuana sex industry has been published elsewhere (Katsulis, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Factors which increase risk for youth entering the commercial sex work industry include: 1) poverty (Longford, 1995; Save the Children, 1996; Shamim, 1993); 2) personal and family debts (Knight, 1998; UNICEF, 1997; U.S. Department of Labor, 1996; Youth Plus, 1995); 3) street survival strategies by runaways leaving an abusive situation (NCMEC, 1998; Snell, 1995); 4) street survival among orphans (Lobe, 2001); 5) the need to support their own children (Dembo, 1992; Salvadó, 2000); 6) socialization by other family members (D'Asaro & Foley, 1997; Mueck, 1992; Seneviratne, 1994; UN, 2000); 7) substance abuse and addiction (Ireland and Widom, 1994); 8) environmental disaster, war and displacement (UN, 2000); 9) adult procurement, recruitment and trafficking (Chin, 1990; Harris, 1998; Ireland, 1993; McDonald, 1995; Yoon, 1997); 10) gender discrimination and violence against women and girls, ethnic/racial discrimination, and cultural perceptions of children as property (Salvadó, 2000; UN, 2000); and 11) the lasting impact of childhood sexual abuse, which may increase the likelihood that youth connect sexual exchange with affection and worth, the impact of trauma and/or mental illness, or the role of a parent-focused rebellion or punishment (Doll & Carballo-Diéguez, 1998; Estes, 2001; Widom & Kuhns, 1996). Most countries allocate insufficient resources towards the reduction of domestic violence and child abuse and the provision of adequate mental health services for both children and adults.

<sup>12</sup> Cevallos (1998) estimates that at least 5,000 children are involved in the Mexican sex industry (including sex work, pornography, trafficking, and sex tourism), with approximately 100 children entering the Mexican sex industry every month. Azaola (2000) estimates that the number of cases is closer to 16,000.

<sup>13</sup> The movement of young people across borders to engage in commercial sex work is not unique to the U.S. – Mexico border – these flows can be seen throughout the world wherever there is an economic and social hierarchies that encourages movement into any area with the potential for improvement in one's circumstances.

<sup>14</sup> This crisis further intensified due to Mexico's dependency on foreign aid, foreign trade, and tourist dollars as a result of the serious economic crisis during the 1970's and 80's (Lustig, 1992). As a result, there has been a strong movement toward trade liberalization in the hopes that it would stabilize a

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devastated economy, and to protect it against high rates of inflation and the further devaluation of the peso. The use of the border area as part of a neo-liberal economic strategy was facilitated by both such programs as the Border Industrialization Program and the promotion of export-processing zones (see Fernandez-Kelly 1983), and the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which resulted in a population growth of more than 9 million people, over 40% of whom reside in the San Diego – Tijuana region alone (Dear, 2000; Ganster, 2000; Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social, 1999). The structural adjustments were part of larger bank-led (e.g., the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) strategies for debt relief that required production for export, the lifting of tariffs, and other agreements meant to spur economic development (Labonte, et al. 2004). Although these strategies did lead to the growth of the manufacturing industry on the Mexican side of the border, many have argued that neoliberal led economic development has been accomplished at the expense of health and quality of life, as well as the erosion of livelihoods among the poor (Bettcher, et al. 2000; Schoepf, et al. 2000). The ‘shadow economy’ of globalization (a result of the deepening feminization of poverty) is also reflected in the rising incidence of prostitution, female labor migration, and survival sex (see Lingam 2005 for an excellent review of the gendered impacts of structural adjustment). As noted by George (1988, p. 6): “Economic policies are not neutral. Contrary to received opinion, they can even kill.” Many of those multinational corporations who made initial investments in production facilities on the Mexican border have now moved further south, or overseas entirely, in order to take advantage of looser environmental regulations, lower wages, and the availability of child labor (often referred to as ‘the race to the bottom’). See Palley (2002) for additional information on the relationship between child labor and the flight of global capital.

<sup>15</sup> “Real” wages would include what a wage actually buys with respect to the cost of living. Therefore, the cost of living is taken into account when making this comparison. The cost of living along the border is comparable to that found on the U.S. side. Yet the minimum wage (which actually functions as a wage *cap* in most Mexican industries) is 1/25<sup>th</sup> that of the U.S.

<sup>16</sup> Although there are areas in Tijuana that look like any U.S. city, with up-scale apartments, shopping malls, restaurants, museums, plazas, and lush golf courses, city development has been uneven. In poorer areas, residents face a host of health concerns which affect their quality of life, such as malnutrition, contaminated food and water, diarrheal disease, tuberculosis, heavy air pollution, industrial waste, accidents, lack of adequate shelter, and violence. The following infrastructure deficiencies have yet to be addressed (Ganster, 1999): [1] Education: The average number of years spent in school is 6 years, and only 54.3% receive post-primary schooling; [2] Air Pollution: Poorly maintained vehicles, continued use of leaded fuel, traffic congestion,

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uncontrolled burning of solid waste, factory solvents, dust from unpaved streets, fecal dust from open sewage, sulfur clouds from the thermoelectric plant, and polluted air from Los Angeles and San Diego; [3] Traffic: Traffic congestion and deterioration of roads due to heavy factory-related truck and border traffic; average commute to and from work is 2 hours; many areas lack paving; 50% of paved roads need repair; [4] Housing: Land invasions into unstable, hilly areas susceptible to flooding and landslides, as well as property disputes; [5] Water: 15% of residents in the *colonias* (literally, “neighborhoods”, but used to refer to peri-urban areas surrounding the city) lack electricity and potable water; all residents lack access to contamination-free piped water; water delivery trucks, filling stations, and bottled water is available at much higher cost; [6] Sewage: most *colonias* lack sewer systems, residents use pit privies and hillsides which lead to renegade sewage flows during storms, and wide-spread contamination of running and standing water; [7] Hazardous Waste: close proximity of industrial and residential areas; illegal hazardous waste dumped into *colonias* run down roads and into homes during winter rains; [8] Infant Mortality: 26.9 per 1000, four times that in neighboring San Diego; [9] Waterborne Disease: gastro-intestinal diseases, hepatitis, and other diseases transmitted by impure water.

