



# Human Trafficking/Sexual Exploitation of College Students in San Diego County and Imperial Valley: Preliminary Findings

Lianne A. Urada, Ph.D., MSW, LCSW

Associate Professor, San Diego State University School of Social Work

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# HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN SAN DIEGO



- Sexual exploitation is the use of force, fraud, or coercion to cause a commercial sex act.
- Human trafficking is also exploitation of anyone under the age of 18.
- San Diego is ranked among the top 13 regions in the U.S. for Human Trafficking: 8,000 victims and \$810 million annually. <sup>1</sup>

# **GAP IN RESEARCH**

Few studies in the U.S. have examined college student involvement in sexual exploitation and their associations with food/housing and financial insecurity.<sup>2-5</sup>



# RESEARCH STUDY AIMS:

1) Explore the nature and extent of human trafficking/sexual exploitation among college students in San Diego-Imperial Counties

2) Explore factors associated with sexual exploitation & *what can be done about it?*

- Force, coercion

- Financial insecurity

- Trauma, substance/alcohol use

# METHODS

- Online survey with Qualtrics (responses non-identifiable)
- Recruited college students/alumni in San Diego County and Imperial Valley who knew someone or were themselves trafficked, sexually exploited, and/or sold sex
- Community advisory board of human trafficking survivors & members of the community/campus vetted the survey

- Flyers were posted on campus bulletin boards, bathrooms (November-April 2023)
- Social media posts
- \$15 incentive Amazon gift cards
- Provided resource lists & option to talk to someone



# PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Female 2/3

Male 1/3

Heterosexual 3/4

LGBTQIA+ 1/4

Median Age 21\*

\*interquartile range 19-23. Based on a sample of 500 who were sexually active.

# YEAR IN SCHOOL

Undergraduate	81%
Freshman	23%
Transfer	18%
Graduate student	11%
Alumni	4%



## RACE/ETHNICITY

White	35%
Latinx	30%
Black/ African American	24%
Asian/Pacific Islander	17%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	6%

## Educational Institutions (Current or Ever Attended)

University of California, San Diego	26%
Point Loma Nazarene University	20%
Community College - Imperial Valley	18%
San Diego State University - Imperial Valley	11%
Community College- San Diego	10%
University of San Diego	9%
San Diego State University - San Diego	8%
California State University - San Marcos	3%
Others	8%

Food insecure 35%

Housing insecure  
(couch surfing, car, shelter, street) 3%

Greek student organization affiliation 16%

Employed - Over half

# SUBSTANCE USE

Used **illicit drugs** knowingly 50%

Used illicit drugs **unknowingly** 10%

**Overdosed** as a college student 20%

Illicit drugs were: cocaine; amphetamines; inhalants; sedatives; hallucinogens; opioids. 38% said they witnessed an overdose.

**HAVE YOU EVER  
EXCHANGED SEXUAL  
ACTIVITIES FOR  
SOMETHING OF  
MONETARY OR OTHER  
VALUE?**

<b>Yes, as a college student</b>	<b>27%</b>
One time	12%
More than once	15%
<b>Never, but considered</b>	<b>19%</b>
Never & never considered	50%

# REASONS THEY SOLD SEX AS A COLLEGE STUDENT

Provide for school	34%	3.9 times more likely to sell sex to pay for food
Have extra cash for spending	32%	
Pay for food or rent	29%	
To provide for someone else	24%	3.8 times to have extra cash
Forced	16%	
Convinced or persuaded	11%	3.7 times more likely to pay for school
Under the influence of a substance	11%	
Feel needed or wanted	11%	
Experiment sexually	10%	3.3 times more likely to pay for rent
To feel in control or distract from a life stressor	9%	
As part of an initiation (fraternity/sorority)	5%	

“Most traffickers know how tight campus security is, so they seldom try to recruit on campus. But it’s a completely different case outside campus. Organising parties and inviting students over, they tease them with desirable amounts, and the desperate ones fall for it. Not everyone does alright, but those who do later become lady-escorts, some even push drugs for them on & off campus, **“to make ends meet”**, they say.”

“A friend of mine, a Girl, works as an escort and does introduces the trade to a few of her acquaintances. I understand that she sells hers to **take care of school bills and fees**, as she’s only got her grandmother to depend on for funds... I know a couple of other girls who have ventured into this industry through her who are UCSD students as well.”

