Caught in the intersection:

An exploratory study on queer experiences of sex trafficking and trafficking aid in the United States

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In loving memory of Tsuki

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Abstract

Background: In the United States, LGBTQIA+ youth makeup a disproportionately large percentage of the homeless youth population; homelessness is considered one of the highest risk factors for human trafficking; yet, there is significantly little research written on the experiences of queer trafficking survivors.

Purpose of Research: The purpose of this study is, therefore, to examine the role of gender identity and sexual orientation in queer experiences of sex trafficking in the United States, as well as how these factors influence a survivor's ability to access and participate in trafficking aid programs.

Method: Five, in-depth interviews were conducted with staff members of organizations working with LGBTQIA+ trafficking survivors. Four out of five participants identified as queer with personal experience working in the sex trade, and two participants identified as survivors of trafficking. Interviews were coded and analyzed using thematic network analysis.

Findings and Discussion: Three major themes arose from the analysis in this study. First, there are two distinct and conflicting approaches to sex trafficking aid: the anti-trafficking approach and the sex worker rights approach. The divide between these two groups contribute to the gaps in research and service provision for LGBTQIA+ survivors. Second, there are specific differences between queer and cishet experiences of sex trafficking, such as the emotional complexities surrounding experiences of gender affirmation while being trafficked. Third, there are specific barriers to aid that queer survivors face when seeking help, including fear of harassment and sexual assault by law enforcement and discriminatory practices by aid programs, such as requiring transgender survivors to detransition while participating in the program.

Conclusion: The findings in this study suggest that gender identity and sexual orientation influence both an individual's personal experience of sex trafficking and their experiences of trafficking aid. Further research should adopt a collaborative perspective between anti-trafficking and sex worker rights approaches to ensure greater visibility and inclusivity of queer survivors.

Key Words: sex trafficking, survival sex, LGBT(QIA+), queer, homelessness, aid, intersectionality, empowerment, queer theory

List of Terms and Abbreviations (Abbr.)[1]

Cishet: (abbr.) references individuals with both cisgender identities (gender identities that match the gender assigned at birth) and heterosexual orientations

Cisheteronormativity: used to describe normalized systems of sexual and gender oppression against LGBTQIA+ individuals

DV: (abbr.) domestic violence

Femme: a gender identity that embodies—and often exaggerates—a conscious femininity, drawing meaning from societal and cultural understandings of femininity

Genderqueer/gender nonconforming: a gender identity that does not follow binary or traditional gender norms

IPV: (abbr.) interpersonal violence

LGBTQIA+: (abbr.) lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and any other non-cisgender identity and/or non-heterosexual orientation; may also be abbreviated as LGBT, LGBTQI, LGBTQIA2S+ (2S referring to the term "two-spirit," which is used by indigenous groups in North America for individuals who identify as having both a masculine and feminine spirit)

Outed: when an individual's private sexual orientation and/or gender identity is revealed without their consent

POC/WOC: (abbr.) a person of color / a woman of color

Pushout Culture: a culture in which individuals with marginalized identities are mislabeled and mischaracterized based on negative stereotypes, resulting in discriminatory actions that push individuals further into the margins of society

Queer: a general term used to describe any non-cisgender identity and/or non-heterosexual orientations

Trans: an adjective used to describe a person whose gender or self-identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth.

Transition: a verb used to describe the process of moving from one gender identity to another—usually from the identity that was assigned to the individual at birth to their authentic identity.

TVPA: (abbr.) Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000

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[1] Though I have included this list to provide clarity on the terms used in this study, many of the items below cannot be properly described by a simple definition. The variation of the ways in which the identities and orientations listed are expressed extends far beyond what has been written here.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

1.1.1 LGBTQIA+ Discrimination

Access to social services is often obstructed by discrimination for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and any other individuals of non-normative gender identities and sexual orientations (LGBTQIA+) living in the United States. For example, Angeles and Roberton (2020) found that many LGBTQIA+ individuals are afraid to contact the police when situations of abuse and exploitation occur because they have had prior "unsafe and traumatizing police interactions" directly related to their gender identities and sexual orientations. The participants in this study also describe discrimination in the form of inaction by police, leading to increased mistrust and assumptions of police apathy towards LGBTQIA+ reports (p. 6) As a result, queer individuals frequently rely on community support networks instead of law enforcement when they experience incidents of harassment, assault, and violence. Furthermore, LGBTQIA+ individuals have also been found to frequently delay seeking medical care due to fear of discriminatory healthcare practices (i.e., cisheteronormative language, using incorrect pronouns or gender binary language, refusal of service in private practices, etc.) (McCrone, 2018, pp. 92–95). For many queer individuals, the physical and mental risk of experiencing discrimination by healthcare providers is considered greater than the risk of their current health concerns. LGBTQIA+ individuals seeking help from a wide variety of social services "are subjected to care rooted in heterosexism and cisgenderism, as well as widespread discrimination and misunderstanding from service providers" (Shelton et al., 2018, p. 10). Therefore, it is critical to analyze the care services that are provided for the most vulnerable within the LGBTQIA+ population: human trafficking survivors.

1.1.2 Human Trafficking

According to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000, human trafficking is defined as:

> A) sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or
>
> (B) the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for

labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of

subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery. (Victims of

Trafficking, 2000, division A, Sec. 103)

Human trafficking, therefore, is an umbrella term that has two distinct categories—sex trafficking and labor trafficking. The TVPA definition of sex trafficking not only includes the commonly understood examples of trafficking—situations in which the sexual exchange was elicited through force, fraud, or coercion—but any commercial sex act that is performed by a minor under the age of 18. This means that, in the U.S., any incidents of minors engaging in the sex trade, even if they feel the work is consensual, can be considered sex trafficking. Some of the trafficking aid services available for survivors can include: rehabilitation programs, transition homes that help survivors reintegrate back into society, emergency housing and healthcare services, homeless shelters, human trafficking hotlines, and legal services. LGBTQIA+ trafficking survivors should be able to access these services as easily as cisgender, heterosexual (cishet) survivors; however, because discrimination often obstructs LGBTQIA+ individuals from accessing social services, their experiences of aftercare programs may differ from the experiences of cishet survivors.

1.2 Purpose and Significance of Research

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine the role of gender identity and sexual orientation in LGBTQIA+-identifying individuals' experiences of sex trafficking, as well as this population's ability to access and participate in trafficking aid programs, as defined in section *1.1.2 Human Trafficking*. The primary aim is to identify any queer-specific experiences of sex trafficking and trafficking aid that may differ from cishet experiences. The findings of this thesis have a number of potentially significant implications for the future of anti-trafficking work. First and foremost, this exploratory study brings attention to the specific experiences of a group that is severely underresearched and underrepresented in the anti-trafficking field. If these findings are published, this could inspire additional researchers to examine this population and increase representation of queer trafficking survivors. Second, the recommendations from participants on good practices for service providers working with LGBTQIA+ individuals could be used as a starting point for future researchers looking to establish a more generalizable standard of care for queer survivors. Finally, the findings in this study could be used, along with future research, to

inspire structural and legislative changes in the U.S. to promote greater protections for LGBTQIA+ trafficking survivors.

1.3 Research Questions

The central research question for this study is:

- What are the experiences of LGBTQIA+ sex trafficking survivors in the United States?

The sub-research questions are:

1. What are the queer-specific experiences of sex trafficking in the United States?
2. What are the barriers for LGBTQIA+ survivors trying to access and navigate trafficking aid services?
3. What do staff members of organizations working with LGBTQIA+ victims believe would make current aftercare services more accessible, inclusive, and effective for non-heterosexual, non-cisgender trafficking survivors?

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into nine chapters. Following this introductory chapter, I will use the second chapter to give an in-depth description of how intersectionality, empowerment theory, and queer theory were used as the theoretical frameworks for this study, discussing each framework separately along with how they interacted together during data analysis. Chapter three will be used to identify the significant research gap on queer experiences of sex trafficking as well as to explore the relevant literature adjacent to this issue. In the fourth chapter, I will review my research design and methods, detailing the procedures before, during, and after data collection, my role as a researcher in this study, and the limitations I experienced when recruiting participants. The subsequent four chapters are separated into themes—addressing trafficking: conflicting approaches and definitions, LGBTQIA+-specific experiences of sex trafficking, LGBTQIA+-specific experiences of trafficking aid, and good practices for LGBTQIA+ trafficking aid providers—to clearly present my findings and discussion. To conclude this thesis, chapter nine will provide an overview of my key findings and recommendations for future researchers.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I will discuss the three theoretical frameworks I used to establish my research questions, analyze my data, and contextualize my findings. The first framework comes from Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) work on the concept of intersectionality, a theory primarily focused on how discrimination can be compounded among individuals with multiple intersections of marginalized identities. Factors such as race, economic status, gender identity, and sexual orientation all influence how an individual experiences both sex trafficking and trafficking aid; therefore, the three forms of intersectionality Crenshaw describes, structural, political, and representational intersectionality, were all relevant for the analysis and contextualization of the data collected in this study. Naila Kabeer's (2005) work on empowerment is the basis for my second theoretical framework, examining agency, resources, and achievements—the three dimensions of empowerment—in the experiences of queer sex trafficking survivors. Empowerment not only examines an individual's access to resources and their ability to exercise agency over their lives, but also whether or not the individual is able to live the life they want. This framework is highly relevant for this study, as I analyze both the resources and agency of queer survivors, critiquing the institutions that hold power over these resources. The third and final theoretical framework I used in this study is queer theory, calling upon the works of major queer theorists to examine the effects of oppressive, cishet-centered trafficking discourse on LGBTQIA+ survivors. Specifically, Judith Butler's (1990) work on gender performativity as well as Michael Warner's (1991) work on heteronormativity proved to be useful for contextualizing the queer-specific experiences of sex trafficking and trafficking aid described by my participants.

2.1 Intersectionality

Intersectionality is one of the main theoretical frameworks I used for analyzing the data collected in this study. In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw wrote an article describing the ways in which different forms of discrimination—namely racism and sexism—can be compounded, focusing on the multi-layered discrimination that Black women in the U.S. face. She described discrimination on multiple axes through an analogy of an intersection, explaining that discrimination can come from multiple directions to cause harm (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149). This

analogy emphasized the need for analyses that examine multiple, intersecting identities, and it has since been applied across disciplines to many different forms of discrimination (Cho et al., 2013, p. 788; Lutz, 2017, p. 13). In the context of this study, the primary intersection of identity I explored comes from the combination of non-cishet identities and survivor status; however, economic status also played a large role in compounding the discrimination that queer survivors face both during and after experiences of sex trafficking.

These compounding axes of discrimination can be analyzed on three fronts: structurally, politically, and representationally (Cho et al., 2013, pp. 797–800; Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). Structural intersectionality examines how certain marginalized groups are more vulnerable to maltreatment than others due to intersecting structures of subordination, challenging programs that fail to acknowledge the compounded, structural dimensions of an individual's circumstances (Cho et al., 2013, p. 797). I use structural intersectionality to analyze participant comments on how institutional and systemic discrimination contribute to the complex and multifaceted experiences of LGBTQIA+ trafficking survivors. Political intersectionality examines the effects of being "situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252). This form of intersectionality was most relevant when I examined the emergence of two major approaches to trafficking aid, which hold conflicting political agendas, despite their similar end goals, and divide queer identities and survivor status. Finally, representational intersectionality examines mainstream portrayals of intersectional identities in dominant discourse, analyzing the consequences of racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic imagery on individuals holding two or more marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1282–1283). I utilize representational intersectionality as a framework for analysis of the consequences of national narratives on queerness and trafficking. For these reasons, intersectionality was a relevant theoretical framework to examine my data.

2.2 Empowerment

In addition to intersectionality, I used an empowerment framework as a way of interpreting participant responses through examining the structural power relations that arose from the data. Empowerment is "a process, and the results of a process, of transforming the relations of power between individuals and social groups" (Batliwala, 2007, p. 560). To be empowered, an individual must first have been disempowered, meaning at one point their

choices were limited or unavailable (Kabeer, 2005, p. 13). The origins of empowerment stem from feminist movements in the Global South, primarily in South Asia and Latin America, in which calls were made for more radical change to the structures that perpetuated unequal power relations (Batliwala, 2007, p. 559).

I specifically utilized Naila Kabeer's (2005) framework for empowerment for this study. According to Kabeer (2005), there are three dimensions in which empowerment can be explored: "agency, resources, and achievements" (p. 14). Agency is defined through an individual's ability to exercise choice, examining not only the individual's decisions and the structures that limit them but also their motivations behind the choices they make; it examines the individuals' "power to" make life choices, outside actors' limiting "power over" the individual, and the individual's motivating "power within" (Kabeer, 2005, pp. 14–15). Participants in this study heavily discuss the agency of queer survivors, explaining this populations' power to make their own decisions (e.g., entering or exiting the sex industry, removing themselves from situations of violence) and the organizational and government institutions who hold power over their resources. Resources are defined as "the medium through which agency is exercised" (Kabeer, 2005, p. 15). Examples of the resources discussed by participants in this study include: financial assistance, legal counsel, healthcare, continued education, and housing/shelter. The third dimension of empowerment, achievement, is determined by the combination of an individual's agency and resources to determine whether or not the individual has the ability to live the life they want (Kabeer, 2005, p. 15). Determining survivor achievements required analyzing aftercare services as power structures, as they often hold the resources queer survivors need. As such, empowerment was a relevant choice of theoretical framework for interpreting the data collected in this study.

2.3 Queer Theory

The final theoretical framework I used in this study was queer theory. Though its framework and applications continue to develop and expand, queer theory primarily exists to challenge generalized, fixed, or normalized beliefs and constructs of identity, examining mainstream discourse, categorization processes along with their deconstruction, and how identities are reproduced and performed (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 69). Unlike the concepts of intersectionality and empowerment, it was difficult to draw from a singular work when using

queer theory. Watson (2005) describes the framework as "not a clearly unified body of work but one that continues to evolve, and is characterized by sets of 'theories' which utilize the term 'queer' for a variety of purposes (p. 68)." As such, I utilized concepts from multiple queer theorists for the analysis of my findings in this study.

Judith Butler's (1990) influential work on the performance of gender was used to analyze the role of gender identity and sexual orientation in participant reports of queer-specific experiences of sex trafficking. In their concept of gender performativity, Butler defines gender as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (1990/2006, p. 45)[2]. Gender is understood as something one does, rather than something one is; gender identity is, therefore, a collection of these performative acts over time. Furthermore, Butler uses Foucault's understanding of discursive formation to analyze national and political representation of subordinated groups, explaining that those in power essentially form the subjects who will be represented through determining the criteria that constitutes a "subject." This concept was applicable in examining the lack of representation of queer trafficking survivors in national trafficking discourse and literature.

In addition, Michael Warner's concept of heteronormativity was also used in this study, including his collaborative work with Lauren Berlant which explored the privatization of sex in heteronormative cultures. In his 1991 article, *Fear of a Queer Planet*, Michael Warner coined the term "heteronormativity," which examines the ways in which heteronormative cultural ideals, such as marriage, monogamy, and child bearing, are not only assumed and enforced in society, but also how they are privileged. Heteronormativity can be used to examine and challenge the structures and ideologies that hinder and oppress LGBTQIA+ survivors of trafficking. Though Warner primarily uses the term to describe sexual oppression, I will also include broader interpretations from queer theorists that understand heteronormativity as "a process of oppression that describes gender and sexuality" (Marchia & Sommer, 2019, pp. 276–277). Thus, I will use the term "cisheteronormativity" to include both sexual and gender oppression. Finally, I used Berlant and Warner's (1998) work on the privatization of sex in heteronormative cultures to analyze both institutional violence against LGBTQIA+ survivors and the national discourse

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[2] In-text citation follows APA 7 guidelines (Section 8.15) for reprinted works, including both the original year of publication followed by the year of publication reprint. The original publication was unavailable online.

surrounding queer identities and sex work. By understanding the ways in which queer relationships and identities challenge the heteronormative culture of reducing sex to a personal life matter, one can begin to analyze the assumptions and motivations behind acts of discrimination and violence.

2.4 Theoretical Application

Intersectionality, empowerment, and queer theory all seek to disrupt the status quo by challenging structures of power that disproportionately affect marginalized groups. These three theoretical frameworks converged with one another to provide multiple perspectives on the ideas presented in my findings and discussion section. The approach I took in this thesis to understanding cisheteronormativity in queer theory adopts an intersectional lens, seeking to address the compounding discrimination against both non-cisgender identities and non-heterosexual orientations within the field of trafficking, rather than analyzing them as separate phenomena (Marchia & Sommer, 2019, p. 269). Furthermore, I analyzed the consequences of cisheteronormative practices on queer survivors' ability to seek help, using empowerment theory to assess their agency and access to trafficking aid resources. This research sought to examine the effects of holding several marginalized identities on queer sex trafficking survivors who are navigating a system of inaccessible resources that are a direct result of cisheteronormative practices, making all three theoretical frameworks connected and relevant for this thesis.

3. Literature Review

As research on queer trafficking survivors is limited, I examined the literature surrounding the research gap using research on homelessness to articulate a potential connection between LGBTQIA+ individuals and risks of human trafficking. I will begin by discussing the process I used to identify and assess this research gap, detailing both my search methods as well as the potential contributing factors causing the lack of literature. Following this discussion, I will then use adjacent literature to provide context to the research problem. First, I will explain the significance of the overrepresentation of LGBTQIA+ youth in U.S. homeless populations; second, I will discuss homelessness as a major risk factor for human trafficking; and, finally, I will connect the prevalence of homelessness and housing instability among LGBTQIA+ populations to queer experiences of human trafficking (Langer et al., 2020, pp. 179–180).

3.1 Research Gap

As I began researching LGBTQIA+ identities and human trafficking, the gap in literature became quite apparent. ProQuest had only 34 peer-reviewed results for "LGB*" AND "trafficking" (anywhere, except full text), while there were 3,466 peer-reviewed results for "women" AND "trafficking" (anywhere, except full text). Using the same filters, alternative terms and combinations—gay, transgender, queer, exploitation, bonded labor, and forced labor—all still produced less than 100 results each. It is possible that this discrepancy in available literature is due to the lack of demographic reporting on LGBTQIA+ survivors. The information collected through Polaris' National Human Trafficking Hotline (NHTH) has resulted in one the largest, most extensive data sets on trafficking in the U.S., yet there has been little demographic information collected on non-cishet identities by the organization. Historically, the NHTH has relied on survivor disclosure regarding their gender identities or sexual orientations during phone calls, rather than asking for this information directly (Polaris, 2017, p. 16). In their 2017 report detailing the typology of trafficking, Polaris analyzed over 32,000 cases of human trafficking in the United States; however, the organization admits that queer experiences of trafficking were likely not represented in the typology. According to the report, queer survivors "often need more urgent assistance such as crisis intervention and direct services, which may take priority over collecting more detailed information about the nuances of their human trafficking experience"

(Polaris, 2017, pp. 5–16). Because Polaris is not actively or intentionally collecting information on queer-specific experiences of trafficking, there is limited data available on LGBTQIA+ survivors compared to other demographics.

Furthermore, there are also issues regarding the literature that is available. In many articles on queer youths' involvement in the sex trade, authors frequently do not reference the term *trafficking* at all in their study. Instead, they use the term *survival sex*, or the act of voluntarily exchanging sex for basic needs. Survival sex does not typically meet the TVPA criteria for sex trafficking with one exception: when those involved are under the age of 18 (Victims of Trafficking, 2000, division A, Sec. 102–103). The article that many anti-trafficking authors frequently cite when discussing LGBTQIA+ issues in trafficking is a study conducted by the Urban Institute in New York, which explores experiences of survival sex among LGBTQIA+ youth. In this study, the term *trafficking* is used only once to explain that, while minors engaging in the sex trade are legally considered victims of trafficking according to the TVPA, the authors chose to use the terms "survival sex" and "third-party exploitation" to more accurately describe participant experiences (Dank et al., 2015, p. 46). Many of the queer youth involved in this study did not identify with the TVPA's definition of sex trafficking, as they did not experience trafficking through "force, fraud, or coercion" by an exploiter (Victims of Trafficking, 2000, division A, Sec. 102). The choice to replace the word trafficking with "survival sex" was a common occurrence I found within the little literature[3] written on the experiences of queer youth engaging in the sex trade. Though the terminology is chosen intentionally in these articles, it could be another contributing factor to the lack of literature on queer trafficking survivors.

3.2 LGBTQIA+ Youth and Homelessness

LGBTQIA+ youth make up 20 to 40% of homeless youth in the U.S., yet they only account for 5 to 10% of the overall youth population (Shelton & Bond, 2017, p. 284; Côté & Blais, 2019, p. 437; Fraser et al., 2019, p. 1). Queer youth are significantly more likely to experience homelessness than cishet individuals, which only increases when individuals also hold additional marginalized identities. This discrepancy in likelihood has been linked directly to systemic, multi-faceted discrimination against LGBTQIA+ populations in the U.S., including in

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[3] ProQuest had only 25 peer-reviewed results for "LGB*" AND "survival sex" (anywhere, except full text), and 32 results for "queer" AND "survival sex" (anywhere, except full text)

areas such as housing, employment, and schooling. Shelton et al. (2018) found that 70% of their participants experienced familial discrimination and abuse based on the participants' gender identities and sexual orientations, which led to the participants being forced into homelessness (p. 16). Parents, relatives, group homes, and even foster parents frequently reject queer youth because of their non-cishet identities; these individuals are typically either directly kicked out of their familial homes or are forced to runaway out of fear of domestic violence (DV). LGBTQIA+ youth without social safety nets are considered at high risk of homelessness and housing instability. In addition to familial discrimination, Fraser et al. (2019) found that many LGBTQIA+ individuals face discrimination when trying to access homeless shelters or social services and, as a result, remain without housing. Transgender and genderqueer individuals in particular face significant difficulties when trying to seek emergency housing, as many shelters are not equipped or trained to provide care for gender nonconforming individuals. Moreover, when these individuals are given access to housing based on their assigned gender, they are frequently subjected to harassment and sexual assault by other residents (pp. 7–8). As a result, LGBTQIA+ youth are often hesitant to contact homeless shelters at all, fearing that they will be met with discriminatory practices and even violence. Côté and Blais (2019) report that homeless queer youth frequently have to "choose between disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity to service providers, which may put their access to much needed services at risk, or concealing their LGBTQ+ identity to obtain these services" (p. 441). This subsequently increases the length of time that queer youth spend in homelessness.

3.3 Homelessness and Human Trafficking

According to Polaris' (2019) data report for the NHTH, unstable housing and being a runaway homeless youth were some of the highest reported risk factors for sex trafficking victimization in the U.S. (p. 3). Young people who are homeless frequently report experiencing exploitation and violence that can be classified as sex trafficking by the TVPA. In a study of 564 homeless youth, Wright et al. (2021) found that nearly half of all of the participants surveyed had experienced some form of trafficking during their lifetime with 45% of incidents occurring within the last year. The findings of this study suggest that "trafficking is a remarkably common occurrence among young people experiencing homeless" (pp. 7–12). When minors lack necessities such as food, clothing, or shelter, it increases their risk of sexual exploitation and

trafficking, as they are often coerced or forced into exchanging sex for shelter (Middleton et al., 2018, pp. 141–142). Furthermore, homelessness and unstable housing are high risk factors for sex trafficking because traffickers frequently use the prevalence of substance abuse and mental illness within this population, as well as the lack of basic needs, to recruit their victims (Middleton et al., 2018, p. 154; Wright et al., 2021, pp. 2–3). Traffickers will often initially disguise sexual and labor exploitation as opportunities to increase an individual's agency through offering money, housing, or food in exchange for various acts, progressively increasing the severity of these acts through force, coercion, and manipulation. According to Middleton et al. (2018), the most commonly reported resources traffickers used to coerce homeless youth into a sexual exchange were money and shelter (p. 149). Increasing financial and housing opportunities among homeless youth is essential in preventing sex trafficking.

