Sex Trading Among Students in Higher Education: Report of Findings for the Minnesota Department of Health

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Introduction

In 2024, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) executed a contract with the Minnesota Youth Sex Trading (MYST) collaborative at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities (UMN) to conduct a research project focused on resource needs for students in higher education who trade sex. Work for this project began on February 22, 2025 and was completed on June 30, 2025. This report provides an overview of findings for MDH. The MYST team is in the process of preparing publicly accessible dissemination of results (e.g., presentation slide decks, manuscripts, and brief reports on specific topics), which will be available at a later date.

The project combined quantitative secondary analysis of the 2024 College Student Health Survey (CSHS) from eight campuses in Minnesota with qualitative interviews of staff and students at the UMN Twin Cities campus. Both aspects of the project were reviewed by the UMN's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Below are brief descriptions of the two IRB submissions and the IRB determinations:

- **Study 1**. The purpose of the quantitative secondary analysis was to understand the prevalence of trading sex among students in higher education attending school in Minnesota, and potential risk and protective factors associated with trading sex (IRB study number: STUDY00023960; determination: not human research).
- **Study 2**. The purpose of qualitative interviews of staff and students at the UMN Twin Cities campus was to better understand the challenges and strengths faced by students in higher education who trade sex when accessing on and off-campus resources; and to identify recommendations to improve response and support (IRB study number: STUDY00023821; determination: exempt).

Background

This mixed-method project builds on past research conducted by the MYST collaborative that was funded by the Minnesota Office of Higher Education. Results from this previous work found that students in higher education in Minnesota are involved in trading sex, and some students experience exploitation and trafficking (Filoteo et al., 2023). We also conducted a literature review on the topic as part of that study and identified the need for more research on this topic. Other products from this grant will use and provide more detail on the peer reviewed literature.

In this report, we use the term sex trading to refer to the exchange of sex or sexual activity for something of value. This term includes many types of experiences encompassing a range of coercion and choice, such as consensual exchanges, sexual exploitation, and trafficking. Sexual exploitation and trafficking are a public health, social justice, and human rights issue; and consensual exchanges can happen in situations of limited choices and be associated with harms.

We acknowledge many terms are used to describe sex trading, including sex work, trafficking, exploitation, prostitution, sugar dating, transactional sex, and more. We opted to use the terms sex trading or trading sex as a description of the behavior. In using these terms, we do not presuppose the specific experiences students have, how someone may describe their experiences, or the meaning(s) they ascribe to their experiences.

The term sex trading encompasses activities that are criminalized (e.g. prostitution, sex exchanged for money, forcing someone to engage), in a legal grey zone (e.g. sugaring, a form of transactional dating), and not criminalized, yet potentially subject to punitive regulation (e.g. erotic dancing, online performance, selling personal items). All types of sex trading – whether legal or not – are stigmatized. The resulting stigma can prevent people from seeking help and support, if needed. People engaged in sex trading, regardless of how they define their experience, are subject to high rates of violence and secondary harms from criminalization.

The State of Minnesota created and funds a statewide system of services, supports and housing for people up to age 24 who have lived experience of trading sex. The MDH, Violence Prevention Programs Unit, which includes the Human Trafficking Prevention Program, houses and runs these Safe Harbor services through grantee partners (MDH, n.d.). Additional programs and supports are run by the Department of Human Services, which funds and coordinates housing options and the child protection response in Minnesota. Furthermore, as part of Minnesota's Safe Harbor response, the Minnesota legislature decriminalized youth who provide sex or sexual activity in exchange for something of value, viewing them instead as children in need of protection. Youth through age 24 are eligible for state-funded services, supports, and housing provided by Safe Harbor funding and other state and Federal funds.

As such, many students in institutions of higher education may be eligible for Safe Harbor services for youth aged 18-24; however, this age group is subject to criminal penalties related to Minnesota prostitution statutes. The extent and impact of sex trading among Minnesota students in higher education is not yet known, and it is unclear what, if any, response postsecondary institutions have to support students. This study aims to address this gap in knowledge and practice.

The MDH Human Trafficking Prevention Program also houses and runs a labor trafficking and exploitation supportive services grant program for all ages. There are instances in which labor trafficking and exploitation co-occur with sex trafficking and exploitation, which may be relevant to this study.

Report Outline

The goal of this report is to provide preliminary analysis to MDH as part of our contract deliverable. The results provided here are early-stage findings. While all the content presented here is accurate, there is more to learn from these data with further analysis, and we will release additional reports to add depth and nuance to the content provided in this report.

This research project was made up of two studies: 1) a quantitative analysis of the 2024 College Student Health Survey (CSHS); and 2) qualitative interviews of staff and students on the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities campus. The next section provides a thorough description of our quantitative methods, analysis strategy, and results. A table of these quantitative results is provided in Appendix 1. Then, we describe the qualitative data collection, analysis and results. We conclude the report with a discussion section that combines the quantitative and qualitative data to identify key implications. That section also includes limitations, recommendations, and a conclusion.

Study One: Quantitative Methods and Results

Quantitative Data Source, Participants, and Procedures

Data were from the 2024 College Student Health Survey (CSHS). The CSHS is a comprehensive survey designed to assess the health status, behaviors, risk factors, and protective factors of college and university students. Developed and coordinated by Boynton Health at the University of Minnesota, the CSHS has been administered since 1995 at more than 60 colleges and universities. The goal of the survey is to use population-level surveillance data to advance student health, well-being, and academic success. By collecting actionable information, the CSHS informs data-driven decisions that strengthen campus policies, practices, and programs aimed at improving student health, promoting well-being, and supporting academic achievement. In 2024, the CSHS survey was administered online to 2- and 4-year college students at eight Minnesota higher education institutions (see Table 1). We obtained the dataset from Boynton Health per their data sharing agreements.

Table 1. *2024 CSHS Participating Institutions*

University of Minnesota – Crookston
University of Minnesota – Duluth
University of Minnesota – Morris
University of Minnesota – Rochester
University of Minnesota – Twin Cities
Minnesota State University Moorhead
Rochester Community & Technical College
St. Catherine University

Participant selection methods included a random sample for four institutions and a census of all enrolled students at four institutions. Approximately 21,759 students from the eight institutions were identified from enrollment rosters and invited to participate in an online Qualtrics survey, through one email invitation and up to five email reminders. The survey was open for six weeks during the spring semester (February – March 2024). As an incentive, all students who responded to the survey were entered into a random drawing for an Apple iPad (1 winner), Apple Pencil (three winners), 3rd Generation Airpods (two winners), or a $200 gift card for Amazon or Target (two winners). In addition, one student from each institution also won a $100 gift card from Amazon or Target. The overall response rate was 25.1% across the eight institutions, for a total sample size of 5,463 undergraduate, graduate, community and technical college students. This response rate is similar to other studies of college populations (Fosnacht et al., 2017; Porter & Umbach, 2006). Response rates ranged from a low of 14.6% to a high of 44.2% amongst the eight institutions.

