

# Missing, Presumed Trafficked: Towards non-binary understandings of 'wayward' youth in Jamaica

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## Abstract

Boys and LGBTQ youth, especially those who go missing from home, have recently started to appear in mainstream anti-trafficking discourse as a group of children who are peculiarly vulnerable to human trafficking. This paper reports findings from research with Jamaicans who experienced various forms of violence and exploitation as children. Our data is consistent with the claim that boys and LGBTQ Jamaicans are amongst those who experience forms of violence and exploitation that policy makers often discuss under the heading 'sex trafficking'. However, the same data also challenges the conceptual binaries used to frame assumptions about 'sex trafficking' as a significant threat to Jamaican youth and informs assumptions about missing children as victims of trafficking. In this way, the paper provides empirical support for criticisms of the turn towards including boys and LGBTQ youth as victims of 'sex trafficking', and of dominant discourse on 'child trafficking' more generally.

**Keywords:** LGBTQ youth, child 'sex trafficking', missing children, binary thinking

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## Introduction

The way in which governmental and non-governmental actors in the United States interpret the concept of 'trafficking' has impacted, and continues to impact, well beyond the country's own borders. Congress has given a mandate to the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons 'to issue annual Trafficking in

Persons (TIP) reports that rate each country's progress on eliminating trafficking',<sup>1</sup> and 'under-performing' nations are threatened with sanctions.<sup>2</sup> Jamaica is one of a number of global south countries that has been negatively affected by the TIP process. It was given a Tier 3 ranking in the 2005 report. Though Jamaican governments have subsequently enacted all the measures demanded by the TIP Office, it has never managed to secure more than a Tier 2 ranking. TIP reports continue to claim the island is a source and destination country for human trafficking, and that domestic 'sex trafficking' of children is a particular problem.<sup>3</sup>

Where trafficking was once imagined as a problem solely or largely affecting women and girls,<sup>4</sup> boys and LGBTQ youth have recently started to appear in mainstream US anti-trafficking discourse as a group of children who are peculiarly vulnerable to human trafficking. Exodus Road notes that 'LGBTQ youth face tremendous pressure and an increased risk of sex trafficking',<sup>5</sup> while a Polaris blog explains that the multitude of unique obstacles faced by transgender youth in their everyday lives position them 'at higher risk of being targeted by traffickers'.<sup>6</sup> The risks are said to be especially high for children who run away from home, and this includes many children who are LGBTQ. In line with this shift, recent TIP reports now also identify LGBTQ youth in Jamaica as 'at risk' of trafficking, and further claim that 'many children are reported missing in Jamaica',<sup>7</sup> 'some' of whom fall victim to 'sex trafficking'.

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<sup>1</sup> M Desyllas, 'A Critique of the Global Trafficking Discourse and U.S. Policy', *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, vol. 34, issue 4, 2007, pp. 57-79, p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> E O'Brien and M Wilson, 'Clinton, Bush and Obama: Changing policy and rhetoric in the United States Annual *Trafficking in Persons Report*', in M Dragiewicz (ed.), *Global Human Trafficking*, Routledge, London, 2015, pp. 123-137, p. 124.

<sup>3</sup> K Cruz, J Sanchez Taylor, and J O'Connell Davidson, 'Tourism and Sexual Violence and Exploitation in Jamaica: Contesting the "trafficking and modern slavery" frame', *Journal of the British Academy*, vol. 7, issue s1, 2019, pp. 191-216, <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/007s1.191>.

<sup>4</sup> O Martinez and G Kelle, 'Sex Trafficking of LGBT Individuals: A call for service provision, research, and action', *Int Law News*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2013, pp. 1-6.

<sup>5</sup> B Giovagnoni, 'LGBTQ Youth: At risk for human trafficking', The Exodus Road, 17 June 2021, retrieved 15 May 2022, <https://theexodusroad.com/lgbtq-youth-at-risk-for-sex-trafficking>.

<sup>6</sup> Polaris, 'Unique Obstacles Put Transgender People at Risk of Trafficking', Polaris Blog, 10 March 2017, <https://polarisproject.org/blog/2017/03/unique-obstacles-put-transgender-people-at-risk-of-trafficking>.

<sup>7</sup> US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report 2021—Jamaica*, US Department of State, Washington, D.C., 2021.

On first inspection, the inclusion of boys and LGBTQ youth in policy discourse on trafficking may look like a welcome shift away from heteronormative assumptions about the sex in 'sex trafficking'. And given that male homosexuality is still criminalised and LGBTQ people heavily stigmatised in Jamaica,<sup>8</sup> it might also appear as a step towards addressing concerns voiced by a number of human rights organisations about violations of LGBTQ rights on the island.<sup>9</sup> Yet critics have noted that in other contexts, the recent turn towards including boys as victims of 'sex trafficking' is 'less useful—and more harmful—than it may appear',<sup>10</sup> and that constructing LGBTQ youth as 'exceptionally vulnerable' to trafficking does not necessarily lead to policies that safeguard their rights.<sup>11</sup>

We were recently involved with a study in Jamaica that generated interview and survey data consistent with the claim that LGBTQ Jamaicans are amongst those who experience the constellation of violence and exploitation discussed under the heading 'sex trafficking' by policy makers and many NGOs.<sup>12</sup> Yet the same data also challenge the framing of that violence and exploitation as 'sex trafficking', and the idea that missing children can be presumed trafficked. This paper draws on that data to add to criticisms of the turn towards extending the 'victim of trafficking' category to boys and LGBTQ youth. It argues that because mainstream anti-trafficking discourse emerges from and reproduces the conceptual binaries of liberal thought, it fails to address the material and ideational structures that create vulnerability to violence and exploitation or to recognise Jamaican youths'

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<sup>8</sup> J Gaskins Jr., "Buggery" and the Commonwealth Caribbean: A comparative examination of the Bahamas, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago', in C Lennox and M Waites (eds.), *Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in The Commonwealth: Struggles for Decriminalisation and Change*, Human Rights Consortium, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London, 2013, pp. 429-454; K West and N Cowell, 'Predictors of prejudice against lesbians and gay men in Jamaica', *The Journal of Sex Research*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2015, pp. 296-305, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2013.853725>.