3.4 LGBTQIA+ Youth and Sex Trafficking

Though there is a clear connection between LGBTQIA+ youth and homelessness, and homelessness and trafficking, there is little literature written explicitly on the experiences the LGBTQIA+ population has in regards to sex trafficking. As described above, authors frequently use terms such as *survival sex*, *sexual exchange*, or even *child prostitution* when discussing queer minors who exchange sexual acts for basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter (Institute of Medicine, 2013, p. 6; Xian et al. 2017, p. 143). All of these labels, frequently used in studies of LGBTQIA+ youth under the age of 18, can be classified as sex trafficking (Victims of Trafficking, 2000, division A, Sec. 103). Middleton et al. (2018) argues that the TVPA's inclusion of minors engaging in survival sex as trafficking victims has "prompted researchers, service providers, and policy makers to reframe the context within which we conceptualize how at-risk youth experience survival sex and sexual exploitation, including a significant shift in language" (p. 142); however, this "shift in language" remains unseen in much of the literature written specifically on queer experiences of trafficking. Therefore, I argue that the variation of terms used to describe queer experiences of sex trafficking has led to scattered, disconnected research. The Institute of Medicine (2013) details the dangers of non-uniform terminology stating, "a child or adolescent victim identified as a prostitute may be treated as a criminal and detained, whereas the same youth identified as a victim of commercial sexual exploitation will be referred for a range of health and protective services" (p. 6). Language informs service

provision. A queer minor engaging in *survival sex* may not be referred to or granted access to the same services as a queer minor who has been *trafficked*, even if their experiences of exploitation are the same. How we define and identify a *victim of trafficking* matters. Though many acknowledge the high risk of exploitation for LGBTQIA+ individuals, few explicitly make the connection between queer identities and human trafficking. This thesis will, therefore, attempt to bridge this gap by distinctly addressing LGBTQIA+ experiences of trafficking.

4. Research Design and Methods

In this chapter, I first present the research design used in this study, explaining my epistemological and ontological positions as well as the justifications for my choice in design. Second, I give context to the research through providing information on my study area and participants. Third, I describe how the data was managed and analyzed, and finally, I review the trustworthiness measures taken, positionality of the researcher, the ethical considerations made, and the challenges I faced during the research process.

4.1 Research Design

I used an interpretivist paradigm during this study, examining my own positionality as a researcher as well as building a rapport with my participants to create mutual understandings and knowledge together (Moon & Blackman, 2013, p. 1173; Neuman, 2014, p. 108). I used a qualitative approach with an interpretive phenomenological research design. A qualitative approach allowed me to appropriately capture my participants' knowledge and understandings surrounding queer experiences of sex trafficking and aftercare programs (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 313). An interpretive phenomenological research design allowed me to examine the lived experiences of my participants, focusing on how to interpret the meanings of participants' experiences, reflecting on and analyzing the patterns and themes that emerged from the data (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 90; Creswell & Poth, 2018, pp. 126–128).

All data for this study was collected between October and December in 2021. The digital nature of the interviews in this project allowed for a study site that spans across the western, southern, and northeastern United States, including locations in: Washington, California, Washington D.C., and New York. These locations were chosen solely based on participant responses, as I contacted 56 different organizations and consultants across the U.S. with limited results.

4.2 Participants

In total, five participants were interviewed for this project. At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked their pronouns and how they would like to self-identify for this study, allowing them to share the identities that they felt may be relevant for this project. For

example, Carrie (pseudonym) felt that it was important the readers of this study knew her responses were coming from the perspective of a white, cisgender woman. Four out of the five participants self-identified as queer, while one identified as cisgender. The participants were all staff members from various organizations that provide aftercare services, including: emergency shelter, interpersonal violence (IPV) response, legal services, sex worker rights advocacy, and LGBTQIA+-centered trafficking aid. In an effort to avoid potential retraumatization and discomfort, both "Personal History of Sex Work" and "Personal History of Trafficking" in Table 1 below were noted by the participants without prompting. Four out of the five participants had a personal history working in the sex industry, and two participants disclosed having personal experiences of sex trafficking.

Table 1.

Individual Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym & Pronouns	Self-Identification	Involvement in Aftercare Services	Personal History of Sex Work	Personal History of Trafficking
Juliette (she/her)	Genderqueer femme	Emergency Youth Shelter Director	Yes	No
Chloe (they/them)	Queer, mixed-race femme	Sex Worker Advocacy Consultant	Yes	No
Carrie (she/her)	White, cisgender woman	Director of Research & Advocacy	No	No
Eyron (they/he)	Indigenous, queer trafficking survivor	Founder of LGBTQIA+ Anti-Trafficking Organization	Yes	Yes
Ash (they/them)	Queer, non-binary survivor and former sex worker	Sexual Violence Preventionist	Yes	Yes

4.2.1 Participant Criteria

Two separate criteria were used when selecting participants for this study. The first criteria set, Criteria 1 below, focused only on LGBTQIA+ human trafficking survivors who had participated in aftercare programs. As many aftercare organizations were unable or unwilling to serve as gatekeepers who would allow me access to this population, the first criteria set proved to be too limiting for the amount of time and resources available for a master's thesis study. Therefore, a second set of criteria, Criteria 2 below, was established to ensure the project could continue. The second criteria set focused on staff members employed by aid organizations who worked with LGBTQIA+ trafficking survivors. This revision was met with more positive responses from aid organizations, and it allowed the project to move forward. Coincidentally, however, two out of the five staff members interviewed met the requirements for *both* Criteria 1 and 2, allowing these participants to provide deeply personal and nuanced insights into the experiences of LGBTQIA+ trafficking survivors.

Criteria 1:

- Must be 18 years of age or older
- Must identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, or any other non-normative gender and/or sexual orientation
- Must fit the criteria of a human trafficking survivor, as defined by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000
- Must have participated in at least one aftercare program, as defined in section 1.1.2.

Criteria 2:

- Must be 18 years of age or older
- Must be currently employed by an aftercare organization, as defined in section 1.1.2, that aids human trafficking survivors and/or individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, or any other non-normative gender and/or sexual orientation

4.2.2 Recruitment

During the initial stages of this project, I used the NHTH online Referral Directory to find relevant organizations to contact in the U.S. This directory is carefully vetted through an application process, as the site only includes "anti-trafficking organizations and programs that

offer emergency, transitional, or long-term services to victims and survivors of human trafficking as well as those that provide resources and opportunities in the anti-trafficking field" (NHTH, n.d., para. 1). In total, I found 26 relevant human trafficking aid organizations—using the search filter called "Specialized Competency" with "LGBTQI Individuals"—and contacted them via the email they listed on the NHTH Referral Directory. Out of these 26 organizations, 14 did not respond and 7 responded negatively. The negative responses ranged from simply not having the capacity to collaborate to not participating in research "of this kind". A few organizations also said that they did not have enough experience with queer survivors to contribute meaningfully, despite identifying as having a specialized competency with LGBTQIA+ individuals on the NHTH Referral Directory. Five organizations responded positively, showing interest in the study and agreeing to meet with me; however, only one meeting resulted in an interview.

Following my limited success in contacting human trafficking aid organizations, I began searching for LGBTQIA+ support organizations who might also work with trafficking survivors. In total, I contacted 26 LGBTQIA+ support organizations as well. Of these organizations, 14 did not respond, 7 referred me to other relevant organizations and individuals, and 3 organizations responded negatively due to limited capacity and lack of relevancy to the project. Though there was some overlap in the organizations and individuals suggested, the 7 referrals led to an additional 3 contacts of individuals working in this field: one of which agreed to an interview. Two organizations responded positively, and both resulted in an interview. Finally, there was one LGBTQIA+-specific human trafficking aid organization that I was able to connect with that responded positively, agreeing to an interview; these responses can be seen in **Table 2** below.

Table 2.

Contact Responses

Type of Organization	No Response	Positive Response	Negative Response	Referral	Total Contacts	Number of Interviews
Human Trafficking Aid	14	5	7	0	26	1
LGBTQIA+ Support	14	2	3	7	26	2
LGBTQIA+ Human Trafficking Aid	0	1	0	0	1	1
Individuals	0	1	1	1	3	1

Note. Out of a total of 56 contacts, excluding multiple contacts within the same organization, only 5 individuals were willing or able to participate in this study.

4.3 Method of Data Collection

I conducted five in-depth, semi-structured interviews for the data collection in this study. According to Morris (2015), "the strength of the in-depth interview lies in its ability to create a research space in which the interviewee is able to tell their story and give the researcher a range of insights and thoughts about a particular topic" (p. 5). Four out of the five participants were queer and had personally worked in the sex trade, giving them the ability to describe queer experiences of sex trafficking with a certain degree of nuance. In-depth interviews are also a useful tool when collecting data on sensitive topics, allowing the researcher to build a rapport with the participants before addressing more difficult topics (Morris, 2015, p. 7). Building rapport with my participants beforehand—through prior introductory meetings or simply taking time before the interview to discuss my motivations behind this study—proved to be essential in

creating a comfortable and relaxed environment. The interviews were semi structured: I followed a prewritten interview guide, as documented in the Appendix, but asked follow-up questions when appropriate. I recorded each interview on my personal, encrypted laptop using UiB's Zoom license, which allowed me to extract just the audio from the recording.

4.4 Data Management and Analysis

At the beginning of each interview, participants were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym in an effort to recognize and honor their autonomy and identities, while also maintaining their anonymity (Allen & Wiles, 2016, pp. 161–162); I then verified with each individual that the pseudonyms chosen would not be easily recognizable (Duong, 2015, p. 180; Suen, 2015, p. 728). The interviews were stored using audio only—as per the WHO's Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Interviewing Trafficked Women (2003)—on my encrypted laptop and transferred to the University of Bergen's SAFE system using a VPN after each session. During the transcription process, all personally identifiable information was omitted from the transcript. After I completed this process, all recordings were then deleted. Though I offered all participants the opportunity to verify their data, only one requested to do so.

Coding and managing my data through NVivo qualitative analysis software, I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) understanding of thematic analysis to analyze the data collected from this study. There are six main phases, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), to using thematic analysis in research: familiarizing oneself with the data through transcription and review, generating initial codes containing interesting features across the entire data set, searching for themes among the initial codes, reviewing themes' relevancy to the coded extracts and larger data set, clarifying the themes by defining and naming them, and finally, producing the report with carefully selected examples of each theme (p. 87). Phase one was completed through my transcription of the interviews followed by my review of the transcriptions, noting initial ideas I had on potential themes. For phase two, I coded my data and gathered the codes into meaningful groups. I solidified these groups during phase three and four of my analysis by determining larger themes within the data set, creating a thematic map similar to the one seen in **Figure 1** below. These basic themes were then collected into larger organizing themes. Finally, I sought to complete phase six by providing thematic chapters in my findings and discussion section that include clear, substantial data extracts as evidence of those themes.

Figure 1.

Illustration of Thematic Map: Conflicting Approaches

Note. This map is not an exhaustive representation of all of the basic themes connected to this specific global theme. The purpose of this figure is solely to illustrate the process of analysis used in this study.

4.5 Trustworthiness of Research

The trustworthiness of a qualitative research study can be assessed using four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Yilmaz, 2013, pp. 319–321). Credibility occurs when individuals who share personal experience with the phenomenon being studied find the researcher's descriptions and interpretations to be accurate to their lived experiences of the phenomenon (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, pp. 152–153). This criterion can be achieved through establishing thick descriptions, conducting member checks, allowing for peer debriefing, and triangulating the findings using multiple theoretical frameworks (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). I recorded specific contexts and backgrounds regarding my participants' experiences with LGBTQIA+ sex trafficking to establish thick descriptions of the interviews; I conducted member checks in which I allowed my participants to verify that their data was transcribed accurately; I allowed both my classmates and supervisor to peer review and challenge my work throughout the entire research process; and I utilized theoretical triangulation by analyzing my findings through three theoretical frameworks—intersectionality, empowerment theory, and queer theory—and determining if these theories "converge on the same conclusion" (Tracy, 2010, p. 843).

Transferability occurs when the findings of a study can be applied to other contexts or participants, allowing readers of the research to transfer the ideas presented to their own life experiences as well (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 320). This criterion can be achieved through "gathering direct testimony, providing rich description, and writing accessibly and invitationally" (Tracy, 2010, p. 845). Dependability occurs when a researcher clearly describes the selection, justification, and application of research methods and procedures (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 320). In this methods section, I provided an exhaustive list and description of all procedures used to complete this study. The final criterion, confirmability, occurs when credibility, transferability, and dependability are met by the researcher (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 154). To achieve confirmability, transparency in the research must be established through making the methods, data collection, analysis, and interpretive choices of the researcher visible to those evaluating the study. In addition to the actions taken to meet the aforementioned criteria, I practiced reflexivity by detailing my personal bias as a researcher and being aware of the implications of these biases throughout the research process (Tracy, 2010, pp. 841–842).

4.6 Role of the Researcher

A key feature of qualitative research is reflexivity of the researcher, or acknowledgement by the researcher that they cannot separate their own lived experiences and beliefs from their research (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 302). Therefore, I must detail my own motivations for this study. I have personally witnessed two separate cases of LGBTQIA+ discrimination in aftercare services. The first occurred while I was attending a seminar on trafficking. The host organization expressed that, if a survivor in their program came out as LGBTQIA+, the survivor would be forced to choose between conversion therapy or expulsion. The second incident occurred while I was working with survivors in Moldova. I had worked with this organization for many years, so I noticed when a survivor was missing. The organization told me that the survivor left voluntarily; however, once I learned to speak Romanian, I found out they were removed from the program because they came out as gay. These incidents have motivated me to seek the experiences of LGBTQIA+ survivors directly.

Furthermore, I personally identify as queer. I officially came out only months prior to beginning this research, and—as a femme-presenting woman in a heterosexual relationship—my identity has not impacted my life experience significantly. Nonetheless, this identity did influence my choice to explore the experiences of LGBTQIA+ survivors. As such, I thoroughly examined my interview questions prior to data collection to confirm that I would not lead my participants to respond in a way that reflects my own bias. I kept my role as a researcher in mind as I reported the findings, ensuring that all conclusions were drawn from the participants' experiences rather than my own.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

4.7.1 Considerations for Human Trafficking Survivors

Conducting research with human trafficking survivors is considered a sensitive topic because it involves participants who have been stigmatized and discriminated against and because it is connected to personal experiences of abuse and exploitation (Duong, 2015, p. 175). For this reason, I established a set of guiding ethical principles, identified potential risk factors as well as solutions to eliminate them, and thoroughly prepared for acquiring informed consent (Duong, 2015, pp. 175–176; World Health Organization [WHO], 2003, p. 4). The guiding ethical principles I followed, which can be seen in the Appendix, were a modified version of the WHO's

Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Interviewing Trafficked Women (2003). I thoroughly detailed the purpose of the study, placing the focus on social change rather than trafficking history, as well as clearly establishing that the participants have the power to revoke their consent to participate at any time. I have prior experience with de-escalation techniques to mitigate PTSD-related trauma responses as well, but I only needed to utilize these techniques once.

During this interview, the participant showed subtle, but clear signs of dissociation upon describing past abuse, including struggling to articulate thoughts and difficulty remembering what we were discussing. The participant only expressed this for a moment before I simply redirected the conversation to a new subject, specifically one that focused on positive social changes rather than abuse. This alone proved to be effective; the participant's demeanor returned to its previous state, and we were able to continue the interview. The best course of action, however, would have been to ask if the participant would like to continue, change the subject, or stop the interview entirely, rather than deciding for them (WHO, 2003, p. 23). When interviewing survivors of exploitation and abuse, it is essential to avoid potential retraumatization by recognizing and addressing signs of distress as early as possible and allowing the participant to choose for themselves how they would like to continue. Significant signs of stress can include: "trembling or shaking, crying uncontrollably, severe headache pain, dizziness, nausea, difficulty breathing or catching her [their] breath, sudden appearance of a rash or becoming flushed" (WHO, 2003, p. 23). In my personal experience working with survivors, more subtle signs of distress can include appearing "spaced out" or disconnected, being unable to articulate thoughts—repeated "I don't know" statements can be a sign of this—wringing their hands, and suddenly avoiding eye contact. Researchers working with participants who have experienced trauma should be aware of these signs to successfully avoid retraumatization.

4.7.2 Considerations for LGBTQIA+ Populations

One of the biggest ethical concerns surrounding research with LGBTQIA+ populations is the possibility of an individual being outed, or revealing an individual's LGBTQIA+ identification publicly without their consent (Tufford et al., 2012, p. 224). I mitigated this potential risk by asking the participants to meet via Zoom in a neutral location, requiring that the participants create pseudonyms, masking any personally-identifiable information that was

disclosed during the interview, and by allowing the participants to review their data before it was made public. Though these steps were a necessary precaution, there was no risk of outing any of my participants for this specific study, as all of the LGBTQIA+-identifying participants publicly identified themselves as such prior to this project. It was also important that participants felt safe enough to express their identities and not feel pressured to present themselves as "more heterosexual" or "more cisgender" (Tufford et al., 2012, p. 229). This required using inclusive language by respecting pronouns, using the correct terms, and asking informed questions. When appropriate, I also let the participants know that I am queer, which often seemed to help them feel more comfortable speaking to me. The safety protocols checklist I reviewed prior to each interview, combining the considerations for both trafficked and LGBTQIA+ populations, can be seen in the Appendix.

4.7.3 Informed Consent and Anonymity

I established informed consent at the start of data collection through recorded oral confirmation. I let the participants know that they could revoke their consent at any point before, during, or after the interview. Anonymity was achieved through the pseudonym and masking procedures described in section **4.4 Data Management and Analysis** above.

4.7.4 Norwegian and U.S Ethical Clearance

To follow Norway's ethical research clearance protocols, I consulted with the Norwegian Center for Data Protection (NSD) to ensure the proper collection and storage of my participants' personal data. As I was looking to work with a highly vulnerable population, it was crucial that I contacted NSD early so that any potential concerns could be addressed prior to initial contact with participants; therefore, my research proposal was submitted to NSD in August—prior to any data collection—to obtain the appropriate clearance. It was then automatically transferred to the University of Bergen's RETTE registration system for research.

In the U.S., the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP), is the governing body that regulates research involving human subjects. In 1991, this department enacted the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, also known as the Common Rule, to establish clear ethical guidelines to better protect human subjects (U.S. Department of Health, 2016, para. 2). As such, I contacted HHS OHRP via

email on September 17th, 2021 to clarify if I am also required to follow the Common Rule as a student researcher attending a university outside of the U.S. A representative from HHS OHRP responded, saying, "Based on the information you provided, it seems unlikely that your research project will come under our oversight jurisdiction and that you would need to satisfy any of our requirements" (M. Azar, personal communication, September 17, 2021); the full email correspondence is included in the Appendix. This thesis is not, in any way, federally funded by the United States, and therefore, is not subject to the regulations of the Common Rule (U.S. Department of Health, 2016, para. 2). Though I was not legally required to obtain ethical clearance in the U.S., many principles of the Common Rule were applied to this study simply by adhering to NSD's policies.

4.8 Challenges

4.8.1 Tensions between Groups

The first major challenge I faced when conducting this study was navigating the tensions between LGBTQIA+ support organizations and anti-trafficking organizations, which I was not aware of prior to this research. Many LGBTQIA+ support organizations hold a sex worker rights framework, viewing the decriminalization of sex work as beneficial to queer individuals who are often involved in the industry. In 2019, the International LGBTI Association (ILGA) released a joint statement saying, "LGBTI sex workers are an integral part of our communities and movements, and have shaped key moments in queer history: we must listen to their voices, stand by their side and continue our fight towards social justice for all" (Paletta, 2019, para. 2). On the contrary, many anti-trafficking organizations hold an anti-sex work framework, viewing the sex industry as inherently exploitative and calling for stricter policing and criminalization. Melissa Farley (2015), a prominent name in the Anti-trafficking Movement, states, "for those in it, prostitution is not a job, it is 'paid-for rape.' [. . .] In the real world, from the perspective of the person in the sex trade - pornography, prostitution, and sex trafficking are the same" (p. 1).

The opposing frameworks of pro-sex work LGBTQIA+ support organizations and anti-sex work anti-trafficking aid organizations made it quite difficult to find organizations willing to participate in research that examines both queer identities and sex trafficking. Furthermore, I received a number of negative responses from anti-trafficking organizations as well who did not wish to participate in "research of this kind" or believed that they did not have enough

experience with queer survivors to contribute, despite listing themselves as having "Specialized Competency" with "LGBTQI Individuals" on the NHTH online Referral Directory. The tensions between these two groups posed perhaps the biggest challenge during the recruitment process.

4.8.2 Participant Compensation

The second challenge I came across during the recruitment process was not being able to provide compensation to participants. Between three to four organizations, who would have served as potential gatekeepers, declined to participate only after learning that survivors would not be compensated for their interviews. It was my understanding that these organizations did not feel it was appropriate to ask the survivors in their care to participate in work that was unpaid, given the financial instability that often comes with being trafficked. This also hindered potential snowballing with one of my participants. During our initial meeting, they expressed that they did not feel comfortable referring me to other queer survivors they knew because those survivors were not in places of financial stability.

4.8.3 Lack of Follow Through

The third major challenge I faced during the data collection process was a significant lack of follow through from organizations who had agreed to participate in this study. In the beginning of October, I met with the director of an anti-trafficking organization to discuss their potential involvement in the project. During this meeting, the director agreed to serve as a gatekeeper. I followed up with the organization throughout the month for any updates on participants; however, by the end of November, I stopped receiving responses altogether. Also, I met with the director of a different anti-trafficking organization who was highly interested in the project. We met twice to discuss the details of the project and set up a third meeting for the interview. The director did not show up for the interview, and I have not heard back from the organization since. This was a common issue during data collection. I believe this may be, in part, due to a realization by the providers that they do not have the level of LGBTQIA+ survivor participation that they originally thought. According to the majority of my participants, queer survivors often do not seek aid from anti-trafficking organizations, as these programs predominantly serve female, cishet survivors. This phenomenon will be discussed more in-depth in the findings section.

5. Addressing Trafficking: Conflicting Approaches and Definitions

In this findings and discussion section, there will be a total of four thematic chapters, starting with the introduction; the remaining chapters will contain both the findings from my interviews with participants and the discussion tying these findings to relevant literature. This first chapter will begin by describing my participants' personal and work history to contextualize their understandings of queer experiences of sex trafficking and aid. These understandings can be grouped into two main categories: the anti-trafficking approach, which seeks punitive justice and stronger anti-trafficking laws, and the sex worker rights approach, which seeks restorative justice and the decriminalization of sex work. As such, this chapter will discuss the conflicting viewpoints behind these two approaches, describing how each group defines trafficking and the issues that arise from their differences. The second thematic will discuss the findings on queer-specific experiences of sex trafficking, followed by the third chapter discussing queer-specific experiences of aid. The fourth and final chapter of my findings will discuss good practices for service providers working with LGBTQIA+ trafficking survivors, as defined by the participants.