**“Local loan Sharks** offer sometimes require sexual services as a form of debt repayment. This occurs outside college grounds often. Female students who take loans and default on the payment may often be required to tend to the services of the one of the creditors as a form of repayment.”



“Most girls in college tend to be 18 years old and above, so I think assuming that under 18 are being forced to sell their body for sex might be a difficult argument to make for college students. However, that doesn’t mean they don’t happen. Recruiting people is always easy, think **it’s all about saying a few words to them** with the hope that they are manipulated and leave their comfort zone to work for a pimp. **From school parties and dinners to sorority events, girls meet a lot of people who are double-faced and who use them as instruments of sex of they could.”**

“It occurred as part of a **fraternity initiation** routine of which I saw from a distance”

“Girls belong to **sorority groups**, yes. Some only actually **join these groups to recruit** other babes into their line of work, as **they are given a percentage/ commission for every new girl who gets introduced**. It’s in no way a forced recruitment, but I think so much more can be done within these groups rather than be a center or avenue for sex-for-hire girls/ladies.”

# How was the sexual exchange established (for something of monetary or other value)?

In-person (set up independently)	24%
Online or over the phone (set up independently)	14%
Online or over the phone (set up by someone else)	8%
In-person (set up by someone else)	7%
<b>Psychological manipulation by another</b>	<b>6%</b>

“Sex-selling is lucrative for college girls. They are young, perhaps naive, and tend to appreciate every little dime they get, so they just try to flex these little luxurious things they get. Seeing the flex, Some Others start to feel inferior and would want to match their spendings, ultimately they become a part of this business as well. **College boys buy sex, Rich, Old men buy sex, and even the Fathers of these college boys tend to buy sex from these college girls through their son’s’ introduction.**”

# Who set up the monetary sex exchange with a buyer?

Friend	18%
Partner	9%
Pimp, madame, "folks", "bottom", "sister wife"	7%
Online platform (website to view profile)	4%
Family member	4%
Agency or business	4%
Group posing as a religious group	2%
Greek Panhellenic student organization	1%
Criminal group	1%

**“At San Diego city college guys looking for girls to work for them”**

**“In my sophomore year in college, I got a whiff of some girls get into this business with an older guy who used to sponsor them financially; later on, he introduced these two girls into going clubbing with him from there, things escalated.”**



**“In rare cases, sex trafficking occurs right under everyone’s nose on campus, considering how discreet these people operate. They look sharp, smart and wealthy, even students among them. They try to look impressive, as a first impression matters to people a lot. Whoever is approached or contacted online feels impressed and would want to do what they say to live a life like that, getting deceived or less, exploited...”**

If they or another college student they knew ever exchanged sexual activities:

<b>Emotional or psychologically harmed</b>	<b>30%</b>
<b>Physical abuse/violence</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>Rape/sexual violence</b>	<b>16%</b>
<b>Acquired a sexually transmitted infection</b>	<b>16%</b>
<b>Initiated in drug/alcohol use</b>	<b>16%</b>
<b>Were asked or told to recruit or traffic</b>	<b>13%</b>

**14% said they had ever heard, seen,  
or suspected human trafficking  
recruitment (force, fraud, coercion, or  
under age 18 involvement in selling sex)  
on a college campus.**





“You can’t pinpoint where exactly their base of operations is on campus, but I can assure you they are everywhere. They look for pitiful ones who seem too young to be a problem. **They go around classes looking out for those who don’t attach themselves to others and wouldn’t be noticed were they to skip or miss classes often.**”

**“It happened between my friend and bully”**

**“My 1st year in school”**

**“I have seen this couple it times and it seems people are not talking about it”**

**“On campus, during the faculty’s dinner party one year.”**

**“Happens discretely on campus. Got guys who seduce juniors into coming to their homes to have sex.”**

# EVER FORCED/COERCED/TRICKED (FRAUDED) INTO SELLING SEX?

YES, AS A COLLEGE STUDENT	26%
YES, ANOTHER PERSON PROFITED (e.g., pimp)	6%
No, but knew of another college student	19%

**“Pubs outside school, strip clubs, bars and restaurants are places where these pimps peek at vulnerable kids. They study them and may even put a tail on them for observation. They may even make acquaintances of them just to make themselves trustworthy. They offer to pay for their lunch, walk them home, humor them and do all sort of convincing things, just to make them feel close enough to trust them to say YES whenever they feel they are ready to be sexually trafficked.”**

“Pimps - whose connections make these dealings possible - exist around the university and surroundings, and would jump at the opportunity of having one more person join their ranks. I have learnt that the more they are, or show up, the more money they get paid. In short, the higher the number of girls made available for sexual activity, the more the agency’s commission, or in this case, the PIMP’s.”