<sup>9</sup> Amnesty International, "I Feel Scared All the Time." A Jamaican Sex Worker Tells Her Story', Amnesty International, 27 May 2016, retrieved 8 March 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/05/apple-sex-worker-testimony-jamaica>; N Goshal, 'Human rights body calls for repeal of Jamaica's anti-LGBT laws', Human Rights Watch, 17 February 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/17/human-rights-body-calls-repeal-jamaicas-anti-lgbt-laws>.

<sup>10</sup> K Kaye, 'The gender of trafficking, or why can't men be sex slaves', in M Skilbrei and M Spanger (eds.), *Understanding Sex for Sale*, Taylor & Francis, London, 2018, pp. 180-198, p. 180.

<sup>11</sup> A Boukli and F Renz, 'Deconstructing the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender victim of sex trafficking: Harm, exceptionality and religion–sexuality tensions', *International Review of Victimology*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2019, pp. 71-90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269758018772670>.

<sup>12</sup> Cruz *et al.*

ambiguous standing as both subjects *and* objects, victims *and* agents. As a result, it is unlikely to inform policies that will improve the situation facing either heterosexual or LGBTQ youth in Jamaica.

## Research Methods

Between 2017 and 2019, together with Katie Cruz, we held British Academy research funding for a project that explored whether the legal and policy understandings of child sexual exploitation and trafficking in Jamaica map onto the sociological realities of the country's informal tourism economy.<sup>13</sup> We employed non-random sampling methods and snowballing techniques to recruit a sample of 13 cis women, 10 cis men, and 2 trans women for biographical narrative interview, all of whom were adults working in the informal economy in Jamaican tourism areas either as sex workers or ambulant beach vendors or both. All had experienced, when under the age of 18, one or more of the following: labour exploitation, physical violence, rape, and trading sex for material or financial benefits. In addition, all but 3 of our 25 interviewees had either run away from home, or been thrown out, or orphaned or abandoned by parents or carers when under the age of 18. At the time of interview, our interviewees' ages ranged from 18 to 44, and their childhoods thus spanned the decades from the late 1970s to the 2010s.

As Jamaica did not introduce its *Trafficking in Persons Act* until 2007, few of our interviewees would have been legally considered 'victims of trafficking' at the time they experienced childhood sexual or labour exploitation. Nonetheless, many of the experiences they describe (such as running away from home or entering into sexual-economic exchanges with adults) would today be cast as 'trafficking' or considered to place them 'at risk of trafficking'. Their retrospective accounts can therefore shed light on the phenomena today discussed under the rubric of 'child trafficking'. Moreover, retrospective interviews with adults about their childhood experiences of sexual exploitation and violence helps to avoid some of the most challenging ethical dilemmas presented by conducting research on these forms of abuse with persons currently below the age of 18.<sup>14</sup> Such dilemmas are all the more vexed when the researcher works in settings where welfare and support services for children in difficult circumstances are very limited, and/or where children are known to also be at risk of violence and abuse in the institutional care homes to which they may be referred if they are reported to the authorities as runaways or involved in sex work.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> M Melrose, 'Labour Pains: Some considerations on the difficulties of researching juvenile prostitution', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, vol. 5, issue 4, 2002, pp. 333-351, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570110045963>.

In addition to retrospective narrative biographical interviews with adults, we conducted 10 in-depth interviews with tourism employers and employees; 15 background interviews with police officers, academics, and civil society actors; and two Focus Group Interviews with sex workers (15 participants in total). We worked in partnership with the Sex Workers Association of Jamaica (SWAJ), an association formed in 2007 to address issues facing sex workers in Jamaica and to work to empower sex workers to advocate on their own behalf. Our research partners at SWAJ assisted with recruitment of sex workers for interviews, and with the design of a survey of sex workers. They then gathered survey data from a non-random sample of 165 sex workers (87 cis women, 52 cis men, and 26 trans women) recruited in the course of their outreach work, and advised on data analysis.<sup>15</sup> Members of SWAJ were also invited to participate in project dissemination activities in the UK, the US, and Brazil. Unfortunately, they were denied visas by the UK and US authorities, but they were able to travel to Brazil for meetings with policy makers and sex worker rights activists.<sup>16</sup> Neither interviewees nor survey respondents were offered any inducement to participate in the research. However, when fieldwork was complete, interviewees were given a sum of money to thank them for their participation and cover any expenses incurred or earnings lost as a result of time devoted to the biographical narrative or focus group interviews.