5.1 Participant Backgrounds[4]

5.1.1 Juliette

The first participant in this study, Juliette (she/her), is currently the director of an emergency youth shelter, serving homeless youth in her area. Her organization frequently works with young, queer, trafficking victims. During her early 20's, Juliette personally worked in the sex trade and was frequently surrounded by women who had experienced trafficking themselves. Later, she went on to complete a master's degree in social work, spending two years working in child welfare services. Because of Juliette's prior experience working in the sex trade, she was able to notice signs of trafficking and exploitation in the youth in her community far earlier than her colleagues. As such, she quickly became the community's go-to person for all cases on trafficking. She states, "*it very quickly became like, '*[Juliette] *we have one of your girls.* [Juliette] *we have one of your boys.' I mean, I was given universal expertise on all people gay, all people being exploited, but I was glad.*" Her identity as a genderqueer femme and as a former

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[4] The names presented here are pseudonyms chosen by the participants, as described in section *4.7.3 Informed Consent and Anonymity*

sex worker influenced which cases she was assigned during her time working in child welfare. This led to a lifelong career of anti-trafficking work—serving as an anti-trafficking consultant, an executive director for an NGO working with exploited migrants, and then the board president of a national commercial sexual exploitation aid organization.

5.1.2 Eyron

The second participant, Eyron (they/he), had their first professional experience in the anti-trafficking field after leaving the sex industry and beginning their work as the outreach case manager in a shelter that they helped build from the ground up alongside other queer, survivor, people of color (POC). This shelter was created to fill an immediate and overwhelming need for queer- and survivor-friendly housing in their community. Eyron knew, firsthand, the importance of finding safe harbor during times of intense vulnerability. As a young, queer, indigenous 14-year-old, they were living on a military base surrounded by family who were not accepting of their sexual orientation and gender expression; their trafficker took advantage of that vulnerability to groom them, using a sense of acceptance to expose them to the sex industry. Though Eyron respects the intentions behind the sex worker rights approach, their experiences and perspectives of the sex industry have influenced them to hold an anti-trafficking approach to aid. As such, they went on to create one of the first LGBTQIA+-specific anti-trafficking organizations in their area. They have also used their experiences to help inform their work while serving on multiple national anti-trafficking councils and while collaborating with their local prosecutor to ensure proper care for trafficking survivors.

5.1.3 Carrie

Similar to Juliette and Eyron, Carrie (she/her), my third participant, also comes from an extensive anti-trafficking background. Previously, she oversaw a national survivor advocacy program which advised the federal U.S. government on its policies related to human trafficking. Carrie also spent time working as a case manager on the US-Mexico border—reuniting young survivors of trafficking with their families—and she has done extensive policy work overseas with various anti-trafficking, migrant rights, and sex worker rights groups. However, unlike Juliette and Eyron, Carrie takes a strong, sex worker rights approach, rather than an anti-trafficking approach, to trafficking aid. In her current role, Carrie works as a departmental

director for a non-profit law firm specializing in sex worker rights. She oversees the organization's original research and federal legislation proposals, advocating for the legalization of sex work and police accountability regarding violence against sex workers. When talking about her current employer, she states: *"We define sex work as work and, like any labor sector, people may experience exploitation."* She is critical of the Anti-Trafficking Movement and believes that a greater focus on the rights and protection of sex workers is key in addressing sex trafficking.

5.1.4 Chloe

Like Carrie, Chloe (they/them) also maintains a sex worker rights approach that stems from a long career in sex worker advocacy. They spent a large portion of their career working as a community organizer for sex workers, serving as the direct contact person for people in crisis. In this role, they frequently worked with individuals who had experienced forms of IPV, client violence, as well as sex and labor trafficking. Though they are no longer working as a community organizer, Chloe continues to have individuals reach out for help due to the reputation they built as a queer-friendly, pro-sex worker advocate. They have also worked with direct anti-trafficking service providers in crisis response, using their experiences as a former sex worker and as a queer, mixed race femme to inform their practices. Currently, Chloe works as a sex worker advocacy consultant: they provide training, technical support, and policy work around anti-trafficking, IPV, and anti-violence services, specifically for individuals that trade sex, use substances, and identify as LGBTQIA+. On their approach to this work, they state: *"I am very much a harm reductionist and very much a healing justice person."* Chloe believes that trafficking survivors should be able to identify the type of care they need and that justice efforts should focus on the victim, rather than the trafficker.

5.1.5 Ash

The final participant, Ash (they/them), follows the same sex worker rights approach that Chloe and Carrie subscribe to, placing emphasis on the importance of harm-reduction and greater protections for sex workers in the fight against trafficking. Currently, Ash works as a sexual violence preventionist by providing rape crisis centers, DV agencies, and human trafficking programs in their area with training and technical assistance. They have spent over a decade

working in this field with jobs ranging from an NGO's anti-trafficking specialist to a direct crisis responder and survivor advocate. Their work is informed by their own lived experiences as both a former sex worker and a human trafficking survivor, as well as their experiences being both queer and non-binary. During some of their trainings with rape crisis centers, Ash found that they often had to also inform the organization on how to appropriately work with queer individuals, as the services were not queer-friendly. As with Chloe and Carrie, Ash is highly critical of the Anti-Trafficking Movement. When asked what advice they would give to queer survivors seeking help, they said, *"I would say to anybody that you might get better and more compassionate responses from sex worker, harm-reduction groups, even if you're a trafficking survivor, than you would from anti-trafficking groups.*

5.2 Conflicting Approaches to Aid

In the following sections, I will describe the conflicting approaches to trafficking participants expressed during their interviews. There were two primary perspectives that arose during data collection: the anti-trafficking approach and the sex worker rights approach. In the anti-trafficking approach, sex work is viewed as inherently exploitative and collaboration with police is prioritized to target traffickers. In the sex worker rights approach, which is often adopted by LGBTQIA+ aid organizations, sex work is viewed in the same as any other industry and less police involvement is prioritized to protect victims from incarceration.

As mentioned above, Juliette and Eyron operated most closely within the anti-trafficking approach, while Carrie, Chloe, and Ash operated within the sex worker rights approach. The ways in which these two groups defined trafficking, approached aid, and understood survival sex varied greatly. Though acknowledging these distinctions is important in understanding how trafficking is discussed and addressed, it is also important to note that many advocates find themselves adopting various aspects of both approaches. As Eyron states,

> *"I think that, whether you're a part of whichever movement you're a part of, it tends to be categorized as sex work versus anti-trafficking. It should be noted that's just your access point to something you care about."* (Eyron)

We will begin by examining the anti-trafficking approach to sex trafficking.

5.3 The Anti-Trafficking Approach

5.3.1 Defining Trafficking

In an anti-trafficking approach, trafficking is understood using the TVPA (2000) legal definition, viewing all minors exchanging sex as victims of trafficking (division A, § 103). When discussing how the staff at her shelter screen homeless youth for signs of trafficking, Juliette explains:

> *"As far as we're concerned, all youth who have been on the streets more than three days are already in transactional relationships and usually transactional sexually exploitive relationships."* (Juliette)

Furthermore, she postulates that the longer minors remain homeless, the greater their risk of getting involved with more professional exploiters. Juliette evaluates all of the youth coming to her organization using the same criteria, presuming that those who have been on the street for more than three days have encountered trafficking of some kind.

Though her organization categorizes homeless youth in this way, Juliette reports that many of the minors accessing her program do not identify as victims. She says:

> *"We know that for many of the girls coming in the door, they're not going to identify. What we hear all the time is, 'I have a boyfriend. I had a fight with my boyfriend' or 'I'm tired,' which probably means that he didn't let her come in that night for whatever combination of reasons."* (Juliette)

Eyron also discussed the concept of minors engaging in the sex trade not knowing they are being exploited. When talking about their decision to enter the field of anti-trafficking aid, they said:

> *"I wanna help young people like me who are stuck in someone's house right now, or hotel room, and have nowhere to go and don't even know that they're in a pile of shit…whatever that is, I want to do that."* (Eyron)

Under the anti-trafficking approach to defining trafficking, minors engaging in the sex trade are considered victims, regardless of how they self-identify. This also extends to how anti-trafficking advocates define grooming and how they identify traffickers. Minors living on the street are often taught to survive using the sex trade by older individuals who were also taught this method of survival when they were young, according to Eyron. Though this cycle of learning and recruiting may not be perpetuated with malicious intent, it is considered grooming

and trafficking in an anti-trafficking approach. When discussing their own experiences growing up in the sex trade, Eyron states:

> *"I learned the sex industry from my trafficker at 14. People probably learned the sex industry from me, more than anything you know? I don't consider myself to be a trafficker, although there are times that I could probably be found guilty of promoting prostitution, but I never like schemed or anything like that. It happened in the moment."*
> (Eyron)

It was clear during the interview that Eyron struggled with this definition of *trafficker*, as they began to dissociate after making this comment. Despite the cognitive dissonance they felt using the anti-trafficking definition, Eyron maintained that teaching minors how to survive homelessness in this way should still be considered grooming and trafficking.

5.3.2 Police Involvement and Task Forces

Police involvement plays a vital role in addressing trafficking, according to the anti-trafficking approach. When the TVPA (2000) was written, a significant goal of the statute was to increase police participation to mitigate trafficking, stating that U.S. legislation and law enforcement models at the time failed to adequately address the issue (division A, § 102). Juliette explained that her organization's relationship with the local police department has been important in reshaping the way that police handle cases of exploitation. She says:

> *"We have formed a very strong relationship with the police department because it gives us a chance. It's taken a while to get the trust level up, but I now train their new cohorts coming in about commercial sex trafficking, which helps considerably. That means that I have police on the street that have gotten well past, 'She's making a decision. She's a prostitute' and are in the 'Oh, there's a victim and something should happen.' And the DA's office also."* (Juliette)

She believes that strong relationships between police and anti-trafficking organizations allow for more informed understandings of the sex trade and trafficking and, therefore, better care for survivors. Furthermore, Juliette's lived experience as a genderqueer femme also lends itself to better police understandings of queer survivors through this collaboration. Owen (2017) suggests that, to improve police relations with the LGBTQIA+ community, trainings must challenge cisheteronormative beliefs and practices within the department (p. 687). These beliefs shape the

ways in which queer survivors are treated by police; as Warner (1991) writes, "Heterosexual ideology, in combination with a potent ideology about gender and identity in maturation, therefore bears down in the heaviest and often deadliest way on those with the least resources to combat it: queer children and teens" (p. 9).

Police have historically treated individuals participating in the sex trade as criminals—arresting even victims of human trafficking—according to Juliette. She recalls cases in her early days of working in child welfare services where minors as young as 12-years-old were being labelled as "promiscuous" by local law enforcement. There was a significant lack of training amongst police officers on the signs of exploitation and abuse. Since forming a relationship with local law enforcement, Juliette has found that more victims are being brought into her program, stating:

> *"They come because the police bring them when they do sweeps, which is great. We have a very positive relationship with the police department, and they have a very committed group of police that are focused on this area of concern and very aware of who they are dealing with and what some of the concerns are."* (Juliette)

In addition to these relationships, Juliette also emphasizes the importance of human trafficking task forces—a collaboration of non-profits, government services, and advocates from many different sectors, often led by police, that exist to share information and resources to aid victims of trafficking (TVPA, 2000, division A, § 105). She believes that this level of collaboration is essential in delivering adequate services to trafficking survivors.

While Eyron also feels that this collaboration is essential in anti-trafficking work, they are slightly more critical of the role of police in addressing trafficking than Juliette. They believe that, before it is safe to increase law enforcement's involvement in anti-trafficking work, police reform is necessary. When asked what steps the U.S. should take to better protect young people from trafficking, they simply stated: police reform. Eyron views police involvement as a necessary tool for protecting victims of trafficking, but they also have a firsthand understanding of the complex issues surrounding discriminatory policing in the U.S. For them, increasing police accountability, ensuring equitable policing, and providing services beyond the police to respond to crises are the first steps towards building the relationships between anti-trafficking organizations and law enforcement that are imperative to ending trafficking.

5.3.3 Beliefs on Decriminalization

Anti-trafficking advocates often do not believe in the decriminalization or legalization of sex work. For many who subscribe to this approach, the sex industry is seen as inherently exploitative; therefore, any legislation allowing individuals to more easily trade sex would result in greater amounts of harm, including trafficking. While Juliette did not disclose her beliefs on the matter, Eyron had strong opinions on the decriminalization and legalization movement, stating:

> *"For me, I love what full decriminalization activists are saying, but I disagree with the solution. [. . .] Buyers cause such a huge amount of harm, and I think the full decriminalization movement obfuscates that with the ideologies that they purport."*
> (Eyron)

Though they understand and respect the desire to operate without the scrutiny of police and without criminalization, Eyron feels that treating sex work as legitimate work ignores the physical and mental distress that buyers often cause. For this reason, they placed more emphasis on police training and reform than on decriminalization.

5.4 The Sex Worker Rights Approach

5.4.1 Defining Trafficking

In contrast to the anti-trafficking approach, the sex worker rights approach defines the term *trafficking* simply as a legal definition used to penalize traffickers. Carrie, who works for a non-profit law firm, states:

> *"As an organization, we clearly distinguish between sex work that is done by consenting adults and people who experience exploitation in the sex trade. We define sex work as work and, like any labor sector, people may experience exploitation. We also, because we provide legal services, are very much influenced by the legal definitions only in so much as they're applicable to the clients that we serve."* (Carrie)

All three sex worker rights advocates in this study—Chloe, Carrie, and Ash—expressed an understanding that the label assigned to "exploitation occurring within the sex trade" has little to do with the experiences victims have outside of prosecuting their exploiters. Distinguishing between trafficking, IPV in the sex trade, and survival sex is less important to sex worker rights advocates than working to protect victims and provide them with the resources they need.

Furthermore, they feel that using the TVPA's definition of trafficking misplaces focus on criminal justice, rather than restorative justice. Ash explains:

> *"I think sometimes, because of the way we've talked about trafficking, because of the way it's been entirely framed by criminal justice, it's a crime. It's not a form of violence. It's a criminal definition. The violence in the trafficking is in the homelessness, in the power and control dynamics, the lack of options, and the immigration policy. And those are violent. The trafficking is just a criminal definition of the criminal act that results from this existing violence in other fields."* (Ash)

They feel that the current narratives surrounding trafficking emphasize rescue and criminalization rather than prevention, failing to focus on how individuals end up in situations of violence and exploitation in the first place. While sex worker rights advocates understand that minors exchanging sex for resources is considered trafficking according to U.S. law, they often use the term *survival sex* instead of *trafficking* because it places more attention on the idea that the exchange is an act of survival. Juxtaposed with the narratives surrounding *trafficking*, participants in this group feel that the term *survival sex* evokes the question: *why* are minors engaging the sex trade in the first place?

Chloe furthered this idea, explaining that minors trading sex who have not experienced "force, fraud, or coercion" (TVPA, 2000, division A, § 103) but rather poverty, neglect, and systemic abuse, often do not identify with the anti-trafficking approach's definition of a trafficking victim. They felt that categorizing all minors who are exchanging sex as trafficking victims was often counterproductive in terms of service provision. Ash exemplifies this, recounting the words of a friend who, at one point, was homeless and a minor who traded sex to survive and said:

> *"'What I didn't need, you know…the problem wasn't that I was trading sex: the problem was that I was homeless. Like, I wouldn't need an anti-trafficking program if I wasn't homeless.'"* (Ash)

The participants in this group, opposite to the anti-trafficking group, expressed distaste towards the idea that minors often do not know that they are trafficking victims. During their interview, Chloe showed clear frustration when discussing this concept, saying:

> *"I hate this idea that people don't know they're a trafficking victim. No, they don't know they meet a specific set of very complicated criteria to access this line of services that may or may not actually have anything for them."* (Chloe)

For the sex worker rights group, the label of *trafficking victim* often does not serve victims of violence within the sex trade, and the images of coercion and manipulation that it evokes often complicate service provision for minors willingly engaging in survival sex.

Moreover, participants in this group also had a different understanding the cycle of learning to trade sex as a minor and then later teaching homeless minors to trade sex to survive. They did not necessarily view this as grooming, like the anti-trafficking group, but instead understood it as a sharing of knowledge between older and younger generations. When discussing this phenomenon among queer individuals, Chloe explains:

> *"I've seen, especially with straight people reading queer familial relations and queer survival, I've seen them say 'Oh that's grooming.' But it's like no, this is literally just queer people talking to each other about how we've lived and been able to survive through poverty, through pushout, through having no sex education, no information about your body, no information about your gender."* (Chloe)

In the sex worker rights approach, older generations sharing knowledge about how to navigate the sex trade as a minor for survival is not considered grooming unless some form of coercion or manipulation is involved.

5.4.2 Police Involvement

Police involvement in anti-trafficking efforts is seen as counterproductive and even dangerous, according to the sex worker rights approach. Because this approach accepts that not all minors trading sex are being coerced and manipulated, police involvement can be complicated because of the current anti-trafficking laws in the United States. For example, a minor seeking services to address issues like being unable to attend school might run into problems if the anti-trafficking program collaborates closely with law enforcement. Instead of receiving help attending school, the minor may instead be pressured into telling the police the names of the individuals who helped them survive, as these individuals are considered traffickers by law. Chloe explains:

"If your trafficking program is heavily tied to cops or if the options you have are very
tied to law enforcement, that doesn't necessarily work, especially when you're talking
about that kind of interwoven survival that involves sex work, that involves minors
trading sex sometimes, you are asking people to turn in their families who helped them
survive." (Chloe)

They feel that police involvement hinders minors' ability to access services, as their relationships
within the sex trade are often far more complex than the law allows. Additionally, Ash explains
that, when an organization collaborates closely with law enforcement, they are trained to view
sex work as inherently wrong and exploitative. This stance ends up complicating the experiences
of minors accessing these services for issues other than having to trade sex, as they are made to
feel unwelcome due to the organization's anti-sex work beliefs. Carrie echoed these ideas,
advocating for decriminalization as an effort to reduce police involvement in the Anti-
Trafficking Movement. She says:

"I would see that as the ultimate thing that's needed to address trafficking and to make
sure that people have the resources they need: to move away from this expensive law
enforcement model." (Carrie)

5.4.3 Beliefs on Decriminalization

As their name suggests, the sex worker rights approach supports the decriminalization—
and, eventually, the full legalization—of sex work in the United States. This group recognizes
and emphasizes the deep, historical ties shared between the LGBTQIA+ community and the sex
industry. Chloe details this connection, stating:

"The history of queer liberation has been very interwoven with the history of sex work,
and so when you're talking about the relationships that people have, a lot of times—
especially when folks are street-based, especially when you're talking about survival—
those things are very interwoven." (Chloe)

They continue, explaining that the LGBTQIA+ community frequently cites the sex trade as a
place of liberation and empowerment. Sex workers and the LGBTQIA+ community alike have
historically been discriminated against and pushed to the margins of society in the U.S., and as a
result, often find themselves working together for their survival. For some queer individuals, the
sex industry can, therefore, become a resource through which their agency is exercised "even in

the face of others' opposition" (Kabeer, 2005, pp. 14–15). Ash furthers this idea, discussing how the criminalization of sex work affects LGBTQIA+ individuals directly:

> *"I think it's way more obvious to LGBTQ people that criminalization of adult sexual behavior that's consensual is typically tied to morality rather than safety. Because we've experienced that ourselves. I also think the other piece is that LGBTQ people engage in the sex trades more often, you know, especially when you start to look at trans women of color."* (Ash)

For the majority of U.S. history, LGBTQIA+ identities have been considered taboo—with outward displays of these identities often being met with violence and even legal repercussions (Owen et al., 2017, pp. 671–674). Ash explains that, in response to being discriminated against and criminalized in most mainstream avenues, many queer individuals seek refuge in the sex industry, trading sex as a means to survive.

This group, therefore, believes that giving workers in the sex trade the same rights and protections as employees in any other industry would help prevent exploitation, as individuals could more easily report crimes committed against them to the police. Carrie discusses how current laws criminalizing sex work affect queer communities, stating:

> *"One of the reasons we're pushing for decriminalization is because we see that the laws, as they're written right now, are used in a way that emboldens police officers to profile transgender communities and individuals who are gender nonconforming. There's a lot of assumptions about who sex workers are, and we're trying to change that understanding and also the laws that allow law enforcement to be harassing people who they profile as sex workers."* (Carrie)

Because of the pervasive stereotypes about what sex workers look like in the United States, police often target specific marginalized groups on the street for prostitution, regardless of whether or not they were actually participating in the sex trade. Law enforcement agencies maintain and perpetuate these cisheteronormative ideologies by "measuring deviance from the mass," treating individuals of visible non-cishet identities as sexual deviants (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 557).

Carrie believes that decriminalizing sex work would help protect individuals from this unjust profiling. She goes on to say that full legalization is key in preventing trafficking, as

money would be moved away from police-led, anti-trafficking operations and towards prevention efforts like addressing homelessness. Ash echoed this sentiment, saying:

> *"But I think even if we don't criminalize selling sex, if we just criminalize buying sex, as many people advocate to do, we're still not resolving the economic issues that make them vulnerable. We're basically telling someone, 'Sorry you have to do this thing to feed your family and to stay housed, but we're going to take it away from you without giving you any options. We're going to try to decrease your client base, leaving you more vulnerable and with less income to save you from yourself.' It's just paternalistic and short-sighted."*
> (Ash)

All three participants in this group agree that establishing full legalization of sex work in the United States would help protect individuals trading sex from trafficking.

5.5 Consequences of the Tensions between Groups

Though both approaches aim to eliminate human trafficking, sex worker rights groups and anti-trafficking groups operate significantly separate from one another. The conflicting beliefs between these two groups, specifically regarding how each understands sex work, has sparked a lot of tensions and even animosity towards each other. Ash explains:

> *"I would say the last thing that I've seen a lot of is that, because the Anti-trafficking Movement tends to be very much anti-sex work, that then causes a lot of the trainings that are provided on how to serve trafficking survivors to be very either shaming or antagonistic towards sex workers. Sometimes they won't even let you say sex work. They're like, 'Ugh, saying sex work is an act of violence.' They get weird about that."*
> (Ash)

In their experience, some anti-trafficking organizations believe that sex work is so inherently violent that they will not even tolerate the use of the words "sex work." Many using an anti-trafficking approach believe that exchanging sex for resources itself is exploitative and should, therefore, not be legitimized by calling it "work." This stance essentially eliminates conversations about survivors who have first entered the sex trade consensually and later experienced trafficking, which is often the case for queer survivors. Ash explains the resulting effects on this population, stating:

"We've had situations come up in my state where a local LGBTQ program, because most LGBTQ organizations have an explicit policy supporting the decriminalization of sex work and supporting sex worker safety, they will stop sending clients to get services elsewhere. Like they will not send them to other rape crisis centers, DV centers, and human trafficking agencies because if they have a client who needs sexual violence services, who's a sex worker, they end up not getting the competent, nonjudgmental support they need at a local rape crisis center anymore, because the trafficking people have trained them in a way that is so hostile to sex work." (Ash)

Many LGBTQIA+ support organizations in Ash's area will refuse to transfer queer survivors in their care to relevant sexual violence programs that hold an anti-trafficking approach to aid, as they are concerned that the survivors will be subjected to judgmental, unaccepting, and even hostile attitudes by these organizations.

In contrast, Eyron thinks that many LGBTQIA+ organizations who hold a sex worker rights approach frequently alienate and demonize those who follow an anti-trafficking approach. Perhaps as a reaction to the strict beliefs on sex work by anti-trafficking organizations, Eyron believes that LGBTQIA+ organizations often maintain a similarly rigid understanding of sex work as legitimate work. They personally found it difficult to regain a sense of community after leaving the sex industry and taking a criminalization stance against sex work. They explain:

"When you go against the grain that this isn't empowerment and you start bringing other people into that world, you lose your community. That has been one of the hardest things for me. It sucks, actually. I also have members of my community as part of my life, but not to the same degree as if I was like, 'Yeah! Sex work is work,' which I just don't believe."
(Eyron)

Due to their anti-trafficking approach to understanding sex work, Eyron reports being ostracized from the LGBTQIA+ community. They feel that, due to the strict, pro-sex work stance of many queer support organizations, these groups are unaccepting and intolerant of those who do not believe that sex work is legitimate work.