<sup>17</sup> The increase in commercial sexual work among youth is also a consequence of globalization, urbanization, and the internationalization of labor throughout the world (Gutierrez 1998, Ireland 1993, Lie 1996, Munir & Yasin 1997, Rodriguez 1998, UN 1995, U.S. Department of Labor [USDOL], 1995, USDOL, 1996, Youth Plus 1995). The lucrative business of sex tourism in Asia, and increasingly in Central and South America, attracts young people for hundreds, sometimes thousands, of miles. Though we know that global economic expansion, the selective permeability of borders, and the weakening of social safety nets caused by poverty and migration can all be implicated in the increasing commercial sex work and sex tourism, the particular circumstances under which sex tourism thrives is just beginning to be understood (Azaola 2000, Estes 2001, Estes and Weiner 2001, Seabrook 1997). Though youth sex workers live in every country in the world, some cities have become well known hotspots for sex tourism and prostitution.

<sup>18</sup> Sex work is strategy that allows individuals and families with few resources to participate in the changing economy. Sex workers of every age are not just sex workers – they are also daughters, sons, mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers with very real economic responsibilities that may encourage commercial sex work (Barr, et al. 1996, ECPAT 1996a, 1996b, IBCR 1998a, 1998b, Longford 1995). In fact, family obligations (parents and other relatives left behind in sending communities, as well as to children under their care) and planned investments in the home community (house building for self, parents, and children, alternate businesses, school costs for younger siblings, children, and often nieces and nephews) are the most common reasons for entry into sex work,

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as well as the most significant regular expenses (other than personal living expenses) for the 95% of the sex workers I interviewed.

<sup>19</sup> Youth are unlikely to press formal charges for any reason, including customer violence and rape. Not only do they fear possible legal prosecution and incarceration for their own activities, they also fear that their only source of livelihood would be threatened were they to come forward. Additionally, many have experienced police corruption, harassment, extortion, violence, and rape firsthand. Their fear and distrust of local authorities makes youth sex workers a difficult group to target in terms of service provision, health outreach education, and research.

<sup>20</sup> Whether or not we see child labor as a problem of exploitation depends very much on how we categorize and define childhood, as well as how we conceptualize exploitation. First, the divisions between children, youth, and adults have been demonstrated time and again to be highly culturally specific and even rather blurry and ambiguous within the same cultural settings (Agustin 2007; Ariés 1962; Bucholtz, 2002; Gailey, 1999; Hall & Montgomery, 2000). The expectation that children labor for their families at an early age, marry young, and even start their own families, is normative in many non-Western communities. This is at odds with the cultural construction of childhood in contemporary Western settings. As a result, the restoration of childhood, and innocence lost, is a powerful theme that underlies much of the rescue work reported in Western media. Agustin (2007, p. 70) states the following: “Those who attempt to speak up for the rights of children and adolescents in this matter tend to be stridently condemned, and for this reason nearly everyone states at the beginning of any discussion that they oppose children selling sex.”

<sup>21</sup> Although some youth do fall prey to organized criminal syndicates, or are forced by others to engage in sex work against their will, this is not the case for the majority of youth. Kidnapping, rape, torture, and coercion are rightly dealt with through the criminal justice system; however, this will not address the structural factors that make youth (and adults) vulnerable to force, fraud, and coercion. As noted by Azaola (2000), violent and coercive incidents rarely reach the courts, and adult exploiters are rarely penalized. Many youth work independently in order to meet their basic needs, to acquire goods and services they would not otherwise have access to, or to support their addiction to drugs and/or alcohol. In these cases, there is no criminal to prosecute, except for the customer or the young person themselves. Certainly, we can support the prosecution of any adult who has sex with a minor, but this too is problematic, as they represent the only livelihood these youth have.

<sup>22</sup> Additionally, as Montgomery (2007, p. 429) argues, this approach should also recognize the heterogeneous experiences and needs of those who work as sex workers: “Too often child prostitutes are treated as a homogeneous category facing identical problems and needing similar help...this way of viewing child

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prostitutes is theoretically and practically wrong and potentially damaging for children.”

<sup>23</sup> Kapur (2007, p. 551) notes, for example, that in Bombay, a well-intentioned ordinance to raise the minimum age of bar dancing (from age 18 to age 21) had the unintended consequence of pushing young women out of bar dancing and into underground street prostitution, further subjecting them to increased exploitation and violence. In responding to these findings, Todres (2010, pp. 5-6) states: “when such a regulation is not accompanied by a mandate and funding for social services, educational opportunities, job training, and other programs for girls who leave, or are might be lured into, the sex industry, the end result is that many of these girls...end up in...greater danger than they would have been exposed to before the ordinance was adopted.”

<sup>24</sup> Kelly (2005, p. 376) argues that the “protectionist model is paternalistic, ignores the child’s voice in decision-making, and has a tendency to understand children as a ‘problem population’ in need of discipline and control” however, an exclusive focus on children’s rights “ties children to the abstraction of the rational, autonomous, liberal individual, and thus robs them of their context and devalues the relationships of care that surround them.” As an alternative, Kelly proposes a feminist “ethic of care”, which “recognizes the complex web of relationships in which children exist and listens carefully to their voices.”