As we have written about data from the survey and from our interviews with cis women in more detail elsewhere,<sup>17</sup> in this article we focus on data from our narrative-biographical interviews with 12 interviewees assigned male identity at birth, analysing it in relation to dominant discourse on boys and LGBTQ youth vulnerability to trafficking. All interviewees have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

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<sup>15</sup> M Haughton *et al.*, 'Not Trafficking But Abuse. Policy Briefing 78', Policy Bristol, Bristol, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> M Haughton, J Levi, and B Santos, 'Sex workers united by respect —an interview with the warrior women's association of Brazil', *Open Democracy*, 12 March 2020, retrieved 29 April 2022, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/sex-workers-united-by-respect-an-interview-with-the-warrior-womens-association-of-brazil>.

<sup>17</sup> J Sanchez Taylor and J O'Connell Davidson, 'Sex Work in Jamaica: Trafficking, Modern Slavery and Slavery's Afterlives', in K Kempadoo and E Shih (eds.), *White Supremacy, Racism and the Coloniality of Anti-Trafficking*, Routledge, London, forthcoming 2023; Cruz *et al.*

## Binary Thinking and ‘Child Trafficking’ Discourse

Trafficking discourse rests on a series of conceptual divisions—between voluntary and forced migration, between smuggling and trafficking, between poor work and forced labour, and so on. These divisions are grounded in and reproduce the mental structure that, from the seventeenth century on, was developed by liberal thinkers to explain and represent social and political reality. That structure rests on a series of conceptual binaries or dualisms,<sup>18</sup> which, emerging from histories of colonialism and slavery, are highly racialised (modern/primitive, civilised/barbarous, West/the Rest, white/black).<sup>19</sup> It also historically relied on an assumed split between the public realm of political, civil, and economic life in which propertied white men exercise rights, duties, and freedoms, and the private, domestic realm of the household and family, to which their wives, children, servants, and slaves are relegated.<sup>20</sup> As many critics of anti-trafficking discourse have observed, political claims-making about ‘trafficking’ emanating from the US, and also from Europe, has reinvented these gendered and racialised binaries.<sup>21</sup>

The social categories ‘Adult’ and ‘Child’ also map onto the public/private divide, with children imagined as embodying all that adults are not (passive, innocent, dependent) and belonging firmly in the domestic sphere of the home and in educational institutions until such time as they make the transition to adulthood. This reflects the liberal assumption that children lack the capacities required for the exercise of freedom. Children have rights, but these rights must be protected and enacted by adults on their behalf. Through this lens, the home is a place of safety for those who are incapable of exercising political rights and duties, and

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<sup>18</sup> R Prokhovnic, *Rational Woman: A feminist critique of dichotomy*, Routledge, London, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> C Mills, *The Racial Contract*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1998.

<sup>20</sup> C Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Polity, Cambridge, 1982.

<sup>21</sup> K Kempadoo, ‘The Modern-Day White (Wo)Man’s Burden: Trends in Anti-Trafficking and Anti-Slavery Campaigns’, *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 1, issue 1, 2015, pp. 8–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2015.1006120>; L M Agustín, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, labour markets and the rescue industry*, Zed Books, London, 2007; B Anderson and R Andrijasevic, ‘Sex, Slaves and Citizens: The politics of anti-trafficking’, *Soundings*, issue 40, 2008, pp. 135–145; J Doezema, *Sex Slaves and Discourse Masters*, Zed Books, London, 2010; D Gadd and R Broad, ‘Troubling Recognitions in British Responses to Modern Slavery’, *The British Journal of Criminology*, vol. 58, issue 6, 2018, pp. 1440–1461, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjcr/azx082>.

unable to enter into contracts in the public realm of the market.<sup>22</sup> The adult/child, active/passive, and market/home binaries remain so central to today's mainstream anti-trafficking discourse that leaving the home becomes part of the very definition of 'child trafficking' for a number of campaigning organisations. The Bedford Borough Council tells us that 'Trafficking is where children and young people [are] *tricked, forced or persuaded to leave their homes* and are moved and transported and then exploited, forced to work, or sold'.<sup>23</sup> Or as UNICEF put it:

Once separated from their family [trafficked children] can become malnourished and neglected, and are subjected to violence and sexual abuse. They are also at risk of HIV infection. Trafficked children are driven by fear. Their traffickers control them with threats, rape, violence and drugs.<sup>24</sup>

As with campaigns against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) in the 1990s, campaigns against child trafficking implicitly rest on an opposition between a pleasant, healthy, and sheltered childhood in the bosom of the family, and a 'lost', 'stolen' or 'raped' childhood for those who are forced to leave the protected environment of home.<sup>25</sup> The childhood experience of our interviewees does not fit into this framework.

## Market/Home, Adult/Child, and the Location of Danger

As children, the home lives of our interviewees were powerfully shaped by the legacies of colonial exploitation that undermine human security and flourishing in the Caribbean region.<sup>26</sup> Since 1977 (in other words, during the decades of our interviewees' childhoods), Jamaica has been heavily dependent on financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to stabilise its economy,

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<sup>22</sup> J O'Connell Davidson, *Children in the Global Sex Trade*, Polity, Cambridge, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Bedford Borough Council, 'Child trafficking and modern slavery', n.d., retrieved 31 May 2022, <https://www.bedford.gov.uk/social-care-health-and-community/children-young-people/safeguarding-children-board/practitioners/child-trafficking/> (emphasis added).

<sup>24</sup> As cited in J O'Connell Davidson, 'Moving Children? Child trafficking, child migration, and child rights', *Critical Social Policy*, vol. 31, issue 3, 2011, pp. 454-477, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018311405014>.