Both groups hold such inflexible political agendas regarding sex work that queer trafficking survivors, like Eyron, can become caught in the intersection of their queer and survivor identities—a clear example of Crenshaw's (1991) concept of political intersectionality. Anti-trafficking organizations do not believe that sex work should be legitimized through

legalization, ignoring queer experiences of sex work that lead to trafficking due to a lack of labor protections. Sex worker rights organizations do not believe that purchasing sex should be criminalized, ignoring protests from queer trafficking survivors who hold anti-sex work beliefs due to an internalization of experienced violence.

For Eyron, they had to forfeit their sense of community among LGBTQIA+ support groups as a consequence of their stance against the legalization of sex work. They were forced to choose between maintaining their criminalization beliefs as a trafficking survivor or maintaining their level of access to the queer community—between their survivorship and their queerness. The problem becomes that both approaches not only fail LGBTQIA+ survivors by ignoring either queer or survivor identities but also by being unable to fully understand the complete spectrum of discrimination and violence against queer individuals and against trafficking survivors. Without examining both identities together, anti-trafficking organizations will never understand the full experiences of trafficking victims, and sex worker rights organizations will never fully understand the experiences of queer individuals.

6. LGBTQIA+-Specific Experiences of Sex Trafficking

This section will address the sub-research question: what are the queer-specific experiences of sex trafficking in the United States? As such, in an effort to contextualize LGBTQIA+ issues within the sex trade, I will begin by discussing the connections my participants made between the current, national narratives surrounding queer experiences of sexual violence and how this directly affects LGBTQIA+ trafficking victims. These narratives include the sexualization of non-heterosexual identities from a young age in addition to the normalization of violence against queer people perpetuated by outside groups, as well as within the LGBTQIA+ community itself. I will then explore the nuanced, queer-specific emotional complexities surrounding trafficking that participants described, including gendered experiences of trafficking, the role of sexual orientation in trafficking, and the compounding shame many queer survivors often experience. The last finding I will present in this section will discuss the forms of structural discrimination queer individuals specifically face that often lead to exploitation and trafficking.

6.1 Narratives Surrounding Queerness and Sexual Violence

According to participants, there are a number of harmful, widespread narratives surrounding queer identities in the United States—the first of which reduces queer identities to a form of sexual behavior. Rather than signifying romantic attraction or love, there is a pervasive narrative that non-heterosexual orientations are defined by sexual relations alone. This sexualization of queerness makes LGBTQIA+-identifying youth vulnerable by exposing them to inappropriate comments and actions from adults at a young age. Ash discusses this phenomenon, stating:

> *"I think it can be hard because you've been sexualized from the time you were young. Like, when you think about a young adolescent who says, 'I think I might be gay,' a lot of times the response they get is, 'How can you know? You've never had sex with anybody.' So, like, people are tying it to sexuality for them from such a young age. They're hyper-sexualized, even by people who don't think they're sexualizing them. So, I think that increases vulnerability."* (Ash)

Queer youth are taught that their identities are inherently sexual in nature from the moment they come out, regardless of their age. As a result, lesbian and bisexual minors are frequently fetishized by adults and subjected to harassment. Berlant and Warner (1998) discuss how, in a heteronormative culture, intimacy is heavily privatized, limiting sex to personal life matters like reproduction and self-development. They explain that queer people frequently aim to cultivate "what good folks used to call criminal intimacies. We have developed relations and narratives that are only recognized as intimate in queer culture: girlfriends, gal pals, fuckbuddies, tricks" (pp. 553–558). Because of the heteronormative associations between privacy and sexuality, openly queer relationships are often viewed as sexual deviancies because they challenge these social norms. This contributes to the fetishization of minors who have come out with non-cishet identities.

For young gay boys, they are not only affected by this narrative from individuals outside of the LGBTQIA+ community but from individuals inside the community as well. Juliette explains this issue, talking about how gay youth are taught that having sex with older gay men is impressive and desirable, even in cases of trafficking. She says:

> *"Gay boys who are on the street that are being sold to gay men are being told that it's not a thing, that it's not exploitation. That it's just very cool and very hip to have an adult man in his 60s, 50s, or 40s taking care of you when in fact, the internal experience they're having is of violation and abuse. So, it gets very, very mixed up, and it's already a profound and complex trauma."* (Juliette)

The narratives sexualizing queer minors contribute to the shame and trauma that LGBTQIA+-identifying minors often feel after being trafficked. Eyron felt the direct impact of these narratives when they shared their experiences of trafficking for the first time, recalling how they were dismissed and discredited by those in their own community. They state:

> *"The first barrier is internally within our own community: we set a culture that makes this acceptable. Within my own community, when I think about how I shared this with people, they told me that this was my fault and that, 'as a kid, you made those decisions and you should live with them. The reason why you're in this position now is because you are who you are. You're just a hoe. You're just this party bod. You're just nothing equal to human,' you know? I think we all face that same dehumanization as queer people."* (Eyron)

Eyron believes the sexualization of queerness is one of the major issues that LGBTQIA+ individuals face, resulting in reports of sexual violence and trafficking not being taken seriously. They continue, discussing how narratives in the U.S. normalizing violence against queer people are so prevalent that they have become internalized amongst LGBTQIA+ individuals as well. They state:

> *"While it is fucked up beyond all hell, that is a major barrier we face: we normalize and accept this level of violence in our lives as something we have to accept as queer people."* (Eyron)

Chloe furthered this idea, detailing how the normalization of violence is compounded for queer sex workers. In the U.S., both identifying as queer and working in the sex trade are treated as failures to meet societal expectations. Butler (1990/2006) writes, "Indeed, precisely because certain kinds of 'gender identities' fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain" (p. 24). This can make experiences of violence seem "deserved" to queer sex workers, feeling as though they should expect violence given their identities and their profession. As Berlant and Warner (1998) explain, the heteronormative ideology of a privatized intimate life "shames them for any divergence between their lives and the intimate sphere that is alleged to be simple personhood" (p. 553). Deviations, like identifying as queer, from this cultural ideology of privatized intimacy in the U.S. are met with social humiliation and degradation.

Chloe shared their own story of internalizing the violence they experienced when they first entered into the sex industry. They recall:

> *"When I started out, I didn't know shit. I was literally just broke and needed money, so I was going through the motions and every time I'd be like, 'I'm not dead. I got my money. Everything's fine. Everything's perfect!' Every time I experienced anything that was harmful, it was always coded in like 'I signed up for this. Sex work is violence. All sex work is violent. All clients hate me and just want to use me, and therefore, I deserve everything that happens.'"* (Chloe)

The narrative that the violence experienced by queer sex workers is expected or deserved plays a significant role in the survival of queer trafficking victims. While an individual who was trafficked through force may seek justice after escaping that situation of violence, many queer

individuals who experience trafficking while working within the sex trade may not feel they can seek help. Eyron stresses the consequences of this paradigm, stating:

> *"I think a lot of people are just dead, you know? They don't have a chance to make it out. The last two years, I've had three people die. They're all Black. Two of them were queer."* (Eyron)

Queerness and sex work are both portrayed in mainstream discourse as immoral and ignominious. The internalization of such messages can prevent queer survivors from seeking help when experiencing abuse, which significantly affects the likelihood of their survival. These negative, national representations of queerness and sex work are central in reinforcing gendered and socioeconomic hierarchies of power (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1282–1283). The emotional complexities surrounding both queerness and sex work must be explored to better understand the experiences of queer trafficking survivors.

6.2 Emotional Complexities

6.2.1 Gendered Experiences of Trafficking

Gender identity played an important role in participants' reflections on queer-specific experiences of sex trafficking and the sex trade. They reported that minors who identify as non-cisgender or transgender often find affirmation of their identity while engaging in sex work. Chloe discusses the significance of this experience, stating:

> *"I have found this actually very frequently, even in experiences of survival sex, there is something to be said for that experience of being so comfortable often for the first time in the gender that feels most honest to you."* (Chloe)

Many transgender and genderqueer youth struggle with feelings of dysphoria while being forced to live according to their assigned gender. When these youth are met with acceptance and even praise of their authentic gender through the sex industry, the euphoria they experience can bring about deeply complex emotions. Juliette explains:

> *"In the case of gender queer women, it is particularly hard for those youth because they already have such a profound need to be perceived according to their true gender and not their assigned gender. So, when they're on the street, even if it's for seconds, even if it's just for minutes, they're being perceived as women, they're being perceived as female, so now they feel congruent for just a second. And you would have to feel*

incongruent for your whole life to understand the weight of that moment of congruency."
(Juliette)

In Juliette's experience, the significance of this moment of congruency for transgender and genderqueer youth cannot be understated; it can often be the difference between life and death for young queer folks. Gender affirmation can, therefore, be understood as a resource through which gender nonconforming individuals exercise agency, bringing them closer to achieving the life they desire (Kabeer, 2005, pp. 14–15). The feeling of being sexualized and even fetishized according to their true gender can bring a sense of empowerment for young transgender and genderqueer youth that they may not experience in other spaces. Juliette continues, saying:

> *"To be seen as hot, to be seen as sexy, all the things that all the girls in the street get caught in as part of the thing. Because, even for heterosexual girls on the street, bisexual or pansexual girls on the street, even for them, one of the powers of the street is that they have power. And the power they have is directly related to their sexuality and their body and their performative sexuality and their performative identity. Performative identity exists across the board out there, and for the same reason across the board, and that is that we are drenched in reinforcement that that's the deal. So, a heterosexual girl may or may not, but probably have, had a few women in passing who have told them that's not the deal. Genderqueer girls that are just struggling to emerge have never had an opportunity even for that level of conversation."* (Juliette)

Juliette is likely referring to Butler's (1990/2006) concept of performative identity—the idea that gender is not an identity that is stable or constant, but rather something that is seen through a "stylized repetition of acts" (p. 191). Society and the media teach girls from a young age that their perceived attractiveness, their performative sexuality and identity, are their only source of power. They are made to believe that their desirability should take priority over any other quality. For most cisgender girls, according to Juliette, they are told at least once by another woman that this should not be their priority, that they can have power in other areas of their lives as well. For genderqueer and transgender girls who are newly transitioned, however, they may not have had the opportunity to be told this. Therefore, the positive reinforcement of their gender that they receive in the sex trade has an even stronger affect than it does on cisgender girls. The

sexualization and fetishization they experience can have a significant impact on their mental wellbeing. Chloe explains the nuance surrounding this phenomenon, stating:

> *"When you are trading sex and coming from a background where trans-identities are a site of violence, familial rejection, hatred, all of these horrible, painful narratives, being in the sex industry is not just being in a space where you can be your gender, explore what your gender is, and explore how to present that gender and that name, but also you are fetishized and sexualized for it. I know that people are often like, 'Don't fetishize identities!' But that can actually be a complicated experience, but it does not make it not an experience of affirmation. The sex industry can, not only be economic survival, it can be one of the first places where you get to feel the kind of sexualization that ciswomen, gender normative women, and white women get to experience every single day."*

For genderqueer and transgender individuals, expressing their identities can often be met with pain, rejection, and violence; the sex industry, then, can become a place where they can be authentically themselves. Eyron has firsthand knowledge of this, as they could not express their gender freely at home while living with their conservative family. At the time, they were in the early stages of exploring their gender identity. Their family was not supportive, and their trafficker used this place of vulnerability to groom them. They recall:

> *"Where I wasn't permitted or allowed access to those things from my family, I could access those things through what I could do at night. That was really important to me during that time. In retrospect, as was the affirmation of that expression.* [. . .] *I remember when he'd* [Eyron's trafficker] *first paid for my nails to get done, then I'd scratched his back while we were having sex. I remember how rewarded…he just hyped that up so hard. He was like, 'Oh this is so sexy. They look so good on you,' and this little thing makes you feel like you're on top of the world, on top of the drugs he'd put into my body, on top of everything else."* (Eyron)

During this time, Eyron experienced intense amounts of fear, violence, and shame, while at the same time experiencing affirmation of their gender identity for the first time. The emotional complexities surrounding gender authenticity and sex trafficking can be difficult to process. For queer youth, experiencing affirmation in their gender while also experiencing violence concurrently can bring with it a high degree of cognitive dissonance. Ash explains, stating:

"It can be especially confusing when you both want to be validated by men as a man, right? You want to be seen as a man, you want that validation and that affirmation, and you also don't want to be exploited. So, that can be very confusing because not only are you experiencing violence, but you're experiencing it in the context of validating your sexuality and orientation. I don't know if that makes sense. Like the way that we talk about how some rape survivors are very confused that they may have cared for their abusers or the person who harmed them, it's a similar thing to that where you're like, 'That felt gross and scary. And also, hey, they saw me and validated my identity as a queer person.' And so, it's like, 'How do I marry these two thoughts in my mind?' So that can be hard." (Ash)

Experiencing both gender euphoria, often for the first time, and violence simultaneously is an intensely nuanced and complex situation, physically and emotionally, for trans and genderqueer individuals. It can make these experiences difficult to process and can even influence how young people respond to these situations of violence and abuse. Chloe reports:

"Unfortunately, I've definitely met young trans folks who are in a trafficking situation but feel that it is the only place where they can live in their gender saying, 'The second you can find me that [affirmation]*, I'll leave. But I'm not going to do that until then.' They are very conscious about it."* (Chloe)

Even under violent circumstances, some trans and genderqueer youth prioritize being affirmed in their authentic gender over their own physical safety. This is often a conscious choice, according to Chloe. Gender nonconforming youth need the resource of gender affirmation in order to achieve the life they truly want; however, traffickers and abusers often exploit this desire by attempting to control affirmation as a resource (Kabeer, 2005, pp. 14–15). Eyron further explains this, stating:

"I think that element of identity within queer people is severely taken advantage of; it often times can be a place of grooming as well for traffickers. I also want to lift up that like trans people are not stupid. [. . .] *It's one thing to say that it's common for people to be trafficked through manipulation of an intimate partner—and that occurs in its own way in the trans community—but it's different to say that trans people are preyed upon for their vulnerability of sexual empowerment. If I was hearing that, in that moment, I would say I obviously wasn't looking for sexual empowerment."* (Eyron)

They felt it is important to note that, while gender identity can often be a site of vulnerability for queer people, these individuals are not necessarily actively seeking out the sex industry for affirmation of their gender. The affirmation is a secondary factor, rather than the primary factor that led them to exchanging sex and experiencing trafficking.

6.2.2 Sexual Orientation and Trafficking

In addition to the role of gender identity, two perspectives arose from this study in regards to how sexual orientation influences an LGBTQIA+ individual's experience of sex trafficking. The first perspective comes from Juliette, who discusses the consequences of queer minors being trafficked to individuals who do not align with their sexual orientation. She states:

> *"The percentage of youth that are being trafficked that identify as gay or queer is high. That means that, on top of being raped, commercially raped, on a regular basis, they are being raped against orientation. So that creates an additional layer that plays out in gender in different ways."*

In addition to the trauma that cishet trafficking survivors face, queer survivors must also deal with the trauma of being forced to perform sexual favors on individuals outside of their sexual orientation. Furthermore, Juliette felt that sexual orientation can also be a place of confusion for queer minors who have not yet explored their sexual identity but are experiencing trafficking within a specific orientation. She explains that this is often the case with young girls, saying:

> *"It plays out in a particular way for a girl, where she, commonly what we see, is that she doesn't know what her orientation is anymore, and that may go on for a while. Or she may never have gotten the chance to sort it out in the first place, which makes it so much harder later for her to make sense out of herself."* (Juliette)

Girls who have not had the opportunity to explore and define their sexuality before experiencing trafficking may find it more difficult to do so afterwards. This can create a lot of confusion and shame surrounding sexual orientation and expression for survivors.

It can even be a source of difficulty for girls who are able to determine their orientation after being trafficked. Ash discusses this, recalling an interaction they had with a survivor advocate. They state:

> *"Someone sent me a DM on Facebook or Instagram saying, 'Hey, I met a survivor who is pretty sure she's a lesbian. But when she shared that with her survivor mentor, they told*

her that it's probably because she was trafficked that she thinks she doesn't like men and

that of course she doesn't like men.'" (Ash)

This survivor's sexual orientation was dismissed entirely because of the trauma she had endured while being trafficked to men. The process of coming out is difficult for individuals who have not experienced violence, and it is even more difficult for those who have. Rather than supporting her self-discovery, the individual mentoring her felt that the survivor could not possibly know that she was a lesbian due to the violence men had inflicted upon her.

In the case of young boys, Juliette explains how societal expectations of men complicate the issue even further. She says:

"With the boys, there's the added layer of shame because the way male…you know

people that are male-presenting are held in society. You know, so it's even less likely

that, if they're being sold to men and they're heterosexual, that they're going to

understand anything that's happening to them, and it is even less likely that they're going

to understand why they're responding." (Juliette)

Societal expectations of how men should look and who they should be attracted to hinder young queer boys from freely exploring their orientations. The added layer of shame placed on homosexuality amongst men in the U.S. makes it difficult for boys who are being trafficked to men to even understand what is happening to them.

Juliette's perspective relates primarily to young, queer survivors. Chloe's perspective, however, examines the role of sexual orientation for adult, LGBTQIA+ survivors. They discuss how exchanging sex exclusively with individuals outside of one's orientation can affect the overall experience for many engaging in the sex trade. They state:

"At the same time, the relationship to having sex under an identity and through a

sexuality that is not yours is a very different experience…or can be a very different

experience." (Chloe)

Chloe continues, explaining that many queer individuals exchange sex through a sexual orientation or gender identity that is not necessarily in alignment with their personal, authentic selves. They are utilizing the performative nature of gender to separate their personal and work identities. Queer sex workers are, therefore, aware of the effects of gender and the stylized acts they must produce in order to create the "illusion of an abiding gendered self" for their clients (Butler, 1990/2006, p. 191).

As with other marginalized identities, queer people are well-versed in the act of code switching—alternating language and behaviors to reflect that of different cultural groups—to protect themselves in unsafe situations. Chloe believes that this ability plays a role in queer trafficking survivors' ability to compartmentalize the violence they experience. They state:

> *"One of the things that's always been really amazing is in sex worker communities, especially within queer sex worker communities, being able to have experiences of violence that you can compartmentalize in ways that maybe aren't healthy, but if it helps you when you need it, I think it's important. Just because, as a queer person, you are constantly reforming and trying to figure out your identity because you don't fit; those constructions, being able to shift and code switch really well, doing it so naturally, being able to say this experience of violence happened to my persona, Jade, it didn't happen to me—I can put that there and hold that there where I haven't been assaulted, but Jade has—it's a really interesting thing."* (Chloe)

By separating their own sexual orientation and identity from their work, queer sex workers are then also able to separate the violence they experience while working. This ability is crucial for those who are engaging in the sex trade for their survival. Chloe continues, saying:

> *"I think it is something that is really unique and beautiful that I just don't see being talked about in other spaces. Being able to have this experience and then being like, 'That does not reflect on who I am. I'm going to put it in this other identity, and maybe I'll be able to deal with it in six months when I don't have to go back to work because I do now.' It's a really beautiful mark of the level of commitment that sex workers have to survival."* (Chloe)

Unlike queer minors who have not been given the chance to explore and define their identities, some queer adults in the sex trade have learned to use their orientation as a tool of resilience in their own survival. They are able to compartmentalize abuse and exploitation in ways that cishet survivors may not be able to mirror.

6.2.3 Compounding Shame

Queer trafficking survivors not only have to navigate complex emotions surrounding their gender identities and sexual orientations in ways that cishet survivors do not, they also have to navigate multiple, distinct intersections of shame. Chloe explains, stating:

"Queerness and sex work are both things that are really…you have to work through your shame, you have to work through the narratives that people are telling you, you have to work through the fact that you feel like a failure. There's been a ton of writing on this in the queer community, but queerness as a daily act of failure, of failing your gender, of failing your expectations of forming this nuclear family. Then you go into sex work and you're a double failure." (Chloe)

Both queer individuals and sex workers alike are often made to feel as though they are failures, simply because they do not meet cisheteronormative societal standards and expectations. The intersection of these two identities in queer sex workers can then bring about even deeper, more complex feelings of shame. Ash connects this phenomenon to queer individuals' experiences of familial rejection. They explain:

"As a survivor, the shame that you might feel might be different, especially if your trafficking experience or other violence in the sex trade is in alignment with your LGBTQ identities. So, let's say that you are a young, male identifying person who's out and being trafficked to men, and you already have this shame from your family that's led you to be homeless. I think that shame can be amplified." (Ash)

Queer youth who have been rejected by their families because of their sexual orientation can, therefore, experience additional layers of shame when they are trafficked to individuals in alignment with their orientation. Eyron details how familial shame affected them personally, stating:

"I remember one of the cultural interventions my family had staged earlier on was around one of my aunties coming to talk to me. Even before there could be the topic of gender orientation, there was the topic of sexual orientation. I don't think they would've understood anything about that. It was a wonderful conversation until it came to bringing her religion into play and, I say this as someone who is a devout Christian today, that was not okay. It did not help. It demonized me as being the problem, and it further integrated the trafficker's manipulation into my head as me being the source of something to fix. And also making it so that it was easier to be dependent on him because everywhere else I had turned, the church I'd grown up in, the aunties I'd known for more than ten years, were telling me that who I was is sinful and a problem." (Eyron)

For Eyron, the demonization of their identity by their family reinforced the shame that their trafficker had used to groom them. This is something that displaced queer minors often struggle with. When these minors then reach out for help after experiencing trafficking, they are frequently met with judgmental and unaccepting attitudes stemming from the negative narratives surrounding sex work, regardless of whether or not that minor made an active choice to enter into the sex trade. Juliette reports:

> *"Yeah, I mean it's like you're shamed for being trafficked and some places you'd think would be slightly more sophisticated, but now you're also…if you're on the street, somebody already didn't like who you were and usually the people that mattered to you the most. And the street doesn't care either incidentally, so the thought that anybody cares or that anybody would allow you to be the lead in your identity isn't something they are familiar with or trust."* (Juliette)

This compounded shame can influence whether or not an individual is willing to seek help after experiencing trafficking. Chloe discusses this issue further, explaining the role of shame in help-seeking behaviors:

> *"I think that also foregrounds a lot of why people are like, 'I don't deserve help because I signed up for this kind of violence. I see narratives about trafficking, and that's not me.' I've also heard, more than once, 'I don't deserve these services because someone else has it worse.' And I'm like, 'You are literally homeless, housing unstable in a violent situation. Who do you think these services are for?' So, it's just compounding layers of shame and not thinking that you deserve that kind of help."* (Chloe)

Not only does the compounding shame discourage queer survivors from seeking help, it also prevents them from thinking they deserve help in the first place. This thought process can make it difficult for queer trafficking victims to leave situations of violence and exploitation.