All survey procedures used by Boynton Health to collect this data were approved by the UMN Institutional Review Board. Secondary analysis of existing, deidentified data conducted in the present study was deemed not human subjects by the UMN Institutional Review Board. Per our data use agreement with Boynton Health, data elements with fewer than 10 respondents are suppressed in tables to protect the confidentiality of survey respondents.

Survey Measures

Survey questions were originally developed by Boynton Health staff and experts in adolescent health, substance use, and survey methodology. Minor revisions are made each year, and new items are pilot tested with selected students for readability, interpretability, and face validity. The CSHS contains a wide variety of questions about students' personal characteristics, identities, and backgrounds. Health insurance, health services utilization, and preventive care are all asked

about on the survey, in addition to multiple questions about mental health, students' ability to handle stress, and lifetime diagnoses such as anorexia, anxiety, PTSD, among others. Financial health, in addition to a variety of substance use questions, are also a focus of the survey. Effects of psychosocial factors, such as mental health problems, substance use, and financial difficulties, on academic performance is a large section of the online survey. Finally, sexual health is a primary focus, in addition to questions about sexual and domestic assault and help seeking.

In 2024, for the first time, college students were asked, "Have you ever traded sex or sexual activity to receive money, food, drugs, alcohol, a place to stay, or anything else?" The wording of this question, developed by staff at MDH in the Injury and Violence Prevention Section, is identical to questions added to both the 2019 and 2022 Minnesota Student Survey administrations to ninth and eleventh graders in Minnesota schools. Response options were "yes" or "no." If higher education students answered affirmatively to trading sex, a follow-up question of "What words would you use to describe your experience of trading sex?" was asked. Check-all-that-apply response options were available; examples included: "sex trading," "survival sex," "sex work," "trafficking," "sugaring/sugar baby," among others.

Statistical Analysis

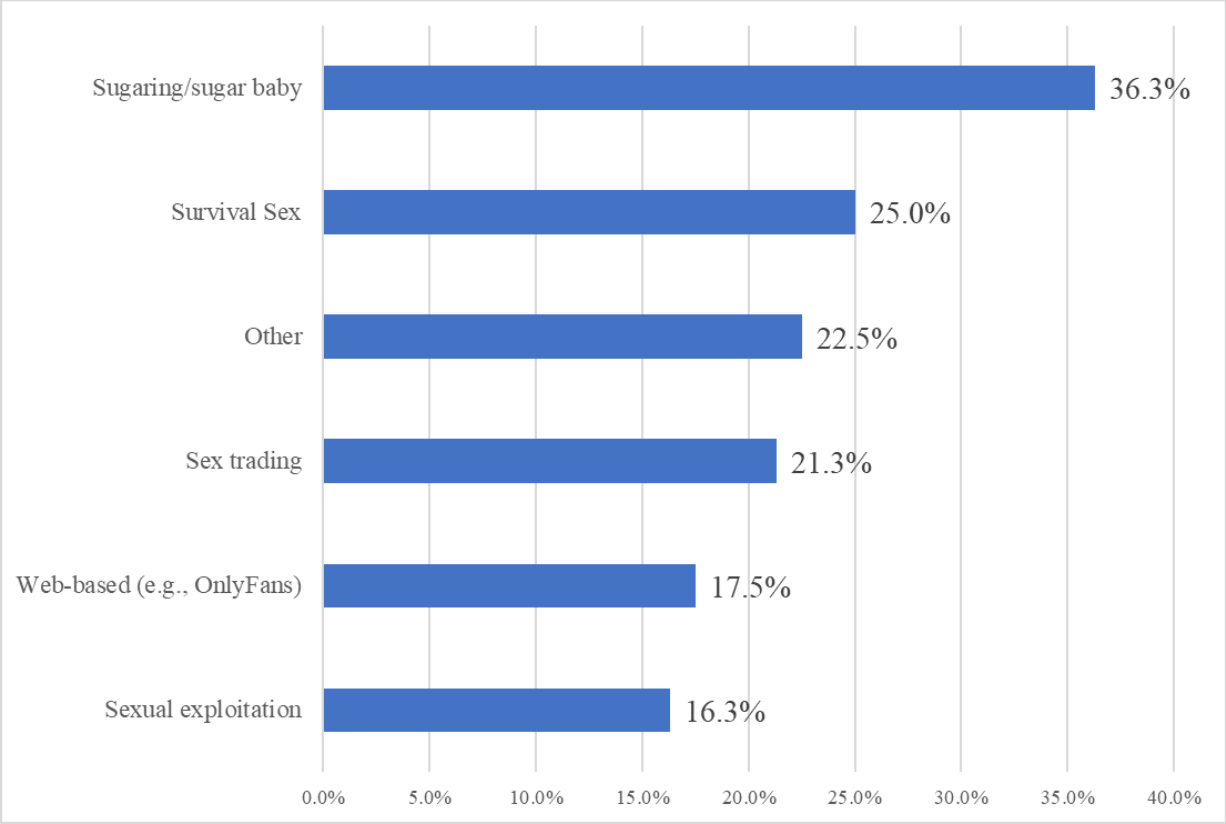
The final analytic sample consisted of all students who answered the trading sex question (N = 5,436). Some valid sample sizes for particular questions vary by nonresponse and skip pattern logic. Chi-square tests and t-tests were used to assess differences in the prevalence of trading sex and then subsequent responses to a wide variety of questions from those students reported trading sex compared to their classmates who reported no to trading sex. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. Analyses were conducted in May and June 2025, using IBM SPSS Version 29.

Quantitative Findings

Prevalence and Terminology

Table 2, provided in the Appendix, shows that approximately 1.5% of students responded "yes" to ever trading sex. The follow-up question asking "what words would you use to describe your experience of trading sex" yielded multiple responses (see Figure 1). The most common term reported was "sugaring/sugar baby," indicated by over a third (36.3%) of students who reported trading sex, followed by "survival sex," reported by a quarter (25.0%) of students who reported trading sex. The descriptive terms of "erotic dancing," "sex trafficking," and "sex work" were checked by too few respondents to report.

Figure 1. *Terms selected by survey participants to describe experiences of trading sex***.**



Note**.** Responses are "check all that apply" and percentages add up to more than 100%. Descriptive terms "erotic dancing," "sex trafficking," and "sex work" were suppressed due to small numbers.