<sup>25</sup> H Montgomery, *Modern Babylon?: Prostituting children in Thailand*, Berghahn Books, London, 2001.

<sup>26</sup> A Nixon, *Resisting paradise: Tourism, diaspora, and sexuality in Caribbean culture*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2015.

and the neoliberal structural adjustment packages tied to IMF loans have had a devastating impact on ordinary people's lives. The poverty rate doubled between 2007 and 2014, while infant mortality rates increased and the number of children completing primary school declined.<sup>27</sup> Austerity measures led to real-term cuts in wages while the cost of living rose dramatically. Between 2001 and 2013, electricity prices increased by over 135 per cent, and in 2011, the average price of a basket of basic goods rose by 15.5 per cent.<sup>28</sup> The government's inability to spend on infrastructure, housing, education, health, and welfare makes the lives of its poorer citizens much more difficult and expensive, and many ordinary Jamaicans find themselves trapped in what Jovan Scott Lewis terms 'a geography of sufferation', struggling to survive, supplementing paid work (if they can get it) with informal earning activities in an economy of makeshifts.<sup>29</sup>

All our interviewees were originally from poor families in rural villages, and in the context described above, their adult carers found it almost impossible to provide for them and their siblings, especially to meet the costs of travel to and from school, uniforms, and lunch money. Because their parents often worked long hours in multiple jobs, most of our interviewees had taken on domestic responsibilities, including care for younger siblings, before they reached the age of ten. As young teenagers, some would also occasionally accompany their mothers to their workplaces to assist them. Billy (born 1992) told us his single mother was a domestic worker, and he would sometimes help her:

*Like if she was going somewhere and she could take me along to help out, hang clothes on the line, help her to rinse clothes and all of that. And like she will have me rake up the yard if the people that she's working for have a yard... But I was more like a mum, the mother and the father of the house. Because my mom would leave me in the house with my smaller brother while she go out to work, and I have to interact and take care of him, feed, bathe, and keep him clean and I loved to always clean our house.*

As this interview excerpt illustrates, the home is not necessarily a space in which children are the passive recipients of care and children's domestic labour can cross the imagined boundary between home and market. For Billy, taking on 'adult'

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<sup>27</sup> N Dearden, 'Jamaica's Decades of Debt are Damaging its Future', *The Guardian*, 16 April 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2013/apr/16/jamaica-decades-debt-damaging-future>.

<sup>28</sup> J Dear, P Dear, and P Jones, *Life and Debt: Global Studies of Debt and Resistance*, Jubilee Debt Campaign, 2013, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> J Scott Lewis, *Scammer's Yard: The Crime of Black Repair in Jamaica*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2020, p. 47.

responsibilities in the home and helping his mother at work was a source of pride and pleasure. Another interviewee, Dante (born 1997), explained that when he was 15, his father was out of work and he realised that his mother was responsible for paying all the bills, providing food, and covering costs for his younger siblings to attend school: 'And so I started feeling uncomfortable because I am there, not contributing and still using water and food.' This prompted him to look for paid work outside the home, which is how he came to take up sex work. But not all our interviewees spoke of childhood labour in these terms, Sanka and Paul being cases in point.

*My mother grow me until I four years old, then send me to live with my dad. I cried that day, so much. I didn't feel the vibes to stay there, I love my mother so much. It was a Sunday evening and they beat me to stay. I hate it ... I didn't want to stay there... My dad didn't want me, because he have a next woman and having kids, so he give me to my grandmother... She worked me so hard. I wasn't to call her granny, she have her kids, her kids to call her granny, but she take a hate to me. I do most work in the yard. Everything they call on me. In those days, you have to be a farmer, you have to plant peanuts, make the bammy. I was the first one in the yard that could grate and wash a cassava, grating cassava from the age of seven year old, wash it. I have to stop from school they work me so much. Hard work. I have to go to the bush to look sticks to make fire, make the bammy. They were selling the bammy in Mo Bay and Kingston... Growing up, they said I was a bad boy. Never give no trouble, just seven years old, growing up, what could I do? Just a kid... Too much work, still keeping up with the bullshit. Because I was hungry. Sanka (born 1984)*

*When I was growing up my mother was always bitching on me... There were four other kids... and I am the oldest one, and I have to do all the dishes and wash the clothes, clean the yard, spread the beds same way, you know what I am saying, empty the chimmy [potty], I have to do all that. So every time I help my mother as I'm growing up to ten, my mother... treat me like... cruel... She used to break everything down on my head that she could get. Paul (born 1980)*

In Jamaica, corporal punishment remains lawful in the home under the common law right to inflict 'reasonable and moderate' punishment, and it is also lawful in schools. Focus group research in 2008 with 60 children aged 7-12 found they all experienced harsh disciplinary measures, including beating with objects such as belts, rulers, garden hose, and boards. The Jamaica Survey of Living Conditions

2018 found that ‘beating was the most used method of child punishment across regions, age groups and quintiles, for both boys and girls... Although most methods were used equally with boys and girls, more boys were beaten with an implement (23%) than girls (13.7%)’.<sup>30</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that, other than Dante, all interviewees reported having been beaten by adult carers as children. However, physical and sexual violence featured particularly strongly in the narratives of our gay and trans interviewees. Kevor (born 2000) said that he was just ten years old when his father began to suspect that he was gay, ‘and he would think that when him beat me I’m going to change’. Billy was about twelve when:

*all the community members starting to realise or notice that I was a bit different from the other boys who were growing up in the community. I normally get into a lot of fight trying to defend myself, I have a lot of scars from those days to show... I was threatened by family members, saying I’m a batty man [gay], they’re gonna put me in a chopped tyre, light me. I’ve gotten beaten from my cousin’s gang, beaten, properly beaten, bruises when the beating done because them say I gay. I remember my uncle beat me, said him gonna beat it out of me.*

The same uncle subjected Billy to a ‘punishment’ rape when he was 13 years old. Candy (born 1994) was also raped by an uncle. She was just 11 years old at the time. She told her father, who beat her for lying. The uncle confessed a year later, ‘but my father didn’t even apologise. Even though he know his brother was HIV positive, he still didn’t care’.