6.3 Structural Discrimination

In addition to the emotional complexities surrounding queer identities and trafficking, participants in this study also highlighted the role of structural discrimination in LGBTQIA+ individuals' experiences of trafficking. This discrimination is structural in that it is perpetuated by U.S. institutions, such as the housing market, labor industries, and law enforcement, and it is often the precursor to trafficking situations. Chloe states:

"Over the last few years in particular, there has been a growing awareness that LGBTQ folks are disproportionately impacted by exploitation. When you're talking about higher numbers of homelessness, job discrimination, and then lack of access to services that are very structural." (Chloe)

In their experience, LGBTQIA+ individuals—like other marginalized groups—are more likely to be exploited due to the vulnerability that comes from the structural discrimination inflicted upon them from a young age. Their experiences are compounded by the convergence of dominant, oppressive hierarchies of race, gender, and socioeconomic class (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1245–1246). Chloe goes on to discuss how structural discrimination can affect queer people specifically, explaining:

"So, you know, you'll have a trans person who has been homeless and doesn't have their documentation, and when they get their documentation, it doesn't match anything about them. And you know like being pushed out from schools, therefore, you don't have a GED [General Educational Development Diploma]*; higher levels of criminalization, so you have a record. So, there is kind of this understanding that LGBTQ people are disproportionately in need of these kind of support services that are really about the intersection of different forms of violence and economic need."* (Chloe)

When an individual becomes homeless, they are frequently unable to bring all of their documentation, such as birth certificates, passports, driver's licenses, and social security cards, with them. This individual then has to go through an extensive process to receive new copies of these documents, which becomes even more difficult for transgender individuals who no longer identify with the gender or name they were assigned at birth. Additionally, queer youth are often subjected to "push out" culture while attending primary and secondary school. Chloe explains that this occurs when students face harassment and bullying, not only from their peers, but from teachers and administrative staff as well. As a result, many queer youth do not finish high school—a requirement for most jobs in the United States. Furthermore, queer individuals also face higher amounts of profiling by police and are, consequently, more likely to hold a criminal record, which makes it even more difficult to get hired.

Carrie expressed frustration at the state of the structural discrimination LGBTQIA+ individuals face in the U.S., holding the nation accountable for creating and sustaining cycles of trafficking by not providing citizens with functioning social welfare programs. She states:

"There are a few people within society who maybe themselves are also victims of the way that the system is structured and the way the system marginalizes certain communities—significantly LGBTQ, racialized, and migrant communities—and they end up exploiting their own community out of a necessity to survive. It's systemic. It's not about individual bad actors. It's about a system that creates bad actors out of necessity." (Carrie)

Carrie believes that trafficking, both for the victim and the aggressor, is a direct result of the lack of resources and social programs provided to individuals living in the United States. She discusses how capitalism exploits workers for profit, creating a system rife with poverty that affects marginalized communities most significantly. Institutions across the U.S. hinder the agency of subordinated groups through holding "power over" the resources necessary for empowered living (Kabeer, 2005, p. 14). Queer individuals within this system are then forced to act out of survival, which creates the level of vulnerability necessary for situations of trafficking to occur.

For queer individuals, trafficking is, therefore, "merely the most immediate manifestation of the subordination they experience" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). When these abusive situations do occur for LGBTQIA+ individuals, they are often contextualized alongside the harm they have already experienced through structural discrimination. Chloe explains:

"I think one of the other problems is, at least in my experience of working with really trans-focused community organizations, trafficking isn't the greatest source of harm in a lot their lives. When you're talking about the way that they experience violence, the way that they experience State violence, the way that they experience poverty, trafficking is just one of those things and very often it's not even the thing that they want to talk about." (Chloe)

Queer people are so affected by structural discrimination in the United States that they often view trafficking as simply a product of larger issues, such as homelessness and police violence, that are a greater concern to their wellbeing. Trafficking is seen as a symptom of the system they are living in, rather than the predominant form of violence they are experiencing.

6.3.1 Housing and Employment Discrimination

Difficulties with housing and employment were among some of the most commonly discussed forms of structural discrimination in this study. Queer youth are frequently forced to

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leave their homes after coming out to their conservative parents in the United States. Being too young to work or navigate social services, these youth are then vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Ash recalls working with many young people who have experienced this phenomenon, saying:

> *"We would also have cases where a family had kicked their kid out for being LGBTQ and then that kid keeps getting trafficked."* (Ash)

Minors who are forced to exchange sex for housing and basic necessities are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, as they do not have the resources or "power to" leave violent situations. When these minors turn 18, they often still struggle to find housing. Ash explains that this is a direct result of the lack of anti-discriminatory housing and employment protections for queer individuals. They state:

> *"They probably wouldn't need a shelter in the first place if they had protections when it came to housing, jobs, and other things that contribute to economic security. When you have this much discrimination, people are going to do what they need to do to stay alive and take care of themselves."* (Ash)

LGBTQIA+ identities are still not protected under anti-discrimination laws in many states across the U.S. There are 20 states who still do not have any housing discrimination protections for gender identities or sexual orientations (Human Rights Campaign [HRC], 2022, sec. Housing). This means that queer people can not only face discrimination during the process of renting, selling, or buying a home, but they can also face discrimination from homeless shelters that are not federally funded. Chloe states:

> *"I think one very structural thing is, in the United States, we do not have great non-discriminatory provisions. The way that those* [provisions] *have played out in terms of congress and administrative back-and-forth are not that old and are legally precarious. They do not necessarily come with expansive amounts of support for training."* (Chloe)

Homelessness is one of the greatest risk factors for trafficking, and queer youth make up a significant percentage of the homeless youth population in the U.S., as discussed in chapter **3. Literature Review**. Yet, many of the diagnostic tools used by shelters to identify trafficking victims do not take this into consideration. Juliette states:

> *"We found that they weren't weighting homelessness high enough in the risk factors. Because we know that, according to some studies, 80% of all the youth that are being*

exploited were homeless at the time that they met their exploiter, so that risk factor

should be very heavily weighed, and it wasn't. (Juliette)

Despite the high risk of trafficking among individuals experiencing housing instability and the increased risk of this instability among queer youth, Juliette feels that homelessness is still not taken seriously enough by anti-trafficking researchers and national advocates.

Queer people who have experienced housing discrimination—whether through situations of familial rejection, denial of rental applications, or being turned away from shelters—often enter the sex industry as a means to survive, placing them at risk of experiencing trafficking and violence.

Moreover, this population also frequently experiences discrimination in employment. Carrie explains:

"[. . .] anyone could be a sex worker, anyone could also experience exploitation in the sex trade, but certain populations are at higher risk of exploitation, certain folks are more reliant on the sex trade for economic survival because of discrimination in the employment sector." (Carrie)

In states where there are no anti-discriminatory protections for LGBTQIA+ identities in the labor market, queer individuals can be denied employment solely based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. There are 12 states in the U.S. who do not provide any employment discrimination protections based on sexual orientation or gender identity at all for queer employees, and an additional six states only provide these protections to public employees (HRC, 2022, sec. Employment).

Even in states that have these protections, discrimination cases against employers are incredibly difficult to prove. Eyron explains how this the affects queer individuals' ability to leave the sex industry after experiencing violence, stating:

"There are fears that you're not going to be able to support yourself because how else are you supposed to make money? I mean you can talk about the low-wage jobs that everyone deals with, but particularly trans folks in general are not going to have economic security: housing, employment, identification, healthcare. These are all realms of why there's insecurity there, and so there's fear around getting all of your basic needs met." (Eyron)

Housing and employment discrimination impact queer individuals' decisions to enter the sex industry and to continue working even after they have experienced violence.

6.3.2 Police Violence and Discrimination

While housing and employment discrimination were primarily understood as a precursor to queer experiences of trafficking, participants understood police discrimination as a hinderance to queer survivors escaping trafficking. Working in the legal sector, Carrie had many insights into this issue. She states:

> *"We see that a lot of people who experience exploitation are also the people who are the most marginalized by law enforcement who are discriminated against simply for existing and are profiled as sex workers."* (Carrie)

Police discrimination disproportionally affects marginalized groups, like those in the LGBTQIA+ community, more than groups with privilege. According to Carrie, transgender individuals frequently report being profiled, harassed, and even wrongfully arrested simply for existing publicly within their gender identities. She explains:

> *"We've heard from community members that they will be stopped simply for wearing a dress, a skirt, out on the street and be profiled as a sex worker—even if they're just going about their daily lives. We see that, because the laws criminalize sex work, it gives police officers the opportunity to harass transgender women who they specifically profile as being sex workers just based on the way that they're dressed."* (Carrie)

In the state where Carrie lives, a previous law allowing police to profile and arrest transgender women for "loitering for the purpose of prostitution" was repealed; however, she reports that police officers often still abuse this principle, assuming that any trans woman or femme-presenting genderqueer individual are sex workers and treating them as criminals. The cisheteronormative cultural pressure to privatize sex can make openly queer relationships and the very existence of gender nonconforming folks seem threatening or dangerous to police who refuse to challenge these ideologies (Berlant & Warner, 1998, pp. 553–558). Carrie goes on to say:

> *"I had a meeting recently with a group of trans, Latina migrants in* [location]*, and they were expressing how much profiling goes on where police officers assume they're sex*

workers and treat them as criminals because, currently, sex work is criminalized."

(Carrie)

A study conducted in 2017 recognizes this pattern of behavior from law enforcement, as police were perceived by participants to treat transgender individuals highly unfairly, second only to the treatment of Black individuals (Owen et al., pp. 680–686). Even when police are aware that a queer person is experiencing trafficking, not engaging in consensual sex work, they will frequently still arrest the victim. Carrie states:

> *"They even admit to arresting people who are being trafficked, and they make the excuse that they have to arrest people 'for their own good,' that arrest is a necessary part of an investigation. They think that they are allowed to traumatize people in order to 'rescue' them. It is this mentality that says that arrest is a good thing in these instances, and we find that is extremely harmful. Just the experience of being arrested can be very, very traumatizing. That's something that's commonly occurring throughout the United States."* (Carrie)

Police will arrest victims of trafficking even when they know the individual is innocent, claiming that it is a necessary part of the legal process.

On the opposite end, queer victims are also frequently met with complete inaction by law enforcement, as they will refuse to file police reports and ignore clear situations of exploitation, holding "power over" the resources this population needs to move forward. Eyron recalls their first interaction with police while they were being trafficked, saying:

> *"I remember the first time I'd encountered police while I was working…working* [adds air quotes] *…I was 14-years-old, and I was with a 60-something-year-old at like two in the morning, and the police officer stopped me while I was in the guy's car. He said, 'Something's funny. This does not look right,' and I remember looking at him like, 'Help me. Help me.' I know what that look looks like as someone in direct service. As a human being, I know what a child's face looks like who needs help. I remember him looking at me and telling me that he had better things to be doing anyways."* (Eyron)

Being young and afraid to speak out, Eyron expected the officer to help them. They were instead met with indifference and inaction. At 14-years-old, Eyron quickly learned that police would not help them out of their situation.

Beyond profiling, unjust arrests, and inaction, LGBTQIA+ survivors often experience physical violence by police as well. Chloe discusses this issue, describing how trans survivors of trafficking categorize the police violence they have experienced in comparison to their experiences of trafficking. They state:

> *"If you ask, 'What is the greatest experience of interpersonal harm that you've had?' there is such a high focus on police violence in particular. Transwomen who trade sex experience outrageous levels of police violence, even the ones who have trafficking experiences, it is the police violence that they want to talk about."* (Chloe)

Despite having experienced violence and exploitation within the sex trade, Chloe explains that trans survivors often cite police violence as the greatest source of harm in their lives. Officers will use the vulnerability of those working in the sex trade, an illegal act in the U.S., to harass and even sexually abuse queer folks. Carrie explains:

> *"I think we've seen a pattern of behavior from law enforcement that they seek out marginalized communities to harass in particular and that sex workers have always been targeted by law enforcement for such harassment and for sexual abuse. We see that's part of what law enforcement refers to when they're basically coercing sex workers into providing sexual services; they say, 'What you're doing is a crime and I could arrest you, or give me this sexual service and I will let you go,' which sometimes amounts to rape or other sexual assault."* (Carrie)

Some police officers use their positions of power to coerce queer individuals working in the sex trade to perform sexual favors for them. This abuse even occurs to minors engaging in survival sex, which, according to the TVPA, is considered trafficking. Therefore, queer minors are not only experiencing discriminatory profiling and inaction, they are also being trafficked by police. Eyron experienced this firsthand. When asked if queer victims could go to the police for help, they state:

> *"You can't do that. I don't think I've ever told anyone this before, but I did go to the police one time and that was so dangerous, you know? They would show up at different places I was at, and I don't even know how they knew I was there. They would demand for me, and it was incredibly scary and hard to survive. **If I did not fuck my way to safety, I would probably be dead** because these were places that weren't just trafficking, like they had bags of car ignitions, they printed money, there were guns, there were*

stolen goods constantly, they would bring cars to my house and shit. Just like all this kind
of shit. There was a specific person who would fuck people up. It was really intense. That
was really scary, so no you cannot do that." (Eyron)

As a minor, Eyron went to their local law enforcement to seek help out of a trafficking situation
only to end up being trafficked by the same police officers who were supposed to assist them.
Police were a hinderance to Eyron's escape, rather than a resource. The violence queer
individuals experience while being trafficked often plays a small role in a larger, more complex
history of structural violence and discrimination. Chloe discusses this concept, explaining why
queer individuals often do not leave the sex trade after experiencing trafficking:

"When so many of those experiences are foregrounded by being fired from your job for
transitioning, being misgendered on a regular basis, being harassed in public for being
queer, bullied at school…when something reaches the level of trafficking, it's not even
necessarily that people don't know, it's that they know that there aren't necessarily better
options." (Chloe)

The structural discrimination and violence that the LGBTQIA+ community is subjected to in the
U.S. silence queer experiences of trafficking, forcing individuals to stay in violent situations
because they have no other means to survive.

7. LGBTQIA+-Specific Experiences of Trafficking Aid

In this section, I will address the sub-research question: what are the barriers for LGBTQIA+ trafficking survivors trying to access and navigate aftercare services? The first subsection will discuss the obstacles that queer individuals specifically face when attempting to seek help from service providers. Participants identified four main barriers in this subsection—discrimination against survivors' gender identity or sexual orientation, a lack of available research on queer experiences of trafficking, a lack of LGBTQIA+ competency from service providers, as well as the "word-of-mouth" system of aid that has resulted from inaccessible programs. The second subsection will cover the three main legal barriers LGBTQIA+ survivors face when seeking aftercare services. The first of which is a heightened fear and mistrust of law enforcement agencies, causing queer survivors to avoid contacting the police for help, as well as to avoid aid programs that rely heavily on police involvement. The second legal barrier, as identified by Carrie, is diversion programs intended to prevent trafficking victims from being incarcerated, which often force queer minors to participate in aftercare programs that are not queer-friendly. The final legal barrier affecting queer survivors specifically is in government funding, including how federal funds are allocated, which organizations are receiving funding, and a lack of funding for specialized services.

7.1 Barriers to Accessing Service Providers

7.1.1 Discrimination in Aid

LGBTQIA+ individuals experience discrimination across multiple institutions in the U.S., and the trafficking aid sector is no exception. According to participants in this study, queer trafficking survivors frequently report dealing with discriminatory service providers when navigating aftercare programs. Whether due to explicit acts of queerphobia or the inability of shelters to house transgender and genderqueer individuals in a gender-appropriate manner, queer survivors often have significant difficulty accessing aid. Chloe explains:

> *"There is this instinct that people have, that is deeply heartbreaking, where it is really scary to ask for help. They've probably been told no a handful of times. They've probably been shut out a handful of times. And that's on us for not having safe avenues.* [. . .] *For*

the most part, everyone I deal with comes through community and has had negative

experiences with asking for help before." (Chloe)

As a community organizer working directly with sex workers, Chloe has had many experiences in which queer survivors felt guilty, even apologizing, for reaching out to them for help. They expressed an understanding that queer survivors have often had such negative histories of working with service providers that they become wary of seeking help at all. Ash discusses this further, explaining the ways in which service providers alienate queer survivors:

"We would sometimes be giving agencies mentoring about how their services just

weren't queer-friendly. These agencies get so wrapped up in gendered descriptions of

how human trafficking happens that people don't feel like they're going to be treated with

respect there if they are nonbinary or trans." (Ash)

According to Ash, trafficking agencies often focus heavily on the trafficking experiences of cisgender women. The dominant discourse in the field of trafficking is highly cisheteronormative, evoking images of white, cishet women being kidnapped and forced into the sex industry. Though this does occur, it does not accurately represent the experiences of those with intersectional identities who entered the sex trade for economic survival and later experienced trafficking. This creates an environment which may feel unwelcoming for queer survivors who have experiences of trafficking that differ from that of cisgender women.

Even among agencies who are inclusive of LGBTQIA+ survivors, issues still arise regarding outside provider discrimination. Chloe explains:

"There are anti-trafficking service providers who are trying very hard, who are also

required to serve every victim of trafficking so they don't necessarily need non-

discrimination provisions, but they are often working with other services who don't have

non-discrimination provisions or have never been challenged on what that means and

don't have the ability to do the cultural humility work and training that could be more

transformative from what they're doing." (Chloe)

Collaboration between organizations is vital in serving victims of trafficking, as each program typically specializes in specific aspects of trafficking aid (e.g., housing, legal assistance, medical services, furthering education, financial aid, etc.). If the organization providing housing for a survivor is queer-friendly but the private agency giving legal assistance is not, this can become a

challenge for LGBTQIA+ survivors navigating the complex social services necessary for leaving abusive situations.

Though federally funded organizations are required to follow non-discrimination provisions, this is not always useful or even true for LGBTQIA+ individuals. Ash states:

"In the US, a lot of times discrimination protections aren't extended to trans people. They get kicked out of shelters; they get turned away from shelters; or they might get into a shelter and then get harassed by other residents in ways that the staff don't monitor." (Ash)

Nearly half of the state governments in the U.S. do not include gender identity in their anti-discrimination laws (HRC, 2022). As a result, non-cisgender individuals are frequently denied entry or expelled from trafficking aid programs. This is particularly a problem for transgender and genderqueer survivors in need of emergency housing, as many DV programs are only designed to serve cisgender women. Eyron discusses their experience working with trans survivors, saying:

"The times that I've interacted in direct service with trans survivors, there's not a program. You're putting people in communities. I've put people in the trans community organizers' offices, you know? With people who will actually take the risks for them. There's every barrier in the world you can think of." (Eyron)

There are limited, if any, trafficking aftercare programs available that are designed to aid transgender and genderqueer survivors. Eyron built the first program in their area to accommodate LGBTQIA+ survivors after personally experiencing discrimination in aid. When asked if they were aware of any discriminatory practices among trafficking aftercare programs, they state:

"Well, I built the first program that serves all genders here. There wasn't one that existed before the one that I built. There was just nowhere to go, period. I guess all the programs were. [laughs]*"* (Eyron)

Before Eyron created their organization, there were no programs available for survivors who were not cisgender women. This is frequently an issue for trans and genderqueer individuals. Chloe explains:

"When you're dealing with gender nonconforming folks, sometimes you'll have a runaway and homeless youth shelter which does serve all genders that may be really,

really tricky about where you house specifically trans men and transmasculine folks who

aren't necessarily safe in a boys' unit, but who aren't girls." (Chloe)

Young trans men often do not feel safe being housed with cis men, but they also do not want to experience the gender dysphoria of being housed with cis women. For nonbinary and genderqueer survivors, neither men's nor women's housing is appropriate, as they do not identify with either gender. This can make it difficult for LGBTQIA+ survivors to find the appropriate resources they need.

Some organizations will even require gender nonconforming survivors to detransition while using their program. Ash discusses their experience with this phenomenon, saying:

"We'd have cases where people would call trying to find housing for a survivor, and the

only shelters available would only let them in if they detransitioned while living there,

presented as the wrong gender while living there." (Ash)

Requiring trans survivors to detransition—forcing them to live with gender dysphoria as a result—is a significant barrier to accessing aid, according to Ash. Queer youth often stay in situations of violence if they are also receiving gender affirmation and do not believe they can receive it elsewhere. Affirmation is a powerful resource for queer survivors; when trafficking organizations exercise their authority by withholding this resource, the experience can be quite disempowering for LGBTQIA+ survivors (Kabeer, 2005, p. 14). It is, therefore, unlikely that these youth would be willing to trade their own agency for assistance from an organization requiring them to abandon their identities.

Furthermore, even in cases where a transgender survivor is granted access to a shelter and treated well by staff members, they frequently experience harassment by other residents using the program. Chloe explains this further, discussing how agencies often overlook this issue:

"On top of that, they've never considered the fact that maybe your staff is trying to be

good, needs the tools, has never been trained, has never dealt with a trans person before,

and is going to make well-intended mistakes, but you haven't considered the fact that this

is an emergency shelter with 30 other women who don't want a trans woman living there.

So, client participation with each other becomes a very real problem, and that's just

rooted in the structure of the way that we've dealt with emergency housing." (Chloe)

Trafficking aid organizations may provide their employees with the proper training for working with queer survivors; however, they have little control over how other residents respond to the

inclusion of transgender and genderqueer individuals. Depending on how this situation is handled by the organization, LGBTQIA+ survivors may not feel safe enough to continue the program. Ash recalls a similar scenario in which their friend experienced harassment both by other residents and staff members. They state:

> *"I have a friend who was trafficked while a younger minor, who got help as an adolescent, and got sent to an anti-trafficking residential program to get healing, and safety, and support. They ended up experiencing so much homophobia there that they got kicked out of that program and then began trading sex while still a teenager to survive after being kicked out of an anti-gay, anti-trafficking program."* (Ash)

This anti-trafficking program created such an unsafe and hostile environment that Ash's friend was eventually forced to leave and begin selling sex to survive. When this young survivor reached out for help, they were met with such animosity and hatred that reentrance into the sex trade became the more favorable option—all because of their LGBTQIA+ identity. Eyron provides an overview of how LGBTQIA+ survivors experience trafficking aid, stating:

> *"I think almost every turn a trans survivor can go to seek help, they will face discrimination and many, many barriers to exit. There's no safe house you can go to. If you came to me and said, 'I want to prosecute my trafficker today, leave today, and do something different for my life,' I can almost guarantee you that you will not find a place to stay…it's fucked up…that's trans-responsive, that can actually keep you safe, that can actually provide a modicum of a chance for a life where you're alive, not even financially stable, where you're just alive."* (Eyron)

7.1.2 Lack of LGBTQIA+ Competency

Even among trafficking aid organizations who do not discriminate based on gender identity or sexual orientation, they often still lack the level of cultural competency needed to successfully work with queer survivors. This lack of LGBTQIA+ specialization can be discouraging for survivors seeking help for the first time. Carrie explains:

> *"I think also just generally what I hear in doing my work is that it is very challenging to go to service providers if you live in certain communities where there are not culturally competent services if you are queer. So, if you're living in a community that is not accepting, that has limited medical and social services, whatever it may be, you might*

have a very hard time wanting to access them and feeling comfortable doing that."