Who Trades Sex? Similarities and Differences

Table 2 also compares and contrasts demographic characteristics and student statuses by whether students reported "yes" or "no" to trading sex. Some notable highlights in this table are that students who trade sex are more likely to be slightly older (average age = 27.4 years) than students who never traded sex (average age = 24 years), and students who trade sex are more likely to report a gender and/or sexual minoritized identity (57.7%) than their classmates who have not traded sex (27.1%). Few differences in terms of race and ethnicity or international student status, living arrangements, or program (class) status exist. However, high levels of housing and food insecurity characterize the experiences of students who trade sex, compared to their peers who never traded sex. Although many students in general carry credit card and student loan debt, students who trade sex are more likely to report carrying debt than their peers who never traded sex. For example, almost half (48.7%) of students who trade sex reported having credit card debt, compared to a quarter of peers who never traded sex.

Health Care Service Utilization

Whether or not students in higher education institutions are seeking services for their health is an important question. Table 3 compares responses of students who trade sex and those who never traded sex. Almost all students have health insurance, regardless of whether they have traded sex

or not. No statistically significant differences in obtaining routine medical examination services or emergency care were noted between students who trade sex and their peers who never traded sex. However, students who ever traded sex were more likely to seek services for mental health, emergency/crisis care for a mental health issue, and testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections, compared to their classmates who had never traded sex. They were also less likely to have obtained services for dental care, compared to their classmates who never traded sex.

Physical and Mental Health Indicators

Many students in higher education report mental and physical health-related stressors. With only one exception (i.e., average ratings of ability to manage stress in the last 30 days), more students who ever traded sex reported experiencing poorer mental health indicators than their peers who never traded sex (Table 4). Students who trade sex reported experiencing almost four mental health-related stressors on average in the past 12 months (Mean=3.79), compared to almost two (Mean=1.73) reported by peers who never traded sex. Stressors included failing a class, being diagnosed with a serious physical illness, and issues related to sexual orientation. This pattern repeats for mental health diagnoses. Students who traded sex reported being diagnosed in their lifetime with over four mental health diagnoses on average (Mean=4.49) such as anxiety, depression, panic attacks, compared to an average of two (Mean=2.05) lifetime diagnoses reported by peers who never traded sex. Opportunities for intervening and providing support exist, especially with regard to counseling or therapy. A little less than half (47.6%) of students who trade sex are taking medication for any mental health condition, compared to a little less than a third of students (30.9%) who never traded sex.

Sexual Assault and Disclosure

The incidence of sexual assault among all college students is striking (see Table 5). Almost 8 in 10 students (79.3%) who traded sex reported ever being a victim of sexual assault (i.e., "ever experienced actual or attempted sexual intercourse or actual or attempted sexual touching without consent") compared to 3 in 10 students (32.4%) who never traded sex. In the past 12 months, these rates are lower, but the pattern remains the same: almost a quarter (23.8%) of students who trade sex reported being a victim of sexual assault in the last year, compared to 5.7% of peers who never traded sex. Regardless of whether students traded sex or not, about 6 out of 10 students who experienced sexual assault told someone about the incident. The most common person was a friend or intimate partner or family member. Notably, very few students go to the authorities.

Domestic Assault and Help Seeking

Reports of domestic violence are also alarmingly high, as shown in Table 6. Almost 7 in 10 students (69.5%) who trade sex reported ever being a victim of domestic violence/assault (i.e., "ever been slapped, kicked or pushed or been hurt by threats, put-downs, or yelling from significant other/ spouse/partner") compared to 2 in 10 students (19.7%) who never traded sex. Past year reports of domestic assault are lower, but the pattern remains identical. Students who trade sex are six times more likely to report domestic violence/assault (30.0%) compared to their peers who never traded sex (5.0%). A little less than half (regardless of whether they traded sex or not) told someone about the incident. Friends/intimate partner or family member were commonly noted. Few students go to the authorities.

Study Two: Qualitative Methods and Results

Qualitative Methods

We conducted interviews with UMN Twin Cities campus staff and students between February 2025 – June 2025 via Zoom Version 6.4.7. Prior to participation, potential participants were provided an information sheet about the project to review. Potential participants were also required to complete two Qualtrics forms. The first was an eligibility form so the study team could verify that the potential participant met all eligibility criteria. The second was a demographic form. We obtained a waiver of signed consent, since this would be the only identifying link to participants. At the beginning of the interview, the interviewer reviewed the study information sheet and obtained verbal consent to participate in the study and have their interview audio recorded.

Campus staff interviews (N = 10) ranged from 27 – 74 minutes (Mean = 50 minutes), and student interviews (N = 3) ranged from 42 – 72 minutes (Mean = 60 minutes). Interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide that the study team developed.

Recruitment

Staff Interviews

Staff were recruited by direct outreach from project staff using a project email. The team developed a list of UMN Twin Cities units that we believed could have a role in supporting students and who may encounter the issue of sex trading. The total list included approximately 20 units, including entities such as healthcare providers and other auxiliary medical staff, student support staff, campus response units, equity and diversity offices, and more. We also gathered ideas of units to include from interviewees. We sent emails to university staff members at these units. Most people we emailed declined an interview either because they did not recall any students they worked with who specifically identified as having traded sex and/or they did not feel they knew enough about the topic to be helpful. A few were wary since the issue is stigmatized or potentially controversial, and some staff felt unclear about the University's approach to the issue.

Student Interviews

Students were recruited through indirect outreach via organizations and units who agreed to send study recruitment information to their email distribution lists on our behalf and/or post a printed flyer in their location. We also posted informational flyers to the official MYST Instagram page. Informational flyers posted both on campus and online had a QR code that directed students to the eligibility screening form. Units and entities included student government, student clubs and civic organizations, identity-specific affinity groups, and more.

Analytic Strategy

Interviews were transcribed using Zoom's built-in transcription services. Transcriptions were directly saved to a secure drive, and audio recordings were retained on the same secure drive in a separate folder. Transcriptions were manually cleaned by two study team members (JS and VV). Transcripts were then analyzed in four phases of thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). In **phase one**, two study team members (JS and VV) familiarized themselves with the data by

reading and re-reading the transcripts. In **phase two**, the same two study team members (JS and VV) reviewed and summarized the transcripts and generated an initial codebook with six parent codes and 26 child codes that responded to the research questions. During this phase, the full team reviewed and discussed the initial codebook, and two senior qualitative researchers (LM and NR) provided feedback. In **phase three**, two study team members (JS and VV) applied the initial codebook to all the transcripts. JS and VV identified additional codes to potentially include in the codebook. In **phase four**, the full team met again, discussed the additional identified codes, and upon agreement, incorporated five additional codes into the codebook.