Our interviewees’ life stories remind us that it is not only when children are separated from their family that they can become malnourished and neglected, experience labour exploitation, violence and sexual abuse, and risk HIV infection, as UNICEF puts it. All these things can happen at home or under the control of family members. This is further evidenced by the fact that Jamaica’s National Children’s Registry figures showed that of cases of child sexual abuse that came to light in 2012, 70 per cent (1,147 cases) involved children who were abused in their own homes.<sup>31</sup> Nor is institutional care provided by the state necessarily a safer alternative. When Tarone (born 2000) was ten, his mother was imprisoned and

<sup>30</sup> End Corporal Punishment, *Corporal Punishment of Children in Jamaica*, 2020, <http://www.endcorporalpunishment.org/wp-content/uploads/country-reports/Jamaica.pdf>; see also: D Smith, ‘Corporal punishment of children in the Jamaican context’, *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2016, pp. 27-44, <https://doi.org/10.18357/ijcyfs.71201615415>.

<sup>31</sup> R Mathison, ‘Children being abused in their own homes’, *The Gleaner*, 19 July 2021, <https://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20210719/children-being-abused-their-own-homes>.

he was placed in a children's home. In line with reports that children's homes in Jamaica are often run along the lines of penal institutions,<sup>32</sup> he described having been subjected to horrific punishments by staff, including being forced to kneel for hours on gravel in the beating sun, arms outstretched and holding heavy stones.

Our data also confirm something else that is somehow forgotten in discourse on child trafficking, namely, the fact that children (defined as persons below the age of 18) are not necessarily passive objects of adult control.

### Active/Passive, Resistant/Compliant

As children, our interviewees did not passively accept their lot, but resisted and sought to transform the hand that fate had dealt them. When their parents refused or were unable to meet their material needs, they acted. From the age of 10, Elijah (born 1974) started to go out to beg for money on the street, and also scavenged uneaten food from rubbish bins. Levi (born 1981) lived with his grandmother who was caring for twelve children. At the age of 13, he began working at weekends. Because he was a good swimmer, he started going out to sea spear fishing, and would flag down cars on the road to sell his catch. Sometimes he fished with friends, sometimes alone; the risks of the work intensified by the presence of barracuda fish. But, he observed, 'back then, times was hard, and there was no electricity for a while, no good water for a while, so you know, it was to survive'. Yet acting outside the home was also a means to something more than bare survival.

*One time I met a white guy, he's from the States. He gave me some money and he buy me some food and I'll never forget, he take my address, and told me that when he goes he'll send me a pair of Puma... I was the happiest kid in town. It was the first time I ever get anything from a foreign country. I loved it so much. That was one of the best shoes I ever owned, cause I couldn't afford to get shoes. (Elijah)*

*When I was 14, I want to work, because I used to like things, like corduroy jeans and I wanna buy them, and clog shoes. Because I used to sing reggae music and I sing good, and I dance good, so I want these things so I can perform. (Levi)*

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<sup>32</sup> K Hibbert, 'Review how children are treated in state care, says official', *Jamaica Observer*, 7 June 2015, retrieved 8 March 2019, [http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/review-how-children-are-treated-in-state-care--says-official\\_19077194](http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/review-how-children-are-treated-in-state-care--says-official_19077194).

As they entered adolescence, our interviewees also started to resist the violent control of their parents/carers. Aged 15, Sanka finally snapped when his granny came to beat him yet again: ‘I hold her finger back until it crack. Broke it that day’. Then he ran away from home. Except for Dante who remained at home with his parents until he was 18, Paul who was orphaned at 12, and Tarone who was detained in a children’s home from the age of 10, all the other interviewees assigned male identity at birth ran away or were thrown out after conflicts that centred either on their sexuality, or their assertion of independence, or both. Kevor observed that ‘young people want to have fun and this and that’, but his father, who suspected him of being gay, set a strict curfew of 8 pm and beat Kevor if he returned late. Following many arguments about this, his father threw him out of the house aged 14. Billy ran away from home at the same age, after being raped by his uncle and threatened by cousins and other community members. Candy’s father threw her out at the age of 13, Ylette (born 1994) ran away at 15. Elijah was 14 when he left, Paul was 12, and Tony (born 1978) was just 10 years old.

When they ran or were ejected, they headed for places bustling with life—the tourist towns of Negril, Montego Bay, or Ocho Rios, and in Sanka’s case, to Kingston. Again, they actively sought out ways to survive. Sanka joined a group of adolescent street dwellers, who made a living from washing the windscreens of cars that stopped at traffic lights during the day, and robbing car radios at night. Levi and Tony worked as day labourers on construction sites. Paul initially earned tips by hanging round outside a supermarket and carrying bags to shoppers’ cars, then later, like several other interviewees, he made links with older people working at tourist craft markets and/or dealing weed, and earned a cut by ‘hustling’ tourists to buy their wares. Friendships and sexual and intimate relationships were also crucial to our interviewees’ survival after leaving home.

