Adverse childhood experiences and sexually trafficked adolescents

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INTRODUCTION
Youths in the sex industry are increasingly viewed as victims rather than criminals. This is reflected by a change in terminology from “child prostitution” to “domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST)” or “commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC)”

Previous studies have identified running away or being thrown away by one’s family, an overlap between the presence of street youths and the presence of an adult prostitution market, and a history of child physical and sexual abuse as the main predictors of commercial sexual exploitation.

Some predictors of CSEC are known, but to our knowledge a cumulative risk model of childhood trauma has not been used to assess risk factors for CSEC. This study seeks to apply a cumulative risk approach known as the Adverse Childhood Experience, or ACEs, model to predict a youth’s risk of commercial sexual exploitation. The ACEs model assigns a score of 0 or 1 for each of ten adverse childhood experiences that encompass child abuse and neglect as well as various forms of household disruption. These scores are added together to form an overall ACE score. ACE scores of 4 or greater have been linked to a higher risk for a variety of adverse outcomes, from heart disease to sexually transmitted infections.

PURPOSE
This exploratory study seeks to use the ACEs model to determine the prevalence of various forms of childhood abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction in commercially sexually exploited youths, juveniles convicted of other crimes, juveniles convicted of sexual misdemeanors, and juveniles convicted of non-violent offenses. It also seeks to compare the prevalence of ACEs and ACE scores among CSE youths with those in the other non-CSE groups.

METHOD
This study utilized data from 64,329 youths arrested in the state of Florida who were assessed using the Positive Assessment Change Tool, a risk-assessment survey given to all youths arrested in the state of Florida. Of these youths, 102 had been commercially sexually exploited.

CSE youths (n = 102) were defined as those who had violated Statutes 796.07 section 2e and/or 2h. Non-CSE youths (n = 64,227) were those who received neither of these charges. The sexual misdemeanor group (n = 389) consisted of non-CSE youths who were charged with sexual misdemeanors but no sexual felonies and who did not receive charges related to CSE. Nonviolent offenders (n = 22,909) were those who received no crimes against person charges and who did not receive charges related to CSE.

Descriptive statistical analysis was performed to determine the prevalence of individual ACEs and ACE scores in each of the cohorts, and binary logistic regression was used to identify predictors for CSE versus all other offenses, non-violent offenses, and sexual misdemeanors.

RESULTS
No CSE youths had 0 ACEs. Most (81.37%) had an ACE score of 4 or more. The most prevalent ACE was parental separation or divorce (92.16%), followed by household violence (90.20%), and household member incarceration (84.31%). Physical and sexual abuse were equal in prevalence (59.80%). Emotional abuse was present in 51.96% of cases, and physical neglect in 41.18%. The least prevalent ACEs were household substance abuse (40.20%), emotional neglect (36.27%), and household mental illness (17.65%).

Commercially sexually exploited youths tended to have higher ACE scores and a higher prevalence of individual ACEs than the other groups. Misdemeanor sexual offenders had the second highest ACE scores and prevalence of individual ACEs, followed by the non-CSE group as a whole and finally by nonviolent offenders. CSE youths were also the most likely to have an ACE score considered high risk for adverse outcomes, followed by those charged with sexual misdemeanors, the non-CSE group as a whole, and finally the nonviolent offenders.

The adjusted odds ratio for CSE vs. all other groups was highest for sexual abuse. Physical neglect had the second highest odds ratio for all CSE vs. total and CSE vs. non-violent offenders, but not for CSE vs. sexual misdemeanor offenders.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS
Even among the high risk population of juvenile offenders, commercially sexually exploited youths experience proportionally higher rates of abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. The high prevalence of sexual abuse and physical neglect is consistent with previous research, and indicates that the union of skewed views of sexuality caused by sexual abuse combined with physical deprivation leaves youths vulnerable to predation by those who would exchange sex for support.