Coding was conducted in Dedoose to allow for simultaneous coding. The parent and child codes were generated to address the two primary foci of this report: (1) better understand the general experiences of students who trade sex while enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate program and the actions or policies the University can do to provide appropriate and desired support; and (2) the challenges for increasing resources available and improving resource access for higher education students who trade sex (particularly related to the resource needs identified by students themselves).

The study team had initially aimed to engage in member checking (a standard qualitative research technique use for rigor and trustworthiness of the data) with student interviewees as part of **phase five and six** of Nowell's thematic framework. However, difficulties with re-recruiting participants prevented this step from being carried out.

Qualitative findings

For purposes of this technical report, we describe four themes (with subthemes) that are particularly relevant to this project, which is to identify ways that institutions of higher education in Minnesota can better support students who trade sex. The themes include: 1) reasons for trading sex; 2) barriers and challenges to seeking services; 3) campus climate; and 4) university actions to improve support. As noted above, this is a first stage report of findings that are most directly relevant to the aims of this project. Interviewees provided additional rich and nuanced information that we will disseminate in the future.

Theme 1: Reasons for trading sex

Interviewees highlighted several reasons that students in higher education may become involved in sex trading. Students and staff clearly identified financial and economic concerns as a primary motivation for trading sex; specifically identifying the cost of living and the costs of attending undergraduate and graduate school. This is not surprising since sex trading is a way to earn money or obtain basic needs. Sex trading is flexible, and students can work around school and other commitments. Some speculated that sex trading may be the only option for international students who are not legally authorized to work in the United States. Below are a few exemplar quotes from interviews:

- "I need to help my family. Especially once you get to a PhD program, it's like I really need to help my family, but I'm making 10,000 a year." *Student*

- “College is expensive. More expensive than ever and folks might need a place to stay. They might need money.” *Staff*
- “Perhaps more college students are trying to cover their tuition, [...] that might not be the same in the general population. But I think basic needs is probably pretty high on the list for everybody who trades sex.” *Staff*
- “Maybe they can't get other jobs. Maybe they're not at a point to have the skills to do other jobs, and everyone needs to pay their rent and put food on the table. So, I think generally speaking, it comes down to basic needs and finances.” *Staff*

Interviewees talked about developmental and transition vulnerabilities. The transition to undergraduate or graduate school can be a vulnerable time of change, particularly for students leaving home for the first time. Some noted that younger people may be more susceptible to suggestion or peer pressure. Exemplar quotes are below:

- “I think exploitation is a really big thing [...] I'm thinking about some of the girls who I work with and some of them were college age [...] and they didn't know what they were getting themselves into. [...] there are people who will exploit these young people.” *Student*
- “It's definitely a lot easier to be [recruited into sex trading] when you’re young. Like coming from like high school, you're struggling immediately. And then you meet someone who is doing sex work, and they're like “Oh, just do this. You know, like, you just have to sell your socks online for this much.” I think it's a lot easier to fall under the influence of someone else when you're coming from high school into college and then getting into [sex trading] because a lot of people are naive when they come from when they are coming from high school into college. That naivety is kind of like their downfall.” *Student*
- “Every time that I thought of trading sex for something, it had to do with a necessity. Like my first winter, I needed gloves. I needed like boots.” *Student*.
- “We're working with really young adults who a lot of times they're developmentally still maybe in the adolescent phase of development.” *Staff*

Interviewees, particularly student interviewees, highlighted other reasons as well such as experimentation, fun, and testing boundaries.

Theme 2: Barriers and challenges to seeking services

Interviewees identified four primary barriers and challenges to seeking services for students who trade sex: safety concerns; threat of exposure or manipulation; criminal law; and restrictive or punitive policies.

Staff in particular highlighted issues with safety concerns associated with seeking help. This included concerns about privacy and confidentiality. There were also concerns about emotional safety and fear that students would be judged for disclosing involvement in sex trading. Students may fear stigma, opprobrium, and negative consequences for revealing involvement in sex

trading. This theme is related to subthemes in the campus climate theme as well. One staff said this about safety:

> "The overwhelming fear of any sort of retaliation. [...] If I share this open[ly] like in class or with another student, what type of retaliation would I face from my peers and colleagues [and] for those in position of power. So, I am thinking about retaliation in kind of forms and power."

Because sex trading is stigmatized, and some forms of sex trading are illegal, disclosure or discovery adds barriers to seeking help. Interviewees described how engaging in sex trading or even seeking help related to sex trading could open the door for exposure, manipulation, extortion, or further coercion. People can use those threats to gain compliance, money, services, or silence. Apart from that, discovery of sex trading could come back to haunt people in their future job search or with faculty and other students. Given this, there is a very real fear of seeking help and potentially risking exposure.

- "If you have sent pictures back and forth to people who have them and have blackmailed you. Blackmail is a huge one that stops your career wholly. People have you know unalive[d] themselves because these things have come out." *Student*
- "Especially with interacting with like deep fakes or the ability. Photoshop [ha]s been there for a minute. Then also entering into the idea of like digital property theft in addition to violations of privacy and like a sense of self and bodily autonomy it [digital technology] makes everything more complicated and more difficult." *Staff*

Finally, many interviewees noted the barriers that arise because some aspects of sex trading are criminalized and subject to restrictive or punitive university policies (e.g. student codes of conduct). One staff member noted that many of the university policies are general and have vague references to being penalized for engaging in "unlawful conduct or unethical behavior within or outside of the University of Minnesota community." The staff member went on to say,

> "As I read that [policy], that's really general, and I know if I were a student I would worry that that could be something that if I were engaging in transactional sex that that would fall under something like that, and I wouldn't want to disclose it to somebody who would maybe view it that way."

Vague policies in combination with entrenched stigma have a chilling effect on students' ability to seek help for harms related to sex trading, disclose involvement in sex trading while seeking help, or simply live openly and without punishment. For example, if a student is sexually assaulted while trading sex or if they seek treatment for a sexually transmitted infection, they may not disclose sex trading or may forgo seeking help at all.

> As one student described, "I think just having a personal record on it is always just a little like nerve-wracking for me just because I've always been off the books. So being like on

> the books like in that regard like documented in that regard so it's kind of like alarmed me to some extent."

Theme 3: Campus climate

Interviewees had a lot to say about the campus climate with respect to sex trading. We identified several subthemes: sex trading is an open secret, institutional stigma and shame, lack of knowledge, the effect of restrictive university policies, and mandatory reporting requirements.