## Sex as Work/Sex as Pleasure, Emotional/Economic Relations

Through the lens of the liberal conceptual binary of public/private, economic and emotional life are cleanly separated and sex is typically assumed to belong firmly to the private realm of intimate and affective relations. Our gay and trans interviewees’ experience does not fit this model. All described themselves as sex workers, and all started to exchange sex for money between the ages of 13 and 15. However, the line between sex for pleasure and sex for money was initially blurred, since both were discovered simultaneously. Motivated by desire for sexual experience, both Dante and Kevor began to look for partners online, and here they discovered that they could get paid for sex. As Kevor explained:

*I started off on-line. That’s where I meet other guys and, uh huh, and we make plans to link up at a certain place... At that time I was going to school, me have to find my lunch money, them no give me my fare to get there, nothing to eat, no fare to come back down.*

*So when I'm at school, me have to find me fare and everything... I reached a point where I see that if I don't do something about it, I won't go to school or whatever, you know? Him [father] nah go send me so me nah going go. So I see opportunity, so I take it.*

Billy also started to seek out opportunities for sexual experience at the age of 13, and quickly found that sex with men was also a way to earn money. He met a friend of a friend for sex, a man in his twenties who was a sex worker and knew the business. He offered to arrange for Billy to meet tourist clients, 'Because he was much older and you know, most of the time the tourists doesn't want the older men, they want the younger, slimmer guys'. If the lines between pleasure and work were blurred, so too, in some cases, were the lines between work and violence, and between intimate friendships and abuse. Billy's 'friend' did not pay him a 'fair share of what I was supposed to get' from hook ups, nor did he protect him from violence. On several occasions, Billy was gang raped having entered a hotel room expecting to service one client, only to find up to four men waiting inside. Dante described being gang raped in identical circumstances, by four police officers.

When Kevor's father threw him out of home, he decided to turn to a 35-year-old man he had previously met at a party and had sex with. The man took him in and said he would take care of him. He provided shelter and food for Kevor for two years, but expected sex in exchange and was abusive and controlling: 'When you stay with somebody, you do anything they want, you do whenever they want, so it was very hard. Very, very hard. But I still made it through, and I'm still alive'. At the same time, Kevor engaged in sex work to earn money for clothing and other necessities. The man was then evicted from his apartment, and Kevor found someone else to live with. At the time of interview, he was still living with the second, also much older partner, still having sex in exchange for shelter ('he is also the kind of person that love to have sex every minute, and I have to give him what he wants'), and still earning what he could from sex work. He said it would be 'complicated' for him to leave the relationship, because 'if I tell him I want to leave, he's not going to take that easy'.

The conflict that led to Candy's father throwing her out aged 13 was precipitated by the fact she arrived home bruised after having been beaten by a male sexual partner. Her father asked what had happened, and she told him. He then told her to get out of his house. At the same time, others in her village accused her of being gay and beat her: 'I was told to drop everything and leave the community'. She travelled to a tourist town and started sleeping rough, begging, and selling sex to survive. After a few months, she was picked up by the police and returned home. Because she explained that she had not run away but had been thrown out 'because of my sex life', she was assigned a probation officer and referred to a psychologist. Candy was extremely grateful for the latter. She explained that she had been suicidal and the psychologist helped her find ways of coping with

her feelings of despair and rejection. However, her father kicked her out of the house again at the age of 16.

This time, she was befriended by a 22-year-old cis woman who allowed Candy to sleep in her apartment and provided her with clothing ('because I see myself as a female and I dress as a female going out'). The friend was a sex worker, and Candy used to accompany her to her place of work. If any client asked for anal sex, a service that she did not provide, she would direct them to Candy. She did not control Candy's sex work or take a cut of her earnings, although Candy did contribute to the costs of rent and food when her earnings allowed. As Candy put it, 'she helped me, she gave me options, she showed me what I could do to benefit and I make the decision'. The existence of a queer community is known to be of huge importance to gay and trans Jamaican youth who have run away or been expelled from home.<sup>33</sup> Those cast out of 'respectable' society (which includes straight cis female sex workers as well as people who are LGBTQ) often offer each other friendship, care, and support. 'We see each other as family', Billy explained, and continued:

*If like a bunch of us is living in one house, the older one will be housemother, the others will be sister, brother, cousin, we just have a family. We are a small community so we just make it a family.*

Through the lens of the dominant discourse on trafficking, the 22-year-old woman who offered Candy what care and support she could provide would be criminalised as a 'trafficker'. Candy's father would not. However, as Kevor's story and our survey data show, it would be as mistaken to romanticise alternative, queer families and relationships as it is to romanticise birth families and heterosexual relationships. As they too involve dependencies, they too can be sites of abuse and violent control as well as of care.

The line between sex for pleasure and sex for economic reasons, and between intimate relationships and friendships and economic relations, was also blurry for our heterosexual cis male interviewees. Sex was part of the freedom they enjoyed as adolescents who had run away from home and adult control. Living in tourist towns, sometimes sleeping rough or on a makeshift bed in the craft market, or staying at friends' homes, 'we tackle with the girls and we have fun. Just enjoy life', as Elijah put it. That fun could also generate material benefits. Sanka explained:

*I found out when I come to Negril you have white girls and they say, OK, you are this you are that, and you sex them nice and they*

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<sup>33</sup> L Mills, 'Dwayne Jones and the Dangers of Tragedy Tourism', *Making Queer History*, 24 February 2017, <https://www.makingqueerhistory.com/articles/2017/2/24/dwayne-jones-and-the-dangers-of-tragedy-tourism>.