“According to sources, **some parents actually sign off on their children, in search of greener pastures,** leaving Imperial valley with certain agencies who promise to provide and take care of their children overseas. **Parents think these kids just do menial jobs with whomever they leave with, but little do they do know it’s actually not.** A girl was fortunate to flee back to El Centro to tattletale.”

“A certain **girl who lives with her madam,** heeds whatever her Madam says. **The Madam pays her tuition fees** and takes care of her other bills but in return, she grants **sexual favors to one or two or her Madam’s clients.** Albeit she is older than 18, which makes her an adult, the fact that her situation is been exploited makes everything so messed up. Madam could claim the sex is always consensual, when those who know of the girl’s story know she only does that out of responsibility as her madam’s ward. It’s that bad. It’s a girl I know; I know all these because we used to date. And yes, it happens here in El Centro.”

“My sister was a victim. She was trafficked a couple of years ago right before the Pandemic struck, and she’s been amiss since. Had a struggling father who couldn’t provide all she needed, but we thought my sister worked at a store where she earned money. Little did we know she was an escort at night, selling sex to men in clubhouses. As a naive girl, she left house one day and never came back. It’s assumed she was probably deceived into fleeing the country for MEXICO just so she could make more. We know this because a girlfriend of hers confessed to been almost recruited as well.”

**“It’s been said around campus that these traffickers are a large organization with a wide network, hence it should come as no surprise if you, who happens to find yourself in need of assistance, get approached by a stranger, who offers a way out. This is how they recruit young ones on campus, they attack and catch them off guard, when they are vulnerable.”**

“Human trafficking, to my knowledge, doesn’t happen anywhere on campus grounds. School Resource Officers are always on everyone’s neck which makes it difficult for people to come on campus to recruit students for trafficking. However, **selling of sex is a major issue the school authorities could try to address. Even those who stay in campus dorms and rooms smuggle themselves out some nights to party and have sex, getting paid after the acts.”**

“Heard different tales of human trafficking right outside CSU, but recruiters have laid low over the years at CSU as SROs on campus have been working tirelessly to curb the spread. Although, a lotta **students still engage in hookups and call-girl businesses, considering their activities cannot be monitored outside the university.”**



**41% ever felt  
pressured to engage  
in a sexual activity  
as a college student**

**Who on campus pressured you?**

Student	15%
Partner (e.g., boyfriend/girlfriend)	8%
Instructor	6%

**40% said they were not comfortable reporting the person.**

As a college student...

**29% Forced/coerced as seasonal farm worker**

**6% Exchanged sex for help with schoolwork**

**6% Transported or sold drugs**

**4% Labor trafficked**

If forced/coerced/frauded into selling sex as a college student:

**71% never took an HIV test**

**45% never used condoms**

“The girls who recruit actually get paid in advance against future events and prepare themselves to entertain certain set of men. These girls don’t use their college’s health facilities **when they contract sexually transmitted infections**, and **visit certain medical centers around their colleges to avoid suspicion.**”

# SEXUAL EXPLOITATION EFFECTS

37% **academic performance**

29% **increased alcohol use**

6% began using alcohol after the experience

4% decreased alcohol use

20% **increased drug use**

8% began using drugs after the experience

6% decreased drug use

# PERCEPTION OF SEXUAL ACTIVITY AS EXPERIENCED IT

The first time:

As an act of intimacy	70%
As a transactional exchange	7%

Now:

As an act of intimacy	70%
As a transactional exchange	3%
<b>Both</b>	<b>15%</b>

## Quotes:

“I personally associate sex with trauma, unfortunately.”

“I first thought of it as an achievement, something to count and increase.”

“I knew it was wrong of them, but I was in a safe situation so I did not feel in danger, I simply blocked them after the date, and knew if they can't respect consent I will never go further with them.”