(Carrie)

Anti-trafficking organizations who acknowledge the disproportionate levels of exploitation within LGBTQIA+ populations often still do not recognize how different queer experiences of trafficking can be from cisgender experiences. Crenshaw (1991) explains that intervention strategies designed for one specific group—namely, white, cisgender women—do little for those who face different obstacles due to their racial, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds (p. 1246). Chloe exemplified this difference, discussing the narratives that many of these organizations have around trafficking:

> *"Having this idea of trafficking: you leave and you can be restored, and you can be healed from survival sex—especially when you're dealing with minors who have not experienced force, fraud, or coercion, they have experienced poverty, neglect, and systemic abuse—having that as a narrative that really foregrounds a lot of the services and shapes a lot of the interactions is really not useful for people who have never had access to that narrative and will never have access to that narrative."* (Chloe)

For many queer survivors, it is not necessarily force or coercion that leads them into situations of trafficking, but rather the financial instability caused by housing, employment, and educational discrimination. This makes leaving after experiencing violence in the sex trade more difficult, as the factors that led to their exploitation still remain. The framework of trafficking aid does not necessarily account for the specific needs of queer survivors, according to Ash. They state:

> *"I think, at least in my area, the trafficking movement as a whole has started to realize it needs to be LGBTQ-friendly, but I don't think it realizes the degree of just like wholesale restructuring of what they do, how they do it, and what that's going to require. Like, you can't just do a pronouns training and stick a rainbow flag on your door and call it done. There's like actual change to your framework that has to happen."* (Ash)

Ash feels that anti-trafficking organizations, while they may have good intentions, frequently underestimate what is truly needed to become accessible to and inclusive of queer survivors. Trainings on general LGBTQIA+ issues are not enough to help staff members understand the complexities of assisting a survivor dealing with structural discrimination. Chloe explains:

> *"Unfortunately, a lot of them have never come to realize how much they are working in a very heteronormative, cisnormative space and very quickly are running into institutional*

and systemic barriers that are deeply rooted in gender and sexuality. Especially a movement that is very much like 'we serve women, we can serve queer people.' And it's very much like nah, it's not the same thing. There are a lot of challenges just in terms of they're reliant on structures that pose just problems for queer folks." (Chloe)

The experience of exiting trafficking for queer survivors can be more complex than many anti-trafficking organizations are prepared to handle. For example, many anti-trafficking organizations work directly with police, which becomes complicated when working with queer survivors who have had negative, even violent, histories with law enforcement. The systemic barriers that queer individuals face can make providing aid more difficult for anti-trafficking organizations who are inexperienced with this population. Chloe details this issue, stating:

> *"Those kinds of things come up very, very quickly. As well as just recognizing the level of barriers that they've never dealt with before when you're dealing with people with challenges around documentation, having* [criminal] *records and not being able to change their documents because they have a record, and therefore, they don't have access to jobs or finances. So, a lot of the challenges that the trafficking movement is trying to apply and coming to the first time to realize the inadequacy of a lot of our systems."* (Chloe)

In the U.S., many states do not allow individuals who have recently been convicted of a crime to change their legal identification, according to Chloe. Transgender survivors with criminal records, therefore, cannot change their name, photo, or gender marker on their state IDs. These documents are required by employers before they can hire employees, landlords before they can lease apartments, and financial institutions before they can loan money. If an individual's perceived gender does not match the information on their ID, this can lead to discrimination, preventing queer survivors from gaining access to the aforementioned resources. These multifaceted, oppressive structural barriers that LGBTQIA+ survivors are subjected to hinder their ability to find alternatives to their violent situations.

Juliette explains the consequences of organizations not recognizing the need for greater LGBTQIA+ competency, stating:

> *"You know, the truth is that even getting NGOs to understand how many youth, queer youth, are lost because they don't create a door that's safe for them is work in-and-of-itself that needs to be done. They would say that they do, and they would say that they*

know, but we go back to the staff that is surprised that an identity brings with it a culture

and a history. That just because it is a white youth that doesn't mean that it's a white

culture that she's carrying or he's carrying. And the same thing with the youth of color

like those are deep, historic cultures that most youth gravitate towards quickly to be safe,

to be reinforced, to understand how to be themselves freely outside the structures of white

hetero culture." (Juliette)

In Juliette's experience, understanding the culture and history connected to queer identities is essential for effectively serving young, LGBTQIA+ survivors. When marginalized individuals embrace the rich, historical cultures tied to their identities, they often find a sense of community and belonging, which can be an important part of the healing process. Many service providers do not recognize that this not only applies to racial identities, but queer identities as well. Juliette discusses this further, saying:

"For some of our staff, it is news to them that there is a culture that comes with the

identity. You know, and that there's like styles. That, you know, there's not just culture,

there's the same depth of culture that they're familiar within their own culture is existing

in gay and queer culture, and it evolves like theirs' does. I think that that's news."

(Juliette)

The lack of awareness regarding queer culture often causes LGBTQIA+-identifying survivors to feel alienated and misunderstood by trafficking aid organizations. Rather than creating and encouraging an environment in which cultural identities are celebrated, Juliette has found that many service providers struggle to even acknowledge that these cultural aspects of queer identities exist.

This may be, in part, due to the lack of resources available to anti-trafficking organizations on queer experiences of trafficking. Chloe recalls dealing with this issue in their early days as a community organizer, stating:

"After a while of community organizing and thinking about it, there aren't a ton of

resources out there for working in the sex industry and being assaulted. I can find

literally zero decent articles on sex work and IPV. It's mindboggling what isn't there, and

so a lot of figuring out how to deal with stuff in communities, especially when I was a

young organizer with zero training, a lot of it was just making up things as we went along

and talking to people, asking, 'What would help people? What helped you? Maybe that

could help this person' It was something that really struck me now that I have more
experience in actually reading about trauma-informed care." (Chloe)

For many queer survivors, trafficking and exploitation occur while an individual is already working in the sex trade, rather than in the form of kidnapping and coercion. However, many of the resources provided for trafficking survivors do not take this into account. Chloe explains that there is little to no information available specifically for sex workers who experience trafficking, as anti-trafficking outreach primarily targets those who have not willingly entered into the sex trade. This affects the research on this issue as well. Chloe explains:

"Even in areas where you would assume there'd be some research, it's just not there
when it comes to folks trading sex. You're still going to get sampling barriers because the
research is going to be on people who self-identify as trafficking victims or people who
are working with trafficking organizations, which are just less likely to be queer people."
(Chloe)

Chloe explains that, because of the pervasive narratives of trafficking, many queer survivors avoid anti-trafficking programs altogether, feeling as though their experiences of violence do not match the cisheteronormative descriptions provided by these organizations. Therefore, research on the experiences of queer survivors becomes difficult, as many are not identifying themselves as trafficking victims or participating in trafficking aid services. Chloe continues, stating:

"I think part of it is the service provision because, of the different studies that I have seen
that have taken this into account on some level, young queer folks are hugely more likely
to trade sex underage for all of the reasons: pushout culture, not being able to access
services, not being able to access services where they can exist within the identity that
they feel most comfortable. [. . .] *There's the trafficking definition where anyone* [minors]
who trades sex meets that definition. I would say most of those young folks are just not
going to trafficking services, so when you're doing research on young people who access
trafficking services, that's a very different population than minors who are trading sex."
(Chloe)

Because queer minors engaging in survival sex do not see their situations reflected in widespread trafficking narratives, they are often not accessing trafficking aid programs because they do not self-identify as trafficking victims. If queer minors are not participating in these programs, they are then less likely to be included in trafficking research studies. Chloe feels that this could be a

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major contributing factor to the lack of LGBTQIA+ competency seen in trafficking aid service providers.

7.1.3 Word-of-Mouth Aid

As a consequence of discriminatory practices and a lack of LGBTQIA+ competency among trafficking service providers, queer survivors frequently have to rely on a "word-of-mouth" system of aid. Rather than contacting anti-trafficking organizations directly for help, many queer survivors use their existing networks to find individual actors working in direct service who are known for having a safe, queer-friendly reputation. Ash details their experience being in this position, stating:

> *"As I've done more and more survivor leadership, my name has gotten more out there as someone who has both lived experience and is queer. With survivors, a lot of times—public survivors, people who are public about their survivorship—word travels, and a lot of the most impactful work isn't even being done or funded through organizations. It's just through one-to-one introductions." (Ash)*

They recall friends of survivors contacting them through various social media websites, seeking assistance for those who have had little success working with anti-trafficking organizations. Ash's reputation as a queer sex worker and trafficking survivor led them to become a contact person for other queer survivors looking to exit situations of violence. Chloe has also formed a similar reputation among sex workers in their area. They state:

> *"Now I still get outreach from folks who are within community and not necessarily connected to other community spaces literally just through Twitter or Facebook people will reach out and say, 'Can you help me?' So, I still do that very, very ad hoc, but you know, once you're in that role, you're kind of always in that role."* (Chloe)

Where traditional pathways to exiting situations of trafficking have failed LGBTQIA+ survivors, word-of-mouth networks have succeeded. Both Ash and Chloe feel that some of the most meaningful work they have done for queer survivors has come from these interactions. Ash explains this system of aid further:

> *"So what ends up happening is there is this word-of-mouth network where people reach out, and there's some one-on-one mentoring both with survivor leaders who are losing access to some of their professional networks and income when they come out, but also*

with survivors who's initial contact with help is a resource that isn't especially LGBTQ-friendly—as they start to heal and feel more comfortable sharing what they're going through, they end up finding that those supports are not there for them anymore. They need to kind of build grassroots networks." (Ash)

Queer survivors often find themselves without support as they become more comfortable in expressing their specific experiences of trafficking. It becomes necessary, therefore, for them to establish a network of support outside of anti-trafficking service providers. For example, Ash explains that many queer individuals find support through mutual aid networks. They state:

"In the US, because our financial systems fail marginalized people so spectacularly, we have mutual aid funds. So, in the area where I live, we have a QTIPOC [queer, transgender, and intersex people of color] *fund where there are a bunch of donors—many of whom are white and cis, have better jobs, or have some degree of privilege—who make monthly donations to this fund that just turns around and gives it all to QTIPOC to help them supplement their income. So, I think a lot of times the trafficking movement, the resources, they tend to have a specific utility, but are not the answer to everything. You will need to find supports through other places and connect to other survivors who are also queer because…it's not like it's a whisper network, because it's not secret, but a lot of times, it's just who you know."* (Ash)

Word-of-mouth networks are critical for LGBTQIA+ survivors trying to successfully leave situations of abuse and exploitation, as many of the available resources and programs fail to recognize the complexities surrounding queer experiences of trafficking.

7.2 Legal Barriers

Discriminatory practices and lack of relevant competencies amongst trafficking aid organizations are not the only barriers queer survivors face when seeking help out of trafficking situations: they are also often met with legal barriers as well. According to Carrie, the way that the U.S. legal system currently addresses trafficking actually increases queer individuals' risk of being exploited. She states:

"We also see that the legal framework, as it relates to trafficking, has created a lot of discrimination against queer people specifically and has really compounded some of the discrimination that queer people experience that makes them vulnerable to trafficking, so

it's counterintuitive that the way that trafficking is addressed actually can perpetuate some of the harm that queer people experience." (Carrie)

Anti-trafficking laws targeting the sex industry often result in the profiling and harassment of gender nonconforming individuals by police. Higher levels of police profiling and harassment lead to higher levels of incarceration for queer individuals. Criminal records make it more difficult to get a job or rent an apartment, which then, in turn, increases an individual's risk of exploitation and trafficking. This cycle of structural discrimination is perpetuated by anti-trafficking laws that do not account for queer experiences of trafficking.

One such example, according to Carrie, is the passing of the U.S. Senate's Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) and of the House of Representatives' Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) in 2018. The bill was designed to punish individuals who knowingly aid, enable, or support sex trafficking in the United States. It also led to the amendment of the Communications Decency Act, which had previously protected online services from being liable for the actions of their users (Allow States and Victims, 2018, § 4). Though intended to target traffickers, SESTA-FOSTA has had negative consequences for the queer community. Carrie states:

> *"We've seen that it's also impacted queer youth's ability and queer sex workers' ability to organize online and access harm-reduction information online. In the absence of good social and medical services in a given community, people go to look for information on the internet. SESTA-FOSTA has had an immediate and detrimental impact on organizing and providing healthcare information online because platforms are censoring that kind of content out of an abundance of caution that they're going to run afoul of SESTA-FOSTA."* (Carrie)

Due to the passing of SESTA-FOSTA, websites have begun heavily censoring all content related to sex, including educational and informational materials. Carrie explains that this has hindered queer youth and queer sex workers from being able to connect with communities online. It has also made exchanging sex more dangerous for queer sex workers, as they are no longer able to vet clients online first—leading to increased risk of trafficking and violence.

7.2.1 Fear and Mistrust of the Police

In addition to the actions of legislators, the actions of law enforcement also frequently acts as a barrier for queer survivors trying to access the resources they need to leave situations of trafficking. Marginalized individuals in the U.S. often have significant concerns around calling the police, even when they have experienced explicit violence and abuse. Chloe explains how this affects queer victims of trafficking specifically, stating:

> *"Also, the other part of it is who feels comfortable calling the cops and who doesn't, and everyone knows who feels comfortable calling the cops and who doesn't. Those hierarchies don't go away when you trade sex. Most of the folks that I work with have had massive hesitations and fear around calling the cops, which just gets compounded when you're a POC, when you're transgender, nonconforming, when you're LGBTQ, when you have an open warrant. It is a very painful tragedy. We can talk about violence in that safe space and what that feels like, and it has to be contextualized with the fact that the only thing that's offered is the potential for another form of violence. People don't want to invite that violence as well."* (Chloe)

As discussed in section **6.3 Structural Discrimination**, marginalized individuals frequently experience discrimination by police, which can result in unlawful arrests, physical and sexual abuse, and even death. Queer individuals are, therefore, fearful of contacting and involving the police when they experience trafficking, making it difficult for them to escape. Eyron stressed the significance of this specific barrier for queer survivors, stating:

> *"14-year-old me wanting to leave the sex industry today couldn't. It doesn't exist. I can't call 911. Well, you could but…*laughs*, you know?"* (Eyron)

Eyron alluded to the fact that I, as a white, cisgender woman, could contact emergency police services with little fear of the consequences, but they, as an indigenous queer survivor, could not. The disparity between those who are able and those who are unable to contact the police for help stands as a significant barrier for queer survivors experiencing violence and exploitation. When asked for an example of a fear that may stop a queer survivor from seeking help, specifically one that may differ from a cishet survivor, Eyron reiterated:

> *"Same, but a heightened fear—I don't know if it happens more, but I hear it more—of sexual favors from law enforcement officers."* (Eyron)

The potential solicitation and sexual abuse by police officers frequently eliminates law enforcement as a resource for LGBTQIA+ survivors trying to leave situations of trafficking. For many, even the fear of putting other queer survivors at risk will stop them from contacting the police or accessing trafficking aid programs who require police collaboration. Chloe explains:

> *"They're just not looking for that kind of thing, especially if accessing a service is going to put the rest of their chosen family in very serious legal jeopardy of felonies, they're not going to go."* (Chloe)

Many queer survivors would rather avoid seeking help altogether than risk subjecting their street families to potential incarceration, as arrest can lead to police violence and criminal charges can lead to complications in finding housing and employment.

7.2.2 Diversion Programs

Another example Carrie gave of anti-trafficking policies that disproportionately harm queer people is the use of "diversion programs." Designed to reduce the rate of incarceration among trafficking victims, diversion programs are a collaboration between judicial systems and anti-trafficking organizations. She explains:

> *"Part of what I can speak to from a policy perspective is that there has been this move towards basically diversion programs. They're specific to people who have been involved in sex work, specific to trafficking in the sex trades. It is also a program that tends to perpetuate this simplistic conflation between trafficking and sex work, so you get picked up for doing sex work. You're given this option of…and I'm not a lawyer so I don't know exactly how it's explained, but generally the way that I understand it is: you could plea and have the option of doing this diversion program—meaning if you meet all of the requirements for this diversion program, it does not go on your record as far as I understand it."* (Carrie)

In a diversion program, individuals are arrested by police for prostitution, then they are taken to specialized courts where they are given the option of going to jail or identifying themselves as victims and completing an anti-trafficking program. One of the major problems with this system, as Carrie explains, is that LGBTQIA+ individuals are forced to participate in anti-trafficking programs that are not always queer-friendly. She states:

"Because of who is profiled and arrested, we see that queer people are being arrested on sex work charges, so they're the ones going through these programs. What we're hearing is that it feels coercive like, 'I didn't want to go to that service provider. I didn't want to go to that counseling service. This place was not culturally competent to work with trans or nonbinary youth.' Instead of it being representative of what folks express they need, it becomes just what they need to get through to not have a charge stick on their record."
(Carrie)

Criminal records can prevent numerous employment, housing, and educational opportunities; when queer youth are given the opportunity to avoid jail time and criminal records, it is likely that they are going choose to participate in diversion programs whether or not they agree that they are a victim of trafficking. Carrie explains:

"The assumption being that, if you're going through this program, you've been trafficked, so the charges were incurred during the course of being trafficked. The reality is that people who do sex work end up saying, 'Okay, sure. Yeah. I was trafficked, and I'll go through this program.' It creates barriers to accessing services because so much money and resources are put into these programs that then require people to go to counseling, have meetings with a case manager, to meet all of these supposed services' requirements that aren't necessarily reflective of what the person would actually need to assist them in the situation that they're in." (Carrie)

Queer sex workers who have been arrested usually agree to completing anti-trafficking programs simply to avoid criminal charges. These diversion programs, developed to help victims of trafficking, therefore, end up being filled with individuals who have not experienced trafficking in the sex trade at all. Carrie feels that this is a barrier for queer survivors who have actually experienced abuse, stating:

"Because that's what's being funded, it takes away resources and funding for the programs that could help queer youth, that could be of assistance if someone is in a position where they're not necessarily being trafficked, but they're doing sex work out of a need to survive and are in a position where they easily could be exploited. (Carrie)

Rather than using government funding for diversion programs that disproportionately target queer sex workers, Carrie feels that those resources should instead be allocated to programs that address the environmental factors that lead to situations of trafficking for queer people.

7.2.3 Government Funding

Participants in this study expressed an overall frustration towards the ways in which government funds are distributed in the United States. From a lack of specialized services to DV shelters not being equipped to house trans individuals, participants viewed government funding as a major barrier in aiding queer survivors. Juliette discusses the struggle of finding ways to fund LGBTQIA+-competent, specialized services for queer survivors, stating:

> *"The other barrier is that funding is limited, and so specialized services happen…you'll see in the arc, historically, more specialized services happen during a stretch of administration that's socially committed and starts giving more money, so there's the luxury of smaller programs and more focused programs. I would say that that's very likely gone, incidentally, and it's going to be few and far between. So what we hope for and what people try for is to find any funding that funds us at least some space-creating money within our organization."* (Juliette)

Specialized services are considered a luxury by many service providers, as there is typically not enough funding for regular services. Though she believes that smaller, more focused programs would be highly beneficial for queer survivors, Juliette does not see this as a possibility in the current government administration, nor in the foreseeable future.

Another obstacle queer survivors face when seeking aid is the large-scale allocation of federal funds to religious anti-trafficking organizations who are unaccepting of LGBTQIA+ identities. Ash discusses the prevalence of government funded, faith-based organizations in the anti-trafficking field, explaining the implications for queer survivors:

> *"I think one of the things is that a lot of the services are more likely to be faith-based, at least in the US. In the US context, a lot of services that are funded by the government are faith-based services, which is fine…. I mean, if they're doing good work, but the flip side of that is then there'll be like, if you're looking at geographical regions in our state for example, 'Oh, we have a provider in that county, so we don't need to be funding a new provider.' All the while forgetting the provider in that county is not appropriate for all survivors. Considering needs to be filled, because they fill the need for white, cis, Christian women, moving past that can be a catch."* (Ash)

When a conservative, religious organization is registered as the service provider in a specific county, federal and state governments may not be willing to fund additional trafficking programs

in that area. This can cause problems for queer survivors, as LGBTQIA+ identities may not be accepted under these organizations' religious beliefs. Queer survivors dealing with unaccepting service providers can be met with discrimination and harassment, potentially by both staff members and other residents in the program. Therefore, queer survivors may not have their needs met in areas where the U.S. government is funding religious anti-trafficking organizations.

Furthermore, queer survivors may also struggle to have their needs met due to the way that grant funding for trafficking programs is designed. Chloe discusses the harm-reductionist approach to aid, allowing the individual to decide what assistance they need rather than designating services in a generic way. They explain:

> *"It is the way that fields and funding for IPV is very slowly moving, but not trafficking. In IPV funding, it started off as like a shelter-based funding structure, where they gave formula grants to the states. Every single state got a grant, and that went to fund shelters primarily. Right now, it is super, super small like what actually goes out… it's mostly pieced together funding. But the original inception was: it was a federal grant, every single state got it in different sizes to fund shelters, and out of that shelter you would be able to provide emergency shelter support and eventually case management. One of the things that is shifting is saying that we actually need to provide funding for IPV to community-based organizations. LGBTQ organizations have been a big part of that conversation."* (Chloe)

Community-based organizations follow this harm-reductionist approach to providing services for individuals in need: instead of creating generic, simplistic programs for all survivors to go through, regardless of their needs, these organizations allow the individual to determine what specific services they need (i.e., legal aid, healthcare, education, housing, financial assistance, etc.). Using this model, survivors are given the "power to" make their own life choices through allowing them to determine the resources they need to achieve the life they want (Kabeer, 2005, pp. 14–15). Chloe believes that this method of funding would be a more empowering and effective way of addressing the needs of trafficking victims than how funding currently works for trafficking programs, stating:

> *"Whether you're talking about, a lot of funding for trafficking beds for emergency shelters go to DV shelters or runaway and homeless youth shelters, and that's not the vast majority of trafficking: that's the vast majority of a very specific understanding of*

trafficking. So, you'll have shelters that have never had a trans person before, or they'll say 'well, we have individual rooms and so we can definitely take a trans woman,' but they can't necessarily take a trans man." (Chloe)

Many DV agencies and emergency housing organizations are not equipped to house transgender and genderqueer survivors, yet much of the funding for trafficking aid is given to these programs. Shelters who have only housed cisgender women may not have the competency to serve trans women as well, and they may not have the capacity to serve genderqueer individuals who may need individual rooms or genderless housing designations. Eyron personally experienced this issue when they were seeking housing, as many shelters only accept cisgender women despite being required to accept all genders by law. They discuss this issue, stating:

"DV agencies are mandated by law to serve all genders if they receive federal funding, although they often times don't. For great reasons often, it is an administrative issue rather than a survivor's issue to face. We should provide service provision where women can feel safe in that environment, but also maintaining that we all pay taxes which pay for these services, so I should have a right to access them too." (Eyron)

Despite being federally mandated to serve all genders, many shelters do not adhere to this law, knowing that survivors often do not have the resources needed to retaliate in court. Masculine-presenting, trans, and genderqueer survivors may struggle to find aid because trafficking funding is going to organizations that do not have the competency or capacity to address queer experiences of trafficking. The lack of specialized services, the funding of religious anti-trafficking organizations, and the refusal to adopt a harm-reductionist approach all stand as barriers for queer survivors seeking help.

8. Good Practices for LGBTQIA+ Trafficking Aid Providers

Though a standard of care cannot be established by a singular study with a limited sample size, my participants offered many recommendations on what they considered to be—based on their own personal and professional histories—best practices for service providers working with LGBTQIA+ survivors. The first subsection discusses ways in which organizations can make their services more inclusive for queer survivors, focusing on reflective hiring and cultural humility training. The second subsection will then cover the recommendations participants made for creating specialized services for queer survivors. This includes using a harm-reduction approach, developing affirming spaces for gender nonconforming survivors, and providing leadership and professional development training for survivors. In the final subsection, I will discuss the recommendations participants made regarding improvements to the social welfare and legal systems in the U.S., including establishing stronger social safety nets, repealing SESTA-FOSTA, adopting stronger nondiscrimination provisions for LGBTQIA+ individuals, and police reform.