Students and staff interviewees alike highlighted that sex trading is sort of an open secret and that there is a climate of stigma and shame about sex trading. These two subthemes go hand-in-hand to create a climate of silence and fear. One student noted about sex trading, "Like it's there. Everybody can see it, but nobody like really talks about it." Staff interviews confirmed this.

- "I think we're just ignoring it [students trading sex]. And really not addressing it. And it's a very true reality of very many of our students. And there isn't clear information and resources being shared." *Staff*
- "The lack of acknowledgement or conversation about it, I think just further makes it harder for anyone to even feel comfortable bringing it up...when there's just no conversation about it." *Staff*

Students also expressed concern and worry about judgement from professors, peers, and potential future employers if their involvement in sex trading was disclosed or known. They feared this knowledge would change how they were viewed and might lead to reprisal, loss of opportunities, and censure. Student interviewees described that it was hard, and at times exhausting, to manage their role as a student and a person engaged in sex trading.

These student reflections highlight the central paradox facing students who trade sex: disclosure is often necessary to access resources or help from faculty and accommodations in course work. Yet, it can simultaneously open students to stigma and judgement and be viewed as a violation of university or program-specific policies, exposing them to potential sanctions, punishment, and further harm or traumatization.

Most staff noted that they were unfamiliar with the issue of sex trading. Many noted that the interview request was the first time they thought about the issue. They were not familiar with supportive programs, such as MDH's Safe Harbor program, that could be a resource for students. Further, most were not sure how codes, standards, laws, and mandatory reporting policies might apply if someone disclosed. Although many noted that criminalization of sex trading likely stifles disclosure and help-seeking. One staff member noted:

> "I'm aware that oftentimes [there] are nuances of seeking support from the legal system if there is in any way a connection to sex work or the fact that someone is practicing sex work. [It] gets really messy really quickly. I think there's that same level of fear that

> concerns will be dismissed or someone will not be taken seriously because they are engaged in sex work."

The ambiguity between stated University and school- and program- specific policy was called "a very convenient gray zone" by another staff participant who discussed how for many campus staff members, campus staff response to a disclosure can vary significantly from person to person and even unit to unit across campus. When discussing the role of campus staff response to disclosures of trading sex, this participant stated:

> "I think there's a very convenient gray zone [for campus staff response where] we can't do anything. I think there's also just a stigma of that lingering bit of like asking for it of what did you think was going to happen if you're engaging in this type of work which… is fundamentally [and] immensely frustrating because you should be able to engage in sex work and do so and be taken seriously and be able to be safe." *Staff*

Interviewees were concerned about how disclosure of sex trading may lead to disciplinary actions for violating university policies related to residential life, technology usage, codes of conduct, and sexual misconduct. During several staff interviews, the interviewees were not sure what policies said about sex trading and looked them up during the interview to read aloud. Many were surprised to see how disclosure of sex trading could be seen as a violation of codes, standards and laws. For example, one staff discovered that "soliciting or conducting business in a residence hall" is not permitted. Another staff person said:

> "I don't know if there's any type of policy [specifically about sex trading]. I think it's unwritten. Students, like whether that would be like if someone spoke openly, would they get disciplined or have heightened barriers around their wellness or educational goals." *Staff*

Campus staff interviews raised concerns about mandated reporting and how sex trading may be viewed within campus policies related to sexual misconduct. In particular, participants voiced concerns that some campus staff may conflate trading sex with sexual exploitation, harassment, or violence and may make a report when it is not necessary and how this reporting could impact a student. Several staff members described how they use mandatory reporting requirements as a way to make sure students obtain resources. But it is not clear how the university and university actors charged with interpreting different policies and codes would view situations involving sex trading. Below are some quotes from staff members about this topic.

- "[If campus staff do not] have a background or a lot of information around sex work, around trading sex, around things like that [they] may feel like they have to make a mandated report if somebody talks to if a student talks to them about it." *Staff*
- You know, do you call Title IX? If somebody is bringing up sex work, I think that there might be assumptions made about, 'hey, I'm a mandatory reporter. Don't say any more,

otherwise I have to tell EOT [Equal Opportunity and Title XI Office],' which is not correct, I don't think, in that circumstance. But I could see people being like put out because there is a fear [...] like I have a reporting duty, and it's like actually like this [making a mandatory report] is not relevant. I think that could be a thing." *Staff*

When no one talks about trading sex and staff lack knowledge, students are afraid to seek help. Below are quotes from students about how campus climate impacts them.

- "I don't think these institutions are on our sides [...] but it's the fear that there could be, especially with this administration, backlash. It is very scary." *Student*
- "Social consequences, if there's any disciplinary actions or potential consequences it could be on the university [...] like a work-study position or anything like that." *Staff*
- "I don't think this is a topic [sex trading] that is talk[ed] like through the university scenario, but it's lived by many university people. So it's more like a white elephant *[sic]*. Like it's there. Everybody can see it, but nobody like really talks about it." *Student*

Theme 4: University actions to improve support

Interviewees offered many suggestions for actions that universities and staff could take to reduce barriers and provide support to students who need and want it. An obvious action brought up by interviewees is to provide training to improve understanding of the issue of sex trading. This would both increase knowledge and help address issues around institutional silence and stigma. Staff members asked for this during interviews.

- "Less of culture of silence, more education for people like professors or staff or faculty members to learn about sex work. And potentially workshops about like how to have conversations about sex work in a way that isn't infantilizing or isn't victim blamey if there's like something that someone is looking for support for... certainly benefit from looking more into or feeling more connected to more opportunities to learn more." *Staff*
- "We need more supports like advocacy and education. I think part of it is having these questions on the College Student Health Survey is a step in helping us understand what's happening on our campus and how were we resourced to address that issue." *Staff*
- "I think it's like training of maybe the staff and the university folks of how to respond. [...] Who do we refer them to? There is no center to refer students." *Staff*

Interviewees had other ideas for breaking the silence and stigma. Some students specifically suggested more opportunities for student-led support and affinity groups to build community and center students voices and experiences. Likewise, interviewees suggested ways to challenge stigma through events and activities, raising awareness of the issue (e.g. social media campaign or resource fair), challenging discriminatory beliefs, and educating the campus about the realities of sex trading.

One student said, "You know like if I could change the culture, it's just, view sex work as work. Like they're just going to work. I think there is [are] issues [in how] we view [sex

work] as a moral problem and not like a problem of material conditions or the fact that people are really lonely because people are going through hard times right now kind of thing. You know?" *Student*

One goal of raising awareness and talking about sex trading is to increase and improve access to trauma informed and respectful services and supports. Specifically, interviewees mentioned access to low or no cost health and sexual health services, basic needs support, and culturally responsive care on campus. Students and one staff member offered a few suggestions, listed below.