*say, OK, come on, and they give you stuff... You know, it's just the way it is. In Kingston, you have to pay for sex, in Negril you get a girl and she pay you for sex. [Laughs]*

Sanka also reflected back on his intimate, though not sexual, relationship with two older expatriate white women positively. While still in Kingston and aged 16, they gave him work and a place to live but also offered him care and affection: 'they were good people to me, and I just deal with them with respect. Although I was a bad boy, they see the real me, and they just try to break me out of that shit because they see the real me'. In Negril, Paul found friendship amongst a group of rastas who were living and working at the tourist craft market. They trained him to make jewellery and wood carvings to sell to tourists, taught him to cook vegetarian food, and encouraged him to learn to swim and snorkel. Interacting with tourists also opened up a sense of possibilities for Paul, an idea that life could be otherwise. He spoke of his wonderment on finding that white tourists saw him as glamorous, attractive, cool:

*I never know that I was Jamie Foxx, or was going to be called Michael Jordan. I didn't know that I was going to get all these great titles man! God! As soon as I cut my hair, bald it off, make it shine, from that I'm Michael Jordan and Jamie Foxx. I swear to God these people pin names on me. These people see a star and I couldn't believe it. What white folks see in me, Jamaican people never see.*

He found it very easy to 'hustle' white tourist women looking for sex, and such relationships helped him to survive economically. Yet reflecting on his experience as a 15-year-old having sexual relationships with much older tourist women, he said:

*They rape you! They know you are Jamaican and you are a lucky guy today. But you're the one getting raped... Cos there is no benefit from it. They just want to have fun and that's it, so you shouldn't expect nothing from it.*

At the time, he imagined these relationships were the gateway to something more, but today he says he knows he will never be able to walk on the same streets as those women. He is stuck in Jamaica, on the beach, hustling for small change. Although Paul used the term 'rape', he did not report having been violently assaulted by women. Indeed, in marked contrast to our gay and trans interviewees, violence did not feature in any of our heterosexual male interviewees' accounts of their sexual experience as teenagers. They did, however, face violence or its threat in the course of their daily lives both from fellow street dwellers and 'hustlers', and from police officers and security guards. More generally, the imagined division between 'bad' criminals and 'good' state actors does not map onto the childhood or current experience of our sex worker interviewees and survey respondents. It has already been noted that Dante was raped by four police officers, and our

survey data also found that police officers are amongst those who harass, beat, and rape sex workers.<sup>34</sup>

## Wayward Youth?

US TIP Reports do not cite sources, but when they assert that many children go missing in Jamaica, they are presumably making use of figures collated by Jamaica's Office of the Children's Registry (OCR). Those figures have been widely publicised in media reports, and also by the NGO 'Hear the Children's Cry' (HCC). The website of the latter informs readers that between 2010 and 2020, 'approximately 15,000 children have been reported missing in Jamaica, a problem that continues to create tremendous social concerns and ramifications for families, communities, and the wider society'.<sup>35</sup> In a very small number of tragic cases, children reported missing have later been discovered murdered or to have died from other causes. However, both TIP Reports and HCC fail to mention that OCR data also shows that the vast majority of children who are reported missing are very quickly found or return home. One study by the OCR found that a quarter of those reported went missing for less than one day, and almost half only left home for between two to six days. Just thirty-one per cent went missing for more than a week. The Child Protection and Family Services Agency (CPFSA) states that in 2017, a total of 1,674 children were reported missing and 1,476, or 90 per cent, returned home or were recovered. The OCR study found that the majority of children reported missing are aged between 14 and 18, and more girls are reported missing than boys. Children are frequently reported missing during holidays and following events popular with young people. As an OCR spokesperson observed, these findings are not consistent with the idea that the phenomenon of missing children is linked to criminal activities, such as trafficking.<sup>36</sup>

A government unit that followed up on cases of children reported missing in 2019 found that most cases involved children who were afraid to go home for fear of punishment, peer pressure, the child going to another relative or friend's house without the knowledge of a parent, or 'a wish for freedom'.<sup>37</sup> Journalists reporting on such children sometimes describe them as 'wayward', and our interviewees' narratives certainly speak to Saidiya Hartman's use of the term in

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<sup>34</sup> Cruz *et al.*; Haughton *et al.*

<sup>35</sup> 'Missing Children's Support Programme', HCC, n.d., retrieved 9 August 2022, <https://hearthechildrencryja.com/missing-children>.

<sup>36</sup> C Robinson, 'When girls go missing – Sex, family woes and peer pressure', *The Gleaner*, 27 May 2017, <https://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/lead-stories/20170528/when-girls-go-missing-sex-family-woes-and-peer-pressure>.

<sup>37</sup> A Saunders, 'Missing children problem persists', *Jamaica Observer*, 14 January 2020, <https://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/missing-children-problem-persists>.

her recent book.<sup>38</sup> The book draws on a range of archival materials to explore the ways in which impoverished young black women in the early twentieth century United States refused the subordinate existence assigned to them and rejected the standards of respectability used by sociologists as well as social reformers and state agents to frame them as deviant, criminal or wayward. 'Wayward', Hartman observes, is 'related to the family of words: errant, fugitive, recalcitrant, anarchic, willful, reckless, troublesome, riotous, tumultuous, rebellious and wild',<sup>39</sup> and she approaches the wayward lives of these young black women as experiments in the pursuit of freedom, as 'the untiring practice of trying to live when you were never meant to survive'.<sup>40</sup> The young women Hartman is concerned with hungered for something more than the life of drudgery that had been scripted for them; they sought beauty, pleasure, entertainment, and other such accoutrements of freedom. It was the fact that they acted on the basis of their longings and desires that made them 'wayward'. In this respect our Jamaican interviewees have much in common with them.