“My first sexual encounter were acts of sexual violence.”

“It felt like something that was happening to me without my input or consent.”

“I originally perceived it as something I had to do to please a partner.”

“Just the action of it.”

In this sample, **African American/  
Black Students** were **twice as  
likely to be forced/coerced** into  
selling sex as a college student.



“Some are actually college students who have as well been tasked with imploring their mates and peers into selling sex. **These recruits get maltreated by their eventual sugar daddies and appear the next day with bruises and injuries.** Perhaps they weren’t aware of the consequences that came with being alone in a room with a stranger. **I think BIPOC students are mostly targeted to avoid less suspicion.** Forgive me for revealing this but it’s just the simple truth.”

# How long were you in foster care?

- 0-5 years (63%)
- More than 5 years (36%)
- More than 5 years and emancipated as a teen/adult, or still in foster care (14%)
- 0-5 years and emancipated as a teen/adult, or still in foster care (11%)

**8-9% were ever in  
foster care  
(55-70 respondents)**

# FOSTER YOUTH

**38% who were foster youth said they were forced/coerced or tricked (experienced fraud) into selling sex as a college student.**

# FOSTER YOUTH

Compared to those never in foster care, being forced/coerced into selling sex as a college student was:

**SIX TIMES** more likely if in foster care for 5+ years

**FIVE TIMES** more likely if <5 years **AND** emancipated as teens/adults **OR** still in foster care

# **FOSTER YOUTH**

**FOUR TIMES** more likely if 5+ years **AND** emancipated as teens/adults **OR** still in it.

**TWICE** as likely if in foster care 0-5 years.

# FOSTER YOUTH QUOTE

“In all consciousness, I think kids from foster homes are being targeted mostly, due to the weak attachment they have with their foster parents. They are easier targets and would make for weaker preys, easily swayed and enticed as most of them probably never got to enjoy luxury much. The boys are easily enticed into the drug trade, ladies into prostitution...sex sales. They emancipate at 18, so most don't get easily missed, it's assumed.”

**Involvement in sexual exchange(s) ever inhibited  
seeking support of:**

<b>Mental Health Services</b>	<b>28%</b>
<b>Academic Counseling</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>Health services</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>Police</b>	<b>16%</b>
<b>Housing services</b>	<b>11%</b>
<b>Food services</b>	<b>9%</b>

# PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO SEEKING HELP ON CAMPUS

- Shame (30%)
  - Fear (30%)
  - Stigma (32%)
  - Didn't want family/friends to find out (25%)
  - Discrimination (23%)
  - Felt threatened by person facilitating commercial sex trade (14%)
  - Didn't want to expose the commercial sex trade experience (10%)
  - Unaware of where to get help (8%)
  - Transportation (6%)
  - Cost, insurance (6%)
- Of 422, 40% were not comfortable reporting a perpetrator**



# **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS: AS A COLLEGE STUDENT...**

- **Over 1 in 5 experienced force/coercion into selling sex**
- **2 out of 3 thought human trafficking was a medium-to-large threat on campus.**
- **Nearly half were pressured into a sexual activity (nearly 1 in 5 by an instructor)**
- **1 in 5 (or other college student) crossed the U.S.-Mexico border to provide sexual acts “for something of monetary or other value”**

# TOP STUDENT REQUESTS

- 1. More counselors who have experience working with people who have been exploited.**
- 2. Support groups and organizations.**
- 3. Anonymous way to report sexual exploitation.**
- 4. More counselors with cultural, racial, or ethnic backgrounds and identities that match theirs.**
- 5. More consequences for those who exploit people.**
- 6. Education on campus about human trafficking.**
- 7. Better campus security. (Having gates)**
- 8. Remove consequences for those who are seeking help.**
- 9. Other: Rehabilitation/support for those trying to leave exploitive situations.**

# IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY/PRACTICE

- Educate in freshman orientations
- Address student financial burdens
- Prevent, intervene recruitment
- Have anonymous reporting
- Promote available resources
- Campus security, lighting
- Training for staff about human trafficking (counseling centers)



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- CSU San Marcos IRB

**QUESTIONS OR WANT TO HELP?**

**PLEASE CONTACT:**

**Lianne A. Urada, Ph.D.**

**[lurada@sdsu.edu](mailto:lurada@sdsu.edu)**



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