- "Maybe a hotline or something at Boynton that could direct you straight to that in terms of counseling and advising and aftercare [...] But again, without stigmatization, I think that's the most important thing." *Student*
- "[It would be] useful for students to know their rights with relationship to treating sex and sex work. To have destigmatized places where students can access resources related to some of the risk that comes with trading sex and sex work, like contraception or STI testing, things like that. I think it would be helpful for students who engage in sex work and trade sex [to know that they] can still be sexually assaulted." *Staff*
- "More programs for low-income students and PhD students would be nice …Because my fellowships were taxable... I had to pay DOGE $30,000. I think addressing material conditions, providing a stipend for student scholarships...Your most marginalized students who are doing sex work [are doing it] out of desperation." *Student*
- "[To have] trading sex as an option and not as the only option would be something [by] filling these lags in other resources that university already have but are insufficient. But also providing your resources in terms of settling and adjustment...so resources in terms of mental health, in terms of nutrition, in terms of entertainment." *Student*

While these suggestions are a starting point, developing the capacity for universities to respectfully and safely handle disclosures of sex trading will take time and work to sift through policies, provide training, and get really clear on how to do this well. Staff specifically called for a policy audit as a good way to start this process. This would include a full accounting of all the relevant policies that might relate to sex trading and understanding who enforces the policies. They acknowledged that there are policies that could harm students if they disclose sex trading and that any response should actively seek to avoid unintentional harms to students who trade sex.

Implications and Recommendations

Implications

This mixed-methods project and preliminary report of key findings definitively shows that students in higher education in Minnesota are involved in sex trading. Among respondents to the 2024 Minnesota CSHS, 1.5% said they had traded sex, and this included undergraduate and graduate-level students. Taken together, the quantitative analysis of the CSHS dataset and our qualitative interviews identified several important implications.

- A minority of surveyed students who reported trading sex indicated that they identified or labeled this as trafficking or exploitation; however, this is a significant concern and should be taken seriously.
- Financial concerns are a motivation for students to trade sex. According to the interviews, particularly with students, the cost of higher education and inability to meet basic needs may lead to constrained choices. CSHS data also shows that students who trade sex were more likely than their peers to have financial difficulties such as food insecurity and higher debt load. Interviewees suggested that campuses could do more to provide financial support to students, particularly so that those who do not want to engage in sex trading have other options. We acknowledge that campuses may not be able to fully address this the financial needs of students. At the time of writing, institutions of higher education are facing resource constraints stemming from steep decreases in federal and state funding.
- There are significant unmet physical and mental health needs among students who trade sex. These include higher rates of sexual assault and intimate partner violence, mental health challenges, sexually transmitted infections, and more.

Qualitative data from interviews highlighted several important implications that were not captured in the quantitative CSHS. Staff and students highlighted a campus culture of silence, stigma, and fear related to sex trading. Some described it as an open secret. Interviewees highlighted very real concerns with disclosure of sex trading related to student codes of conduct, policies, legal implications, and professional standards and codes. It simply may not be safe for students to disclose involvement in sex trading to campus staff for a variety of valid reasons. Yet there is a paradox, because access to resources often requires disclosure. It was very clear from our interviews that staff lack awareness and understanding of the issue and that resources are not available for students focused on trading sex, sexual exploitation, or trafficking. In particular, campus staff were not aware of Minnesota Safe Harbor and all the resources that could be available to students who trade sex. It was also clear that all the staff who participated in an interview wanted to learn more and better understand what they could do within their role to better support students who trade sex.

Recommendations

Based on findings from this project, we recommend the following:

1. ***Provide training on sex trading and community resources to campus staff*** who interact with students on issues related to sexual assault, health, student support (e.g. mental health and academic), and basic needs. *Note: the MYST Collaborative is in the process of developing training materials in partnership with the Minnesota Safe Harbor network.* Training could include:
    a. Basic information about sex trading and terminology and an emphasis on destigmatization and presentation of the broad range of experiences and nuance.
    b. Instructions about how to have respectful conversations that do not require disclosure to receive resources and referrals, if needed.

2. ***Make sure that Minnesota Safe Harbor is included on resources handed out to students***. *Note: The MYST Collaborative has a plan for circulating resources to key campus staff during the fall 2025.*
3. ***Conduct a policy analysis*** to understand campus policies and how they may help or hinder students to seek help and present findings to campus leaders. *Note: the MYST Collaborative received funding from the UMN Social Justice Impact Grant fund to do a policy analysis with a focus on LGBTQ+ and students of color.*
4. ***Share information*** with the Minnesota Office of Higher Education to distribute to campuses across Minnesota.
5. Seek ways to ***better coordinate between Twin Cities' campus entities*** (e.g. Boynton, Aurora Center, Title IX) in relation to the issue of sex trading.
6. Identify ways to make sure students who trade sex ***can access low or no cost health care and other emergency supports*** (such as emergency funds), without having to disclose involvement in sex trading.
7. ***More research is needed*** to better understand students' experiences and needs and the most appropriate response. Research should both explore the issue generally and focus on quality improvement and implementation research applicable to each specific campus environment.

Limitations

Like all research, there are limitations to note. For the first study, the College Student Health Survey data are cross-sectional, meaning that we can examine associations between data points but not determine causality or know what came first in students' experiences. Generalizability of findings are limited to the lower response rate, and findings may not be applicable to other geographic areas.

The primary limitation for the second study is the low number of qualitative interviews, particularly with students. We reached saturation with staff, meaning that we were not learning new things with more interviews. However, this was not the case with student interviews, although several themes echoed throughout all the student interviews (e.g. basic needs, the high cost of higher education, and stigma). The project duration was short, and interviewing began at a challenging time in the academic year, when many students are consumed by finals and planning for graduation.

The broader social and political climate at the time of interviews may have impacted our interview response rate. We gathered data during a time of intense scrutiny of institutions of higher education and students on campus. For example, the UMN Twin Cities campus was being investigated by the US Department of Justice, and the Trump Administration issued several executive orders and policies that scrutinized immigrants, international students, transgender and gender diverse students, and students of color.

Conclusion

This study identified a significant unmet need to better support students in higher education in Minnesota who trade sex. Data analyzed here also point to several recommendations to begin the process of better supporting these students so they can access services they may need and achieve their educational goals. Disclosure of sex trading may very well come with risks for

students, and any next steps must be mindful of this, while also providing support and resources. Dismantling the current campus climate of silence, shame, stigma and lack of support for students who trade sex will take time and require additional inquiry to make sure that there are not unintended harms to students.