8.1 Improving Inclusivity

8.1.1 Reflective Hiring

Participants in this study agreed that one of the most effective ways to ensure inclusivity in trafficking aid is to practice reflective hiring; they believe that organizations should hire staff members who share similar identities and backgrounds with the population they are serving. According to Eyron, trafficking aid programs in areas with queer survivors should, therefore, hire queer and survivor staff members in order to establish more inclusive services. They even stressed that the program would be ineffective without this, stating:

> *"If you're serving queer survivors, you should have queer, trans staff as well. It'll never work without that."* (Eyron)

They explain that, to fully understand and meet the specific needs of queer survivors, trafficking aid organizations must hire queer and trans staff members, as no amount of training can evoke the same level of understanding that lived experience can offer. Diverse, purposeful hiring can create an environment that feels safer for survivors. Juliette explains how this has led to a better overall understanding of differences among staff members in her organization, stating:

"In terms of inclusivity, one of the ways that we attempt to ensure that is by making sure that our staff reflect our population we're serving. So that, within our staff, there is a mutual education about differences all the time. Because you're having to learn to interact with each other and you're watching how each interact with the kids and sometimes you're informing each other." (Juliette)

In her experience, reflective hiring results in staff members receiving mutual education regarding differing identities, backgrounds, and cultures. Her team not only learns about differences from interacting with one another, but also through watching how other staff members are interacting with survivors. This creates an immersive learning experience for her staff, as they are constantly surrounded by individuals from diverse backgrounds, resulting in more informed programs.

Ash furthered the importance of reflective hiring by using the history of the Anti-Trafficking Movement as an example of what happens without this practice. They state:

"One of the things I've seen is that the Anti-Trafficking Movement was largely dominated by white, cis, middle to upper class women who weren't survivors and, as we start to see survivors getting engaged, they tended to reflect that: they were also white and cis. Then you start to see more and more Black women getting engaged, kind of taking leadership, and we start pushing back against some of our social, criminalizing narratives, but not all of them." (Ash)

They feel that the lack of inclusion of marginalized individuals in the Anti-Trafficking Movement has led to narratives of trafficking experiences that are exclusive to white, cisgender survivors. Butler (1990/2006) describes this phenomenon as discursive formation, stating, "The domains of political and linguistic 'representation' set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject" (p. 2). In other words, the white, cishet, upper class women leading the Anti-Trafficking Movement established a criteria set for "trafficking survivors" which only reflected the experiences of white, cishet, female survivors. This, in turn, led to the current state of anti-trafficking programs which are often not inclusive of or competent with LGBTQIA+ and POC survivors. Organizations who recognize that LGBTQIA+ individuals are disproportionately affected by trafficking and want to expand their services to include this population should utilize reflective hiring.

8.1.2 Cultural Humility

The second way in which organizations can improve their levels of inclusivity for LGBTQIA+ survivors is through practicing cultural humility, according to Juliette. In traditional cultural competency training, the goal is to gain mastery over intercultural communication. However, in cultural humility training, the first step is admitting that one does not know everything, seeking to learn from others with different cultural experiences while acknowledging one's own cultural background. Juliette explains:

> *"We train to inclusivity in all kinds of different ways. I don't believe in the term, 'gender competence,' I think it's insulting, but we do train to cultural humility and cultural humility around gender and sexual orientation, as well as cultural humility in racial and ethnic directions."* (Juliette)

Competency trainings focus on what an individual knows, while cultural humility training focuses on what an individual does not know. As discussed previously, the new staff members without prior experience at Juliette's organization often do not recognize that queerness comes with a culture. She states:

> *"But the fact that there's a very deep historic and cultural piece that's something that they are less inclined to know or they're less inclined to recognize what is happening."* (Juliette)

Staff members who have not had prior experience working with this population often fail to understand the cultural aspects of queerness and how this plays out in various social interactions. Adopting a cultural humility perspective can, therefore, acknowledge this lack of understanding through approaching interpersonal conflict with the goal of learning. Juliette encourages other organizations to utilize available resources and funding for this kind of training, stating:

> *"People need…there's really a lot of training out there, number one, if there is time and funding to take advantage of it. There's some really very sophisticated training, not as much as there should be by a mile and a half, but there's some good training. So, I think that the first thing is that the leadership has to become informed."* (Juliette)

8.2 Specialized Services

After staff members have been properly trained to work with queer survivors, participants recommended that organizations create specialized programs designed to address the specific

needs of this population. In Juliette's experience, establishing a sense of community through sharing experiences and struggles with one another is an important part of healing for many queer survivors. She states:

> *"And here's what I know, I know that for the vast majority, specialized services where you can be somewhere where you can be with other youth that can talk about very openly the deepest levels of that particular kind of experience is infinitely powerful. I have never seen any subpopulation that is at an intersection of oppression that doesn't do better if at least there are some services that are exclusively with inside their culture."* (Juliette)

The mutual understanding between survivors who share similar life experiences and cultural backgrounds can lead to deeper, more vulnerable conversations that may not be possible elsewhere. Juliette feels that creating specialized services for marginalized survivors, particularly those with intersecting identities, would lead to greater overall effectiveness of the program. There are, however, some exceptions. She explains:

> *"It's also true that some gay youth, that are very clear about who they are, are very disinterested in being out, so if there isn't regular peer-services, mixed, complex kind of demographics in the place, they don't see it as safe. They see it as overexposed and taking from them something that they are not prepared to offer up, which is the door* [to the closet]. *So, it gets more complicated, but all that being said the vast majority, I would still say, would do far better if there was anything as sophisticated as a survivor shelter for or survivor services that are for gender queer youth. It's harder but not impossible to have survivor services for queer youth. That cuts much more down the middle of like some will and some won't and some have no idea who they are yet because they're teenagers, and they're like, 'It could be this. It could be that. Leave me alone.'"* (Juliette)

While she still believes that specialized services would be beneficial for queer survivors, Juliette feels that it is important to note that some young people are not prepared to be "out" yet. It is unlikely that these youth would feel safe enough to participate in queer-focused services, except in very specific circumstances. As such, specialized services should be offered, but not necessarily at the expense of regular programming.

8.2.1 Affirming Spaces

Gender identity plays an important role in queer survivors' experiences of trafficking and their willingness to seek help. Specialized services should, therefore, understand affirmation as an essential resource for the empowerment of queer survivors. According to participants, this can be established through creating programs for promoting and nurturing gender affirmation. Juliette explains how her organization does this, starting with their intake forms, stating:

> *"It includes sexual orientation, gender identity, pronoun preferences because they choose. We have gendered bedrooms, we also have a non-gendered bedrooms when we can do it, not all the time, but depending on the flow. But we have gendered bedrooms, and our youth self-identify. They're the ones that choose which bedroom is appropriate for them."* (Juliette)

Young survivors staying in this shelter are able to self-identify which bedrooms would be most appropriate for them in alignment with their own gender identities. Rather than choosing for them, Juliette explains that giving survivors the ability to determine their own bedrooms can ease some of the tensions queer survivors often feel when seeking help. She explains:

> *"I think one of the strengths of our facility, one of the strong parts, is that because it is a complete mix, people get to choose their space a little bit. They get to say, 'I'm female. I'm in this room. Leave me alone.' Or they get to say, 'I'm not discussing sexual orientation, and I really have no opinion of gender and you really shouldn't either.' Or you know, 'I'm queer, and where's the queer room?' They have some freedom of choice."* (Juliette)

This freedom of choice removes the pressure to be "out" while participating in a program, as the process is straightforward and the choices are determined by the individual. For Juliette, she feels that this is one of the best possible ways to assist young queer survivors in all different stages of exploring their identities.

Furthermore, many transgender and genderqueer youth will choose to stay in situations of violence if they believe that they will not receive the same level of gender affirmation elsewhere. Therefore, providing spaces where these youth can feel affirmed and accepted should be an integral part of trafficking aid. When asked what kinds of services anti-trafficking organizations should provide for queer youth, Eyron states:

"I can't think of a single person I've worked with, in my personal life or professional career, who wasn't pursuing transition through the sex industry or some form of gender affirmation through the sex industry, receiving that through the sex industry. If you were willing, I'd say a program that builds access to things like that to make it so they are not dependent on the sex industry for affirmation. It would be very, very helpful. Having gender affirming clothes and hygiene supplies available." (Eyron)

In their experience, the sex industry is seen as a primary source of gender affirmation for many transgender and genderqueer individuals. It is a place in which they can not only feel accepted in their gender identity, but also sexualized and fetishized for it. Organizations working with this population should recognize the power and importance of gender affirmation as a resource by creating affirming spaces for queer survivors. Chloe agrees with this idea, stating:

"At the same time the answer is not to demonize the one place where you find affirmation in your gender: the answer is to create many, many spaces where you can feel affirmed, sexualized, wanted, and eroticized in your gender…and in your race. If the sex industry is the only place that can feel affirming to the skin that you're in, that's not the fault of the sex industry." (Chloe)

They feel that one of the solutions to addressing queer experiences of trafficking is to create multiple sources of gender affirmation for survivors. Instead of demonizing the sex industry, Chloe believes that trafficking aid organizations should seek to understand why individuals are reliant on the sex trade and create programs to reflect this.

Gender affirming services can include providing gender affirming clothing and hygiene supplies, funding the medical expenses for gender affirming surgeries, or assisting in legal name and gender identification changes. Chloe explains how providing these services encourages queer survivors to seek help, stating:

"If you go to a space that you know is able to navigate these systems and also that you go to for other affirming things—where it's not just this site of emergency, need, pain, and shame but like, 'I go here because once a week they have a hormone clinic. I go here because they have community-building events. I go here because they have awesome pride movies once a month.'—and there's also information on exploitation, information on how to navigate the system as a queer person, then I think we would just be better able to serve people, meeting people where they already are." (Chloe)

Through providing affirming services, community programs often create an environment in which queer survivors are encouraged, rather than fearful or ashamed, to seek information and assistance. As such, Chloe feels that providing anti-trafficking services in existing community-based organizations is the best possible solution for assisting queer survivors. They state:

> *"I think that people should be able to identify their needs and identify the spaces where they need support and healing, and I think those should be offered through the community spaces they access already. I think that people should be able to go to the spaces where they feel comfortable, where they feel seen and affirmed, and be able to say, 'This is the experience that I'm having.'"* (Chloe)

They believe that the most effective way to reach queer survivors is to provide trafficking services in affirming spaces that the survivor has already participated in, like LGBTQIA+ community centers. As a young queer person, there are often many obstacles to seeking help; from explicit discrimination by service providers to fears of police violence, many queer survivors are hesitant to contact unfamiliar aid organizations for assistance. Chloe states:

> *"People should be able to say, 'Here are the things I need: I need emergency housing, and I need a lawyer to get an order of protection, and I need a lawyer to sort out my finances, and I need a job.' Those things should be available in the space where you feel most safe, and that very often is not going to be a space you've never been to before, it is probably going to be the space you've already accessed."* (Chloe)

They believe that anti-trafficking organizations should, not only strive to create more affirming spaces, but collaborate with the programs queer survivors are likely already accessing for affirmation. If a survivor does not have to concern themselves with whether or not they will be accepted by an organization, it can give them the confidence and encouragement they need to ask for help in situations of trafficking. Chloe explains further:

> *"If you have someone who is like, 'I actually need to be affirmed in my identity: I need to feel safe; I need to feel seen,' they are going to go to a community center that they feel comfortable and honored at and say, 'This is what is going on and this is how I identify harm.' That might not involve an order of protection. That might involve a lot of other things, but it is that person going to a safe space and identifying their needs. I really think that we need to rethink what it means to experience harm, and that maybe being a*

victim is not the primary identity in that moment that needs to be coalesced around."
(Chloe)

8.2.2 Harm-Reduction Approach

In addition to creating affirming spaces, participants also recommended that service providers adopt a harm-reduction approach when working with queer survivors. Harm-reduction is an approach to aid that focuses on reducing the negative social and physical repercussions of a specific behavior, regardless of whether or not that behavior is considered legal. Ash explains this concept in relation to trafficking aid, stating:

> *"I think the things that come up for me repeatedly are a harm-reduction approach, using harm-reduction, using a public health approach to any prevention efforts that you do. Then also keeping a human rights approach in the way you do it; traffickers take away someone's choice and agency in their lives, and we can't help people heal by doing the same. Our role isn't to take away their freedoms or limit them in the name of protecting them or keeping them safe. Our role is to empower and support what their dreams are for their lives. And I think that's a big piece that the trafficking movement often gets wrong."*
> (Ash)

One of the key tactics used by traffickers is establishing control over their victims; Ash believes that trafficking aid organizations should be mindful of this by empowering survivors to identify their own needs. They suggest that these organizations utilize a harm-reduction approach by giving survivors the control over which areas they would like help addressing. Chloe explains this further, saying:

> *"I think that the ways that people identify harm and the ways that people identify violence are honest and sometimes they are not expected. But anti-trafficking is not even healing-focused, it is punitively-focused. The services are very prescribed very often, so they'll say, 'For anti-trafficking services, this is the suite of things we have to offer. You have come to an anti-trafficking service provider: these are the things we can do, and these are the options that we have to go through.' It makes a lot of assumptions about what every survivor needs. I do not think that this is an appropriate way to address victim services."* (Chloe)

In many trafficking programs, the service provider decides the level and type of assistance that victims need, which does not always account for what the victim was actually seeking help for in the first place. Based on research centering the experiences of cishet survivors, these organizations determine a generic set of services for all survivors according to what they believe the survivor needs.

Furthermore, many trafficking aid programs often require that individuals stop participating in various illegal activities like drug use and sex work while in their program—the antithesis of harm-reduction. This can serve as a barrier for some survivors and prevent them from receiving help. Chloe explains:

> *"This is something that I run into all the time. Someone is like, 'I'm in a situation of IPV.' I hear what's going on, and I'm like,* [whispers] *'That might be trafficking.' They go to a shelter. It's a DV shelter. The shelter says get clean and then come back. And they're like, 'Fuck you. I'm not going through withdrawal, and I'm definitely not ready to get clean. I'm going to go back to my abuser even though I've identified that it is an abusive situation because you aren't able to actually serve me.'"* (Chloe)

In this example, the survivor identified the area that was causing the greatest amount of harm in their life—interpersonal violence—yet the DV shelter would not serve them without first requiring the survivor to address an entirely separate issue. The survivor sought assistance from this shelter specifically to leave a violent situation; the DV shelter ignored this need, focusing instead on what they determined was more important; and, as a result, the survivor returned to a situation of trafficking.

Trafficking aid organizations frequently require, not only forced sobriety, but forced abstinence from sex work as well. This can pose problems for queer survivors in particular who often use sex work as a means to survive after facing structural discrimination, later experiencing trafficking as a result of financial vulnerability rather than through force, fraud, or coercion. Carrie discusses how service providers working in trafficking aid could work with survivors more effectively using a harm-reduction approach. She states:

> *"If some services were available that would allow them to do sex work in a safer way, do a different type of job, or just not be as economically vulnerable to coercion and exploitation, it would have a great impact on their wellbeing."* (Carrie)

Instead of enforcing generic requirements of survivors, Carrie feels that anti-trafficking organizations should work with the individual to create a plan best-suited for their specific needs. If a survivor wants to continue working in the sex industry, even after experiencing trafficking, the organization should provide them with resources on ways to increase their safety and financial stability. A harm-reduction approach to trafficking aid promotes agency in survivors, allowing them to identify the resources they need to achieve their desired life.

8.2.3 Leadership and Professional Development Training for Queer Survivors

The final recommendation by participants for specialized services was to provide leadership and professional development training for queer survivors. Hiring staff members who reflect the cultural backgrounds of the population an organization aims to serve is an important way to ensure inclusivity. Therefore, participants in this study feel that there should be specialized programs that provide professional development training for queer survivors interested in working in the anti-trafficking field. Juliette states:

> *"I think if I was going to make any recommendation, I would say that the most critical thing any non-profit organization can do is create even one group that is for developing leadership in LBGTQ and queer youth."* (Juliette)

She believes empowering queer youth to assume more leadership positions, both inside and outside of the anti-trafficking field, is one of the most important and valuable services a non-profit organization can offer the LGBTQIA+ community.

As Ash explains, the Anti-Trafficking Movement has historically been led by white, cisgender women, resulting in the dominant cishet-centered understandings of trafficking. In order for queer survivor experiences to be placed at the forefront of anti-trafficking efforts, participants feel there needs to be a significant increase in the number of active queer leaders throughout the country. Ash explains the extent of their ideal leadership change in the anti-trafficking field, stating:

> *"I think they need to be in leadership, and not just like, 'We reach out to a survivor to review what we're doing.' It's kind of like when someone says to you, regarding therapy, that the therapist's job should become obsolete. The goal is that you need them less and less. So, I would say it's the same: I would say that our goal would be to need non-survivor professionals in the field less and less. In my fantasy land, there would be*

enough people who have experienced…I mean, I don't want more people to experience
trafficking…I want more people who've experienced trafficking to get the support and
professional development they need and quit being tokenized. So, in my fantasy land, we
would provide support and professional development to survivors so competently and
thoroughly that, eventually, they would be the ones doing the work, if they choose, rather
than consulting on it. I think that's what I would want to work towards." (Ash)

For Ash, an ideal anti-trafficking movement would be entirely run by leaders who have
experienced trafficking themselves, reflecting the populations disproportionately affected by
trafficking as well. They feel that many anti-trafficking organizations use survivors as
consultants instead of hiring them as leaders. This gives organizations the ability to tokenize
survivor consultants who do not challenge their current practices and leadership status quo,
avoiding criticism by those who feel the programs are not effective. Therefore, encouraging
more queer survivors to participate in anti-trafficking leadership—by providing thorough and
comprehensive professional development training—may address this issue and result in more
inclusive and accessible programs for the LGBTQIA+ community.

8.3 US Government Improvements

8.3.1 Stronger Social Safety Nets

The six federal welfare programs in the U.S. are often viewed as complex and antiquated
systems, as they are strictly funded and difficult to navigate. For example, a program called
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)—established to provide cash assistance for
families with children in poverty—has received the same amount of federal funding since the
program was first introduced in 1996. Though inflation has significantly reduced its monetary
value, the federal grant provided for implementation of TANF in each state has remained the
same. This has resulted in stricter state policies and requirements for families applying for
assistance (Center on Budget, 2022).

Understanding the importance of these programs for queer survivors, participants in this
study expressed a need for stronger, more modernized social safety nets in the U.S. Carrie
believes that the government should begin:

"Putting resources towards actual prevention, which would be making people have
housing, making sure people have access to a basic income, universal basic income."
(Carrie)

She feels that anti-trafficking efforts made by the U.S. government should focus on funding social welfare programs, rather than national anti-trafficking operations. Queer experiences of trafficking are typically the result of systemic abuse and poverty. If the federal government had stronger programs to ensure access to necessities like housing and basic income, queer individuals would not be nearly as vulnerable to trafficking. When asked what they considered to be the most important resource the U.S. government could provide survivors, Eyron states:

"Housing, because nothing else matters until they're housed. Who cares about a therapy
appointment in two weeks if you don't know where your body is going to be in five hours?
What are you going to talk about? [laughs] *How are you going to get there?"* (Eyron)

They believe that providing survivors with safe and accessible housing should be considered a priority when addressing trafficking. Carrie elaborates this further, discussing the consequences of the failures in the U.S.'s welfare system:

"People become vulnerable to trafficking because we create vulnerability in the way that
we are a capitalist society that has no safety nets. It isn't that there are these bad
traffickers out there who are exploiting people; it's that we have a bad system that
exploits people by design. (Carrie)

In her experience, Carrie feels that the current systems in the U.S. perpetuate a cycle of exploitation, fostering the circumstances that create both victims and perpetrators of trafficking. Kabeer (2005) explains, "Subordinate groups are likely to accept, and even collude with, their lot in society, if challenging this either does not appear possible or carries heavy personal and social costs" (p. 14). As such, Carrie believes that this system is one of the primary sources of harm for queer and marginalized people living in the States.

Chloe discusses this issue in the context of NGOs working with queer survivors for the first time, stating:

"So, there is kind of this understanding that LGBTQ people are disproportionately in
need of these kind of support services that are really about the intersection of different
forms of violence and economic need. Unfortunately, because it has not taken into
account… it's kind of what happens when you're like, 'We just need cultural competency.

> *We can serve LGBTQ people because all queer people are just like us.' So that has*
> *fostered a lot of problems."* (Chloe)

Cisheteronormative ideas in the trafficking aid field often do not take structural discrimination and poverty into account as major causes of trafficking. As such, many anti-trafficking organizations underestimate the degree of obstacles they will face when attempting to enroll queer survivors in existing social welfare programs. Chloe explains:

> *"I just think that we would be much better able to serve queer folks if we actually had*
> *anti-exploitation services information available in LGBTQ-affirming spaces first.*
> *Because, at the end of the day, if you don't know a service provider and you've run into a*
> *thousand different problems—like getting SNAP* [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance
> Program] *benefits, losing SNAP benefits, moving a bunch of times, forgetting to update*
> *your address, and getting kicked off the benefits again—if you've dealt with all of that*
> *and you go to a service provider who doesn't work with queer people who says, 'We're*
> *going to get you on SNAP benefits,' then you're just like 'good fucking luck.'"* (Chloe)

For most Americans, the process of qualifying for and getting enrolled in social welfare programs is difficult; when an individual also struggles with housing instability—frequently changing their address, unable to keep and maintain countless identification documents—gaining access to these programs can become nearly impossible. Therefore, in order to fully address trafficking of the LGBTQIA+ community, the U.S. government should establish stronger, more accessible social welfare programs.

8.3.2 Legal Improvements

Participants not only recommended social welfare reform in the U.S. to better address trafficking, but also legislative reform. In section **7.2 Legal Barriers**, Carrie discussed the repercussions of the 2018 anti-trafficking law, SESTA-FOSTA, which aimed to reduce online sex trafficking through penalizing webservices who allow users to solicit sex on their site (Allow States and Victims, 2018, § 1–2). She explains that online services have become so fearful of violating SESTA-FOSTA that they no longer allow any content related to sex, including harm-reduction information for sex workers. Therefore, Carrie recommends an investigation of the effectiveness of SESTA-FOSTA, stating:

"We are working to reintroduce the Safe Sex Worker Study Act, which is a study bill that would mandate Congress through the DOJ and the Department of Health and Human Services to do studies on the impact of SESTA-FOSTA both on investigations into trafficking and also on the health services for sex workers, looking at the public health implications as well. That would be a first critical step in addressing federal policy that impacts queer youth, people who are at risk of trafficking, people who have previously worked online, which creates a level of safety versus working street-based." (Carrie)

She wants Congress to reexamine SESTA-FOSTA to determine its actual impact on trafficking rates online, as well as its impact on public health. The Safe Sex Worker Study Act would provide a foundation for further reform regarding the law. Carrie explains:

"From there, the ultimate goal would be for legislators to recognize that, with SESTA-FOSTA, they were sold a false bill of goods that has extreme ramifications for sex workers in a very harmful way, and it is not helping to address trafficking in the way that it said it would. Ultimately, we would want to see that being repealed." (Carrie)

Because the law has not proven to be effective in reducing trafficking online, Carrie feels that repealing SESTA-FOSTA altogether would be a significant legal improvement for queer sex workers and survivors.

In addition to addressing the failures of SESTA-FOSTA, participants also recommend reforming current non-discrimination laws, expanding them to ensure greater inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals. As Ash explained previously, non-discrimination provisions are not always applied to transgender individuals. This can result in trans survivors being refused access to potentially life-saving resources. Furthermore, over half of U.S. state governments do not have any non-discrimination laws protecting LGBTQIA+ identities at all. Chloe states:

"I think one very structural thing is, in the United States, we do not have great non-discriminatory provisions. The way that those have played out in terms of congress and administrative back-and-forth are not that old and are legally precarious. [. . .] Congress really needs to move towards non-discrimination provisions and significantly higher labor protections for LGBTQ people." (Chloe)

They, like Ash, feel that current non-discrimination laws are unreliable for queer individuals, as these laws are often not upheld in many court cases. The result is continued, uncontested acts of discrimination against members of the LGBTQIA+, leading to the structural issues that antecede

situations of trafficking. Thus, to better address trafficking, the U.S. should strengthen and expand non-discrimination laws to include protections based on gender identity and sexual orientation.