Although as children they mostly ran away from home to escape abuse and homophobia, or were ejected as an act of abuse, and although they often faced further abuse and harms of various types after leaving, our interviewees' accounts of life beyond their homes are also narratives about actively and hopefully pursuing desires. They were looking for sex, fancy clothes, excitement, and other kinds of fun that children are not traditionally supposed to want. At the same time, however, they also longed for things that children are supposed to have a right to—love, intimacy, care, food, shelter, belonging, acceptance, and in most cases also a chance to complete their education and obtain the qualifications necessary for a 'good' job. They imagined how their lives could be otherwise, they envisioned themselves transitioning from childhood to adulthood, dependence to independence, unloved to beloved, victim to agent, debased to respected, and in some cases also man to woman, and then acted on the basis of those desires. In so doing, they experienced moments of solidarity as well as betrayal, kindness as well as cruelty, beauty as well as ugliness. These moments did not add up to a linear trajectory in either direction. It was not that their stories started badly but ended happily, or vice versa. Instead, and like the young migrants that Mai studied in Europe whose mobile orientations unfolded 'between "errant" and more agentic forms of mobility',<sup>41</sup> our interviewees shuttled between such moments, or experienced them simultaneously, and continued to do so even in adulthood. All of them still lead 'wayward' and precarious lives that cannot be neatly boxed into the conceptual dichotomy between agent-victim that is so central to the trafficking frame.

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<sup>38</sup> S Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, W. W. Norton, New York, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>41</sup> N Mai, *Mobile Orientations*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2018, p. 73.

## Conclusion: Beyond the binaries of anti-trafficking

Human trafficking entered into policy and political discourse as a problem of criminal justice and enforcement, but one that was simultaneously represented as a security threat and a humanitarian crisis.<sup>42</sup> It therefore required a cast list of clear and unambiguous perpetrators and victims, and mainstream anti-trafficking discourse was and remains inextricably bound to the agent-victim or subject-object binary. It divides people into those who are the authors and subjects of their journeys and destinies, and those who are victimised, controlled by traffickers, and reduced to mere objects of trade and exploitation. To the extent that the trafficking frame now accommodates LGBTQ youth, it does so by casting them as non-agential victims. But the trafficking frame distorts the realities faced by Jamaican youth. As a result, it encourages demands for carceral solutions,<sup>43</sup> rather than efforts 'to imagine a genuine abolition' of the systems that produce suffering.<sup>44</sup>

Official statistics show that far more children are reported as sexually abused in their own homes than as going missing for longer than a week. The lives of even larger numbers of children are blighted by physical abuse from parents and other authority figures, and the numbers of children whose well-being is negatively impacted by structural adjustment measures and neoliberal economic reforms in recent decades are greater still. The hyper-visibility of 'sex trafficking' in international policy discourse deflects attention from the global and neocolonial power relations that make it impossible for Jamaican governments to provide the kind of welfare support that would allow poorer Jamaicans to meet the material needs of their children.<sup>45</sup> In national as well as international policy discourse, it renders invisible the social practices and laws that harm children, such as those that sanction corporal punishment and which stigmatise and criminalise homosexuality and sex work.

James Kincaid has observed that the telling and retelling of Gothic tales about an epidemic of child molesting works to reassert a vision of 'children' as empty, vulnerable, dependent, and biddable, as the opposite of sex, the opposite of us, and so also a vision of ourselves as good and worthy 'adults'.<sup>46</sup> Media and policy discourse on 'child sex trafficking' does the same thing, while also confirming fictions about the goodness of 'respectable' heteronormative families and sexuality. These are stories that protect socially cherished ideals of childhood, as opposed to

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> E Bernstein, *Brokered Subjects: Sex, Trafficking & the Politics of Freedom*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Y Goyal, *Runaway Genres*, New York University Press, New York, 2019, p. 28.

<sup>45</sup> Cruz *et al.*

<sup>46</sup> J Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence: The culture of child molesting*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1998.

actual, flesh-and-blood children.<sup>47</sup> The real stories of children like our interviewees are very different. They are tales about children being failed in multiple ways by numerous individuals, agencies, systems, and structures, and about their own efforts to change the lives that had been scripted for them by these failures. As Kaye argues, we need a 'new template for understanding... one that not only identifies a multiplicity of harms and needs, but that recognises the complexity of confronting multiple difficulties simultaneously'.<sup>48</sup>

Genuine concern with the realities of our interviewees' lived experience would not lead to the conclusion that 'sex trafficking' is the problem in need of a policy solution. Nor would it lead to attempts to slot their experience into oppositional conceptual binaries. If we actually cared about them in all their non-binary ambiguity, as both subjects and objects, agents and victims, we would be focused on responding to their unmet needs for care (as adults as well as children), and dismantling the structural, legal, and social obstacles that stand between them and the realisation of their freedom projects.

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<sup>47</sup> O'Connell Davidson, 2005.

<sup>48</sup> Kaye, p. 1