The MYST Collaborative is already taking steps to start this process, and we see several early and easy wins that can be achieved relatively quickly. We raised awareness among staff and have built partnership just by conducting this study. We are developing a slide deck for educating campus communities that this is an issue among their students, and we will encourage student support units to add Minnesota Safe Harbor as a resource to all current resource lists. We have also started a policy audit at our home campus – University of Minnesota, Twin Cities – and will continue working on this issue here and across Minnesota.

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Appendix: Data Tables

Below are Tables 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 referenced in the report. All data are from the 2024 College Student Health Survey.

Table 2. *Demographic Characteristics and Student Statuses by Traded or Never Traded Sex (N = 5,436).*

	Yes, ever traded sex n (col %)	No, never traded sex n (col %)	p-value
Overall Prevalence n (row %)	82 (1.5%)	5,354 (98.0%)	
Age Mean (SD) Range: 18 – 73	27.38 (9.68)	24.03 (7.77)	<0.001
Gender identity and sexual orientation			<0.001
Male only, heterosexual	10 (12.8%)	1,001 (20.0%)	
Female only, heterosexual	23 (29.5%)	2,647 (52.9%)	
Gender and/or sexual minority	45 (57.7%)	1,354 (27.1%)	
Race/ethnicity, international student			+
International student	+	288 (5.4%)	
Student of color	21 (25.6%)	1,271 (23.7%)	
White	55 (67.1)	3,447 (64.4%)	
Unknown	+	348 (6.5%)	
Any reported disability (hearing, vision, cognitive, ambulatory, self-care, independent living difficulties)	38 (51.4%)	1,115 (23.7%)	<0.001
Housing insecurity past 12 months	46 (57.5%)	1,505 (29.3%)	<0.001
Food insecurity past 12 months	46 (57.5%)	1,307 (25.5%)	<0.001
Relationship status			0.190
Single	29 (37.2%)	2,385 (47.6%)	
Married/domestic partner or Separated, widowed, divorced	13 (16.9%)	746 (14.9%)	
Engaged/committed dating relationship	36 (46.6%)	1,880 (37.5%)	
First-generation college student status	36 (48.0%)	1,719 (35.6%)	0.027
Current student status			0.010
Full-time	61 (78.2%)	4,410 (87.8%)	
Part-time	17 (21.8%)	611 (12.2%)	
Class status			
Undergraduate	60 (75.0%)	4,027 (78.6%)	0.442
Other than undergraduate (i.e., graduate/professional/community college/ technical college/non-degree seeking)	20 (25.0%)	1099 (21.4%)	
Living arrangements			0.088
Rent or share rent (within one mile of campus)	19 (24.4%	1,010 (20.3%)	
Rent or share rent (more than one mile from campus)	26 (33.3%)	1,179 (23.7%)	
Residence hall	10 (12.8%)	1,311 (26.3%)	
Fraternity/sorority	0 (0.0%)	20 (0.4%)	
Own a house	11 (14.1%)	618 (12.4%)	
Other (parent's home, public/subsidized housing, other, no stable residence/homeless)	12 (15.4%)	842 (16.9%)	
Have credit card debt	38 (48.7%)	1,220 (24.5%)	<0.001
Have student loan debt	56 (74.7%)	2,584 (58.6%)	0.005
Responsible for repayment of student loans (vs. parents/others)	54 (91.5%)	2,676 (86.4%)	0.676

Note: + = values with fewer than 10 respondents are suppressed; corresponding p-values are not calculated. P-values are based on Chi-square tests; p-values for age differences are based on t-tests. Housing insecurity indicated by responses of sometimes or often worried not enough money to cover cost of housing and/or sometimes or often unable to pay all of the cost of housing on time. Food insecurity: sometimes or often worried whether food would run out before got money to buy more and/or sometimes or often the food didn't last and didn't have money to get more.

Table 3. *Health Care Service Utilization by Traded or Never Traded Sex (N = 5,436).*

	Yes, ever traded sex n=82 n (col %)	**No, never traded sex n=5,354 n (col %)**	**p-value**
Has health insurance	73 (90.1%)	5,151 (96.4%)	0.012
Receipt of Services While in School			
Routine Medical Examination Services			0.819
Yes	71 (86.6%)	4,661 (87.4%)	
No	11 (13.4%)	670 (12.6%)	
Dental Care			0.001
Yes	60 (75.0%)	4,586 (87.1%)	
No	20 (25.0%)	679 (12.9%)	
Mental Health Services (non-emergency)			<0.001
Yes	64 (79.0%)	3,082 (59.0%)	
No	17 (21.0%)	2138 (41.0%)	
Emergency/Crisis Care (mental health issue)			
Yes	47 (58.0%)	1,952 (37.7%)	<0.001
No	34 (42.0%)	3,231 62.3%)	
Testing for Sexually Transmitted Infections including HIV			
Yes	56 (69.1%)	2,168 (41.8%)	<0.001
No	25 (30.9%)	3,024 (58.2%)	
Treatment for Sexually Transmitted Infections including HIV			
Yes	36 (44.4%)	1,479 (28.7%)	0.002
No	45 (55.6%)	3,681 (71.3%)	
Emergency Care (physical health issue)			0.254
Yes	58 (71.6%)	3,416 (65.5%)	
No	23 (28.4%)	1,796 (34.5%)	

Note: P-values are based on Chi-square tests.

Table 4. *Physical and Mental Health Indicators by Traded or Never Traded Sex (N = 5,436).*

