

Street youth more likely to trade sex for food, shelter if they were abused as children, study finds

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New research led by Ryerson scientists have found that street youth who have been sexually abused as children are far more likely to engage in trading sex for food, shelter and other basic necessities.

"Youth who live on the street are living under very difficult circumstances and their home life may not have been the most loving or supportive," says Professor Trevor Hart, director of Ryerson University's [HIV Prevention](#) Lab and co-author of the study, which is still underway. "As a result, these youth are dealing with a great deal of stress in their daily lives."

Danielle Schwartz, a Ryerson psychology graduate student, led the investigation from 2008 to 2010. Her co-authors are Carolyn James, who was a graduate student at York University, and Hart, who was their academic supervisor on the study. They were interested in examining the link between [childhood sexual abuse](#) and sex trading as a way for these youth to cope with high [levels of anxiety](#) and stress in their lives.

The researchers surveyed 208 [homeless youth](#) who were living in street shelters in Toronto, asking them about their experience with childhood sexual abuse, strategies they used to manage their emotions (self-harm, using sex to reduce [bad feelings](#)), and whether they traded sex for money or gifts, including food, shelter, clothes and drugs.

Among their preliminary findings, the researchers found 42 per cent of the youth reported they were sexually abused as children. Within this group, nearly 26 per cent said they engaged in sex trading, compared to almost six per cent who did not experience childhood sexual abuse.

"This finding shows there is a strong link between childhood sexual abuse and [risky sex](#), which is consistent with other studies," says Schwartz, lead author of the study. "Part of the reason for this may be youth are having difficulties in managing their emotions and stress so they are turning to sex trading. This may help meet their basic needs in the short term, but does not promote a positive sense of well-being in the long term."

Hart says health-care providers and social agency workers who provide care for street youth should be aware of this link between childhood sexual abuse and trading sex for basic needs.

"Counsellors may want to ask those difficult questions about a street youth's sexual past," says Hart. "It can help them determine how they can help that young adult better cope with the stress in their lives other than relying on sex trading."

Provided by Ryerson University

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