8.3.3 Police Reform

The third and final type of government reform recommended by participants is police reform. As discussed earlier, LGBTQIA+ survivors frequently do not have positive relationships with law enforcement in the U.S. Participants detailed how police often commit acts of violence against queer individuals; Eyron exemplified this using their own history of being forced to perform sexual favors on police officers while they were still a minor—an act of trafficking according to the TVPA. Consequently, the resulting fear and mistrust of police often serves as a barrier to accessing aid programs. When asked what they believe needs to be done in the U.S. to better protect queer youth from trafficking, Eyron states:

> *"Police reform. It's all fucked, but that's the real broken part. We don't have a current mechanism of handling this until police departments change because that's the first response. Or we defund the police. I personally feel like I love the idea of revolution, but it comes with blood. If we can reform it, please. I understand the idea of burning down the systems to build them again, but I am an optimistic reformist. I think we need revolutionaries just as much as we need reformists, and somewhere we land in the middle."* (Eyron)

In alignment with their anti-trafficking perspective, Eyron feels that law enforcement plays a critical role in addressing trafficking as the primary responders during crises. However, they believe that the current system—which allows for police violence and discrimination with little to no consequence—must change in order for trafficking to be appropriately handled. Eyron suggests either police reform or defunding the police, reallocating funds to other emergency responders like social workers, as a solution to this issue. Carrie agrees, explaining how the relationships between law enforcement, district attorneys, and judges creates a system in which police officers are frequently not penalized for breaking the law. This allows police harassment, violence, and even trafficking to continue without consequence. The United States must, therefore, reform and restructure its law enforcement system in order to effectively address sex trafficking.

9. Conclusion

The aim of this exploratory study was to better understand queer experiences of sex trafficking and trafficking aid in the United States. Through the insights provided by my five participants, I was able to uncover two distinctly juxtaposed approaches to trafficking aid, queer-specific aspects of sex trafficking and trafficking aid that differ from those of cishet survivors, and potential practices that trafficking aid providers can use when working with LGBTQIA+ survivors. In the following conclusion chapter, I will, therefore, discuss the implications of my findings, connecting them to my central research question as well as my sub-research questions (Sub-RQ). I will end the chapter with my recommendations for future researchers looking to examine queer experiences of sex trafficking in the United States.

9.1 Implications of Findings

9.1.1 Approaches to Aid

The conflicting beliefs between sex worker rights organizations and anti-trafficking groups contribute to the stagnation of research on queer survivors. Neither group allows space for the nuanced experiences of queer survivors; anti-trafficking groups tend to operate based on the widespread, cishet narratives of trafficking, while sex worker rights organizations tend to operate completely separate from all trafficking discourse. The anti-trafficking approach fails queer survivors in that their services are not tailored to meet the specific needs of LGBTQIA+ individuals. The sex worker rights approach fails queer survivors in that, instead of challenging cishet-centered discourse through participating in trafficking research, they avoid associating themselves with trafficking work entirely. This has likely contributed to the significant gaps in literature on queer experiences of trafficking. Therefore, to further improve both prevention efforts and service provision for LGBTQIA+ survivors, I suggest a collective effort using both approaches to aid. I acknowledge the strong disagreements—even animosity—between groups; however, both approaches share a common goal: eliminating sex trafficking. Collaboration between sex worker rights organizations and anti-trafficking organizations is essential for achieving this goal.

9.1.2 Sub-RQ 1: Queer Experiences of sex trafficking

(*What are the queer-specific experiences of sex trafficking in the U.S.?*)

There were several key findings on queer-specific experiences of sex trafficking that differ from the experiences of cishet survivors. First and foremost, there are significant consequences of dominant discourse in the U.S. that sexualizes queer identities and normalizes violence against the LGBTQIA+ community, as these narratives contribute to greater amounts of vulnerability to trafficking and an increased level of shame among queer minors. Second, gender identity and sexual orientation play an important role in the emotional complexities surrounding queer experiences of trafficking. The sex industry can often be the primary source of gender affirmation for queer individuals, which can complicate experiences of violence and trafficking, as queer minors may prioritize feelings of gender euphoria over physical safety when they feel they cannot receive this resource elsewhere. Furthermore, circumstances surrounding sexual orientation were also found to be a source of emotional distress for queer minors. Some experience additional trauma from being trafficked against their orientation; some experience increased confusion from not being allowed the opportunity previously to safely explore their orientation; and some, namely gay boys, are taught that being trafficked by an older man is "cool" and in alignment with their orientation. Finally, structural discrimination affects queer survivors differently than cishet survivors: LGBTQIA+ identities are not protected by non-discrimination provisions, it is difficult to receive appropriate ID for homeless, previously incarcerated, transgender survivors, and police profile, target, and even traffic gender nonconforming individuals. As such, organizations working with trafficking survivors need to better understand the complexities surrounding queer experiences of exploitation, recognizing that services for cishet survivors may not be sufficient enough for queer survivors.

9.1.3 Sub-RQ 2: Queer Experiences of Trafficking Aid

(*What are the barriers for LGBTQIA+ survivors trying to access and navigate trafficking aid services?*)

In addition to the queer experiences of sex trafficking, this study also determined some of the specific barriers that LGBTQIA+ survivors face when trying to access and navigate aid programs. Firstly, queer survivors are often met with significant amounts of discrimination when working with aid programs. For example, private organizations that do not receive federal

funding can refuse to serve LGBTQIA+ survivors, transgender survivors can be forced to detransition while participating in aid programs, and some queer survivors end up returning to trafficking situations due to explicit queerphobia from both staff and residents. Second, many trafficking aid organizations lack the competency needed to work with LGBTQIA+ survivors, as they are unaware of the structural issues surrounding queer experiences of trafficking. There is also a significant lack of resources for individuals who are exchanging sex consensually and later experience trafficking, as current materials are developed around cishet survivors. As a result, many queer survivors are simply not accessing trafficking aid programs, leading to even greater disparities in trafficking research and informational materials. Instead, these survivors are often forced to find assistance through word-of-mouth networks by contacting individual actors they feel are trustworthy. Finally, there are legal issues that stand as a barrier to exiting situations of trafficking for queer survivors. SESTA-FOSTA has hindered access to safe, online resources for queer sex workers in violent and exploitative situations, and diversion programs disproportionately affect queer survivors who have been targeted by police. Law enforcement agencies are often also unwilling to file reports of trafficking when queer survivors seek help. Most government funding is allocated to agencies who have programs that are inaccessible to queer survivors. To address these barriers, trafficking organizations must work to dismantle their cisheteronormative models of aid.

9.1.4 Sub-RQ 3: Staff Member Recommendations

(*What do staff members of organizations working with LGBTQIA+ victims believe would make current aftercare services more accessible, inclusive, and effective for non-cishet trafficking survivors?*)

In order to effectively address the queer-specific issues detailed above, this study also explored participant recommendations for increasing the accessibility and inclusivity of trafficking aid programs—the implications of which may be used as a starting point for future researchers looking to establish best practices in this area. Organizations can increase their level of inclusivity through practicing reflective hiring by hiring staff members who reflect the population they serve. They can also practice cultural humility, teaching staff to reflect on their own beliefs, while also engaging in the lifelong process of learning about others' cultures. Additionally, trafficking aid programs can become more accessible and effective by creating

specialized services for queer survivors. For example, an organization could create a program that strives to be a source of gender euphoria for transgender and gender nonconforming survivors, providing gender affirming resources such as clothes, beauty and hygiene supplies, and hormone therapy information. Adopting a harm-reduction approach to aid could also make trafficking aid services more accessible and effective by empowering queer survivors to determine the type of assistance they need, as well as the forms of harm in their lives they would like to address. Moreover, organizations can provide both leadership and professional development training for survivors to increase the number of LGBTQIA+ survivors working in the field. Finally, the U.S. government needs to increase preventative measures through establishing stronger social safety nets, repealing SESTA-FOSTA, strengthening non-discrimination provisions for LGBTQIA+ individuals, and enacting radical police reform.

9.2 Recommendations for Future Research

Despite the limitations in its sample size, this study has examined and highlighted the unique needs of a population that has, historically, been significantly underresearched. Queer survivors of sex trafficking often experience exploitation quite differently than cishet survivors in the United States—a phenomenon that has not previously been well-documented by trafficking researchers. As such, more studies need to be conducted to effectively establish and address the issues described in this thesis. The role of sexuality and gender affirmation should be examined more closely by future researchers, as this seemed to be a significant factor in queer survivors' ability and willingness to seek help when experiencing violence. Recruiting participants was a major limitation of this study; I contacted 56 different organizations involved in trafficking or LGBTQIA+ support work, and I was only able to enlist five participants. I recommend that future researchers tailor the information they highlight during initial contact to emphasize focus on queerness or trafficking, depending the organization's approach to aid. If the organization holds a sex worker rights approach, emphasize the role of queer experiences in the study. If the organization holds an anti-trafficking approach, emphasize the role of trafficking experiences in the study. This could help avoid being immediately dismissed by potential gatekeepers, as I was before I learned more about this phenomenon. Future research should be a collaborative effort so that queer survivors are no longer caught in the intersection of inaction.

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APPENDIX 1: Interview Guide

Introductory Questions:

1. What pronouns would you like me to use? What would you like your pseudonym for this study to be?

2. Tell me a little bit about yourself and the work you do.

    a. Why did you first get into this field?

    b. What would you say has been the most rewarding part of your job?

Background Questions:

1. What kinds of aid or support programs have you worked in for the queer community? For example: mutual aid, shelters, legal teams, State programs, etc.

2. Do these types of organizations often collaborate with one another when necessary? In what ways?

    a. Are there any programs or organizations that are more difficult to work with than others? How about organizations that are easier to work with than others?

3. How do LGBT people typically first become involved with your organization?

    a. What is that process usually like?

    b. Do they often have to move between organizations?

4. What factors do you think lead to successful reintegration/healing for LGBT individuals?

    a. What kinds of care do you think is most important for them?

5. Do you have any examples of how a client may have been empowered by your program?

    a. Do you have any examples of times your program was not the right fit for a client?

Barriers/Discrimination Questions:

1. What does accessibility and inclusivity mean to your organization? How does your organization create a safe space for queer people?

2. Has your organization ever worked with LGBTQIA+ individuals who have been trafficked? (including engaging in underage "survival sex")

3. Do you believe their experiences of trafficking were any different from cis, hetero trafficking survivors?
   a. Did their needs differ in terms of care from other clients?
4. What is your organization's approach to aiding LGBTQIA+ trafficking survivors?
   a. Do you have standardized protocols for working with this population?
   b. Does it differ at all from how you'd work with clients who've experienced other kinds of abuse?
5. Have your clients reported any discrimination from other aid organizations, including by individual staff members?
   a. Do you think that the type of organization running the program determines whether or not this kind of discrimination occurs?
   b. How about the location of the program?
6. Are there any red flags your clients watch out for or are there any programs/organizations that your clients tend to avoid altogether? This can include healthcare, shelters, etc.
7. Are there any fears or concerns that you think may hinder a queer survivor from being able to get the help that they need?

Conclusion:
1. What advice would you give to a queer survivor attempting to seek help for the first time?
2. If I were to start an aftercare program right now, what do you think would be most helpful for queer survivors specifically?
3. How do you think organizations can make their programs more accessible for queer survivors? What do you think would make queer survivors feel the most welcome and safe within a program?
4. What do you think needs to be done in the US as a whole to better protect queer youth and to better care for queer survivors?
5. Do you have any other comments to make or recommendations you'd like to give those providing services for the LGBTQIA+ community?

APPENDIX 2: Consent Form

<div align="center">

Participant Consent Form - Staff Members

Please read this entire document carefully before you decide to participate in this study. The researcher will answer any questions before you sign this form.

</div>

Study Title: "A qualitative study examining the role of gender identity and sexual orientation in human trafficking survivor' experiences of aftercare services"

Purpose of Project: This is a master's thesis project. The purpose of this research is to examine the role of gender identity and sexual orientation in human trafficking survivors' ability to access and participate in aftercare programs (i.e., rehabilitation programs, transition homes that help survivors reintegrate back into society, emergency housing services, homeless shelters, human trafficking hotlines, or legal services). The aim is to allow LGBTQIA+ survivors the opportunity to discuss their direct experiences with navigating these social programs.

Who is Responsible for this Project? The University of Bergen (UiB) in Norway is responsible for this project.

Why Are You Being Asked to Participate? Individuals have been selected to participate in this study because they meet the following criteria:

- ● Must be 18 years of age or older
- Must be currently employed by an aftercare organization, as defined above, that aids human trafficking survivors and/or individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, or any other non-normative gender and/or sexual orientation

The organization you work for has contacted you on behalf of the researcher, Hollie Reynolds, to see if you would like to participate in this study. They believe you would be interested in contributing to the limited body of research on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ trafficking survivors, initiating policy and structural change among human trafficking aid organizations, and advocating for the needs of queer survivors trying to navigate these programs.

Procedure: Individual interviews, conducted over Zoom, will be the method of data collection for this study. Each interview will be approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. Only the audio of the interviews will be recorded using an encrypted device. Each participant must receive a copy of this form in advance and give recorded, voluntary oral consent before the interview can be conducted.

Protecting Your Personal Data: Your personal data will only be used for the purposes specified in this document, ensuring your confidentiality in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act). Your name or any other individually identifying information will not be disclosed for this study. At the beginning of the interview, you will choose your own pseudonym with the researcher to ensure that your identity is protected. All interviews will be recorded using audio only on an encrypted voice recorder and will be transferred using a secure VPN to the University of Bergen's SAFE (Sikker Adgang til Forskningsdata og E-infrastruktur) data protection system at the end of the session. After the researcher transcribes your interview, you will be given the opportunity to review your data for accuracy and anonymity. Only the researcher, Hollie Reynolds, and the principal investigator/thesis advisor, Sevil Sümer, will have access to your personal data. This project is scheduled to end in June of 2022. Once the transcriptions are approved by you, all recordings and personal information will be shredded or deleted for your protection. If this research is published, only your gender identity and sexual orientation will be included as individually identifiable information.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating. You may also refuse to answer any of the questions you are asked. The researcher will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with the University of Bergen, The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

Rights as a Participant: You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time before, during, or after the interview is conducted. Because you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data is deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

To Find Out More:

If you have questions about this project or would like to exercise your rights as a participant, please feel free to contact:

- Hollie Reynolds (UiB | master's student researcher): hre039@uib.no
- Sevil Sümer (UiB | principal investigator): Sevil.Sumer@uib.no
- NSD (Centre for Research Data): personverntjenester@nsd.no OR +47 55 58 21 17

Agreement: I have received and understood information about the project, "A qualitative study examining the role of gender identity and sexual orientation in human trafficking survivor' experiences of aftercare services," and have been given the opportunity to ask questions.

Therefore, I voluntarily consent to the following:

- to participate in a 45-to-60-minute individual interview
- I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, approximately June 2022

Name: _____

Date (MM/DD/YY): _____

APPENDIX 3: Interview Protocols

<u>Interview Protocols</u>

In accordance to the World Health Organization's (2003) *Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Interviewing Trafficked Women* and Tufford et al. (2012) "Conducting research with lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Navigating research ethics board reviews"

1. **Do no harm** - The following questions should be answered before collecting data to ensure the safety of the participants:

- Will the request for an interview or the interview itself cause harm or compromise the participant's safety or mental health?
- Will approaching the participant be perceived negatively by others?
- Will the participant feel obligated to participate?
- Will the encounter cause violence, immigration problems, lost wages, workplace fines, or other penalties common in exploitative settings?
- Is the participant still in a state of crisis?
- Will initial contact with the participant result in them being identified as LGBTQIA+ (or "outed")?

If the answer is yes to any of these questions, the interview should not be conducted. This should be established using gatekeepers before contact with individual participants is made.

2. **Know your subject and assess the risks** - Each stage of the interviewing process should be assessed to determine the risks: from the initial contact to the final public release of anonymized data. The most important way to minimize risks is to work with professional and local organizations specializing in LGBTQIA+ aid and/or trafficking aid. I will use these organizations as gatekeepers to assess the risks of initial contact and as potential support after the interviews are conducted.

3. **Prepare referral information** - The researcher must be prepared to provide discreet information about local legal, health, shelter, social support, and security services for trafficking

survivors and LGBTQIA+ individuals in an unsafe environment. Contact with these services prior to the interview should be made to ensure accurate and useful referral information. Discreet referral documents will be created once the location of the data collection site is established.

4. **Adequately select and prepare interpreters and co-workers** - I plan to continue gathering ethical and practical resources for interviewing LGBTQIA+ participants and trafficking survivors to better prepare myself for the interviews. No other individual will assist during the data collection or transcription.

5. **Ensure anonymity and confidentiality** - Participants' identities should remain confidential throughout the entire interview process, even from the initial contact. For this study, participants will choose a pseudonym at the start of the interview to ensure that they cannot be linked to their audio recordings. No one other than myself will have access to the participants' data.

6. **Get informed consent** - It is essential that participants clearly understand the reason for the interview, the subject matters that will be discussed, the potential risks and benefits involved in participating, and any potentially upsetting questions that may be asked. This will be established through the consent form and reiterated before the interview is conducted.

7. **Listen to and respect each participant's assessment of their situation and risks to their safety** - The needs and situations of each participant may be different. It is essential that the researcher does not make any recommendations or actions without a thorough discussion with the participant. All decisions made by the participant should be respected.

8. **Do not re-traumatize a participant** - Questions should not be asked to intentionally create an emotionally charged response. I do not plan to ask any questions about my participants' trauma history; I will make participants aware when we will begin discussing questions related to discrimination and remind them they can stop at any time. I will be prepared to respond to any participant distress, shifting the focus to how their input may initiate positive social change and advocacy outcomes. I will also have grounding techniques prepared and gatekeeper support ready if a participant begins to dissociate or panic.

9. **Be prepared for emergency intervention** - Any requests for immediate help should take precedence of data collection. The researcher should establish the dangers that the participant faces, what the participant believes are their options, and what the participant's expectations are from any assistance. The discussion of options should be realistic. The researcher should be prepared to follow-up with any intervention efforts.

10. **Put information collected to good use** - The data collected should be used in a way that either benefits the participants directly or advances the creation of policies and interventions for LGBTQIA+ individuals and trafficking survivors in general. I plan to attempt to have this data published so that future researchers may expand upon this topic. I also plan to use the data to inform human trafficking aid organizations how to make their aftercare programs more accessible and inclusive for LGBTQIA+ survivors specifically. Finally, the general themes found in this study will be used to inform my future work in the field of human trafficking aid.

References

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APPENDIX 4: U.S. Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) Correspondence
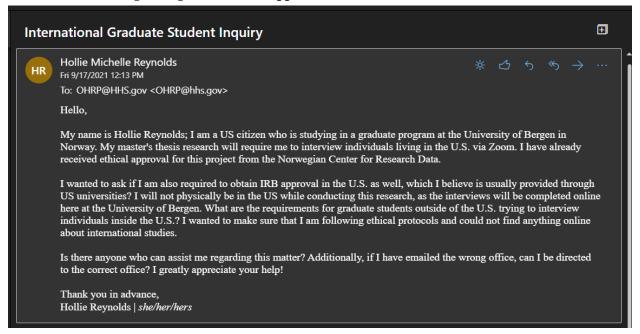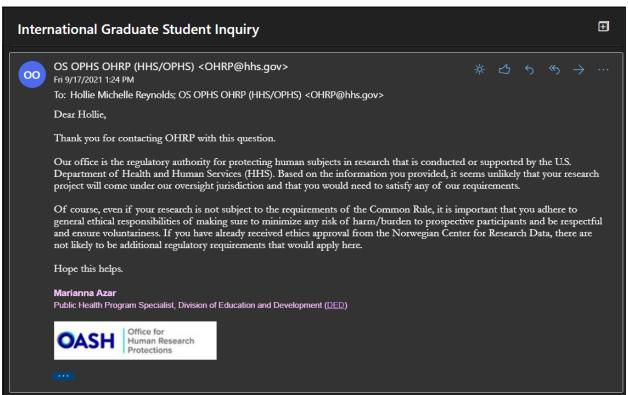
Image 1.

Email to OHRP Regarding U.S. Ethics Approval

International Graduate Student Inquiry

HR Hollie Michelle Reynolds
Fri 9/17/2021 12:13 PM
To: OHRP@HHS.gov <OHRP@hhs.gov>

Hello,

My name is Hollie Reynolds; I am a US citizen who is studying in a graduate program at the University of Bergen in Norway. My master's thesis research will require me to interview individuals living in the U.S. via Zoom. I have already received ethical approval for this project from the Norwegian Center for Research Data.

I wanted to ask if I am also required to obtain IRB approval in the U.S. as well, which I believe is usually provided through US universities? I will not physically be in the US while conducting this research, as the interviews will be completed online here at the University of Bergen. What are the requirements for graduate students outside of the U.S. trying to interview individuals inside the U.S.? I wanted to make sure that I am following ethical protocols and could not find anything online about international studies.

Is there anyone who can assist me regarding this matter? Additionally, if I have emailed the wrong office, can I be directed to the correct office? I greatly appreciate your help!

Thank you in advance,
Hollie Reynolds | *she/her/hers*

Image 2.

Response from OHRP Office

International Graduate Student Inquiry

OO OS OPHS OHRP (HHS/OPHS) <OHRP@hhs.gov>
Fri 9/17/2021 1:24 PM
To: Hollie Michelle Reynolds; OS OPHS OHRP (HHS/OPHS) <OHRP@hhs.gov>

Dear Hollie,

Thank you for contacting OHRP with this question.

Our office is the regulatory authority for protecting human subjects in research that is conducted or supported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Based on the information you provided, it seems unlikely that your research project will come under our oversight jurisdiction and that you would need to satisfy any of our requirements.

Of course, even if your research is not subject to the requirements of the Common Rule, it is important that you adhere to general ethical responsibilities of making sure to minimize any risk of harm/burden to prospective participants and be respectful and ensure voluntariness. If you have already received ethics approval from the Norwegian Center for Research Data, there are not likely to be additional regulatory requirements that would apply here.

Hope this helps.

Marianna Azar
Public Health Program Specialist, Division of Education and Development (DED)

OASH | Office for Human Research Protections

…

APPENDIX 5: *NSD Approval Form*

NSD NORSK SENTER FOR FORSKNINGSDATA

NSD's assessment

Project title

A qualitative study examining the role of gender identity and sexual orientation in human trafficking survivor' experiences of aftercare services

Registered

10.06.2021 av Hollie Michelle Reynolds - Hollie.Reynolds@student.uib.no

Data controller (institution responsible for the project)

Universitetet i Bergen / Det psykologiske fakultet / Hemil-senteret

Project leader (academic employee/supervisor or PhD candidate)

Haldis Haukanes, Haldis.Haukanes@uib.no

Type of project

Student project, Master's thesis

Contact information, student

Hollie Reynolds, hre039@uib.no

Project period

01.09.2021 - 31.01.2022

Status

19.07.2021 – Assessed

Assessment (1)

19.07.2021 - Assessed

Our assessment is that the processing of personal data in this project will comply with data protection legislation, so long as it is carried out in accordance with what is documented in the Notification Form and attachments, dated 19.07.2021, as well as in correspondence with NSD. Everything is in place for the processing to begin.

TYPE OF DATA AND DURATION

The project will be processing general categories of personal data and special categories of personal data regarding sex life or sexual orientation and health until 31.01.2022.