	Yes, ever traded sex n (col %)	No, never traded sex n (col %)	p-value
Frequent physical distress (reported poor physical health for 14+ days during past 30 days)	17 (20.7%)	459 (8.6%)	<0.001
Frequent mental distress (reported poor mental health for 14+ days during past 30 days*)*	42 (51.2%)	1,395 (26.2%)	<0.001
Number of mental health stressors in past 12 months Mean (SD) Range: 0 to 14 stressors	3.79 (2.68)	1.73 (1.82)	<0.001
Experienced 3 or more mental health stressors in past 12 months	51 (62.2%)	1423 (27.0%)	<0.001
Experienced (select) stressors in past 12 months:			
Failed a class	14 (17.1%)	500 (9.5%)	0.021
Being diagnosed as having a serious physical illness	11 (13.4%)	278 (5.3%)	0.001
Attempted suicide	10 (12.2%)	68 (1.3%)	<0.001
Being put on academic probation	+	231 (4.4%)	+
Being diagnosed as having a mental illness	22 (26.8%)	644 (12.2%)	<0.001
Lack of health care coverage	21 (25.6%)	355 (6.7%)	<0.001
Issues related to sexual orientation	16 (19.5%)	291 (5.5%)	<0.001
No stressors listed happened to me	+	1,647 (31.3%)	+
Ever diagnosed			
Any mental health diagnosis	75 (91.5%)	3,221 (62.2%)	<0.001
Substance use disorder	26 (31.7%)	160 (3.0%)	<0.001
Anorexia	16 (20.5%)	343 (6.5%)	<0.001
Anxiety	65 (80.2%)	2,752 (51.9%)	<0.001
Attention deficit disorder	37 (33.3%)	821 (15.6%)	<0.001
Bipolar disorder	+	168 (3.2%)	+
Bulimia	13 (16.0%)	152 (2.9%)	<0.001
Depression	67 (81.7%)	2,222 (41.9%)	<0.001
OCD	10 (12.3%)	394 (7.5%)	0.099
Panic attacks	43 (53.1%)	1,447 (27.3%)	<0.001
PTSD	36 (43.9%)	677 (12.8%)	<0.001
Seasonal affective disorder	29 (35.4%)	795 (15.1%)	<0.001
Social phobia/performance anxiety	27 (33.3%)	877 (16.6%)	<0.001
Number of lifetime mental health diagnoses Mean (SD) Range: 0 to 12 diagnoses	4.49 (2.82)	2.05 (2.23)	<0.001
Currently taking medication for any mental health condition	39 (47.6%)	1,654 (30.9%)	0.001
Currently seeing a mental health counselor/therapist	32 (39.0%)	1,315 (24.6%)	0.003
Rating of average level of stress in past 30 days Mean (SD) Range: 1 "not stressed at all" to 10 "very stressed"	7.23 (2.05)	6.11 (2.06)	<0.001
Rating of ability to manage stress in past 30 days Mean (SD) Range: 1 "ineffective" to 10 "very effective"	6.18 (2.04)	6.24 (1.99)	0.798

Note: + = values with fewer than 10 respondents are suppressed; corresponding p-values are not calculated. P-values are primarily based on Chi-square tests; t-tests of mean values of mental health stressors, lifetime mental health diagnoses, and ratings of stress and ability to manage stress yielded p-values for those indicators.

***Table 5**. Sexual Assault and Disclosure by Traded or Never Traded Sex (n = 5,436).*

	Yes, ever traded sex n (col %)	No, never traded sex n (col %)	p-value
Ever experienced actual or attempted sexual intercourse without your consent or against your will			<0.001
Yes	56 (68.3%)	1,014 (19.3%)	
No	26 (31.7%)	4,236 (80.7%)	
Ever experienced actual or attempted sexual touching without your consent or against your will			<0.001
Yes	64 (79.0%)	1,649 (31.4%)	
No	17 (21.0%)	3,559 (68.6%)	
Ever a victim of sexual assault composite			<0.001
Yes	65 (79.3%)	1,706 (32.4%)	
No	17 (20.7%)	3,563 (67.6%)	
Past 12 months, experienced actual or attempted sexual intercourse without your consent or against your will			<0.001
Yes	15 (18.8%)	129 (2.5%)	
No	65 (81.3%)	4,951 (97.5%)	
Past 12 months, experienced actual or attempted sexual touching without your consent or against your will			<0.001
Yes	19 (23.8%)	280 (5.5%)	
No	61 (76.3%)	4,779 (94.5%)	
Past 12 months a victim of sexual assault composite			<0.001
Yes	(23.8%)	291 (5.7%)	
No	61 (76.3%)	4,799 (94.3%)	
Ever experienced sexual intercourse/sexual touching without your consent or against your will, did you tell anyone about the incident?	(n=65)	(n=1725)	0.344
Yes	41 (63.1%)	986 (57.2%)	
No	24 (36.9%)	739 (42.8%)	
Who did you tell about the sexual assault incident? ***(check all that apply)***	(n=41)	(n=986)	
Health care provider (e.g., physical, nurse, or therapist)	19 (46.3%)	297 (30.1%)	0.027
On campus authority (e.g., campus law enforcement, hall director or advisor, school staff)	+	67 (6.8%)	+
Police agency	+	86 (8.7%)	+
Friend or intimate partner	38 (92.7%)	774 (78.5%)	0.029
Family member	18 (43.9%)	504 (51.1%)	0.365
Someone else	+	136 (13.8%)	+

Note: + = values with fewer than 10 respondents are suppressed; corresponding p-values were not calculated. P-values are based on Chi-square tests.

Table 6. *Domestic Assault and Help-Seeking by Traded or Never Traded Sex (n = 5,436).*

	Yes, ever traded sex n (col %)	No, never traded sex n (col %)	p-value
Ever been slapped, kicked, or pushed by your significant other or spouse/partner			<0.001
Yes	38 (46.3%)	550 (10.5%)	
No	44 (53.7%)	4,693 (89.5%)	
Ever been hurt by threats, put-downs, or yelling from your significant other or spouse/partner			<0.001
Yes	53 (64.6%)	971 (18.5%)	
No	29 (35.4%)	4,282 (81.5%)	
Ever a victim of domestic violence/assault composite			<0.001
Yes	57 (69.5%)	1,036 (19.7%)	
No	25 (30.5%)	4,226 (80.3%)	
Past 12 months, been slapped, kicked, or pushed by your significant other or spouse/partner			+
Yes	+	97 (1.9%)	
No	+	4975 (98.1%)	
Past 12 months, been hurt by threats, put-downs, or yelling from your significant other or spouse/partner			<0.001
Yes	22 (27.8%)	231 (4.6%)	
No	57 (72.2%)	4,836 (95.4%)	
Past 12 months a victim of domestic violence/assault composite			
Yes	24 (30.0%)	254 (5.0%)	<0.001
No	56 (70.0%)	1553 (95.0%)	
Ever experienced being hit, slapped, verbally threatened, verbal put-downs. etc., did you tell anyone about the incident?	(n=56)	(n=1045)	0.575
Yes	29 (51.8%)	501 (47.9%)	
No	27 (48.2%)	544 (47.9%)	
Who did you tell about the domestic assault incident? ***(check all that apply)***	(n=29)	(n=501)	
Health care provider (e.g., physical, nurse, or therapist)	+	146 (26.9%)	+
On campus authority (e.g., campus law enforcement, hall director or advisor, school staff)	+	12 (2.2%)	+
Police agency	+	77 (14.2%)	+
Friend or intimate partner	22 (81.5%)	414 (76.4%)	0.541
Family member	13 (48.1%)	317 (58.5%)	0.288
Someone else	+	66 (12.2%)	+

Note: + = values with fewer than 10 respondents are suppressed; corresponding p-values were not calculated. P-values are based on Chi-square tests.