



Original article

Violence Exposure Among Adolescent Boys and Young Men in Colombia With a Lifetime History of Transactional Sex

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: There is a paucity of research examining the contextual factors that shape the violence experienced by those engaged in transactional sex, particularly among adolescent boys and young men. Recognizing the acute vulnerability among youth engaged in transactional sex, this analysis examined the associations between lifetime transactional sex and experience of violence among 13- to 24-year-old males.

Methods: Using data from two strata of the 2018 Violence Against Children and Youth Survey from Colombia, logistic regressions were used to estimate the association between engagement in transactional sex and violence exposure. Three groups of violence outcomes were examined: violence victimization, violence perpetration, and witnessing violence.

Results: Violence victimization and witnessing violence were widespread. Adolescent boys and young men with a lifetime history of transactional sex were significantly more likely to experience violence victimization than those without a lifetime history of transactional sex, particularly intimate partner violence (adjusted odds ratio [aOR]: 5.23 and 5.41) and caregiver emotional violence (aOR: 7.23 and 8.74). In the national and priority samples respectively, those with a lifetime history of transactional sex were also significantly more likely to witness violence within the home (aOR: 4.42 and 4.99) and outside of the home (aOR: 7.24 and 28.32).

Discussion: Although research is needed to determine causal pathways, our findings highlight the ubiquity of violence and the criticality of supporting this group of adolescent boys and young men. Interventions for those with a history of transactional sex should address factors that may contribute to drivers of violence and transactional sex.

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IMPLICATIONS AND
CONTRIBUTION

Examining violence exposure among adolescent boys and young men in Colombia with a lifetime history of transactional sex is important to support this socially marginalized population. Findings revealed exacerbated risk for experiencing and witnessing violence.

Conflicts of interest: The authors report no known conflicts of interest.

Disclaimer: The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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Transactional sex, broadly defined as the exchange of sexual activity for tangible or intangible resources such as money, services, shelter, drugs, or food, exists in many forms and has complex determinants and drivers. Engagement in transactional sex is intermittent in many parts of the world, with (re)entry initiated as resource needs arise [1–3], and with first entry into transactional sex typically through known contacts [4,5].

Adverse correlates with transactional sex include substance use,

sexually transmitted infections, mental health challenges, and violence victimization [5–8].

Adolescent boys and young men engaged in transactional sex may be acutely vulnerable to violence due to their outward challenging of traditional gender norms. However, transactional sex studies tend to focus on women and girls [5,9]. Fewer still are transactional sex studies from low- and middle-income countries that include adolescent boys and young men, particularly those outside sub-Saharan Africa [5,9]. Across the globe, the prevalence of transactional sex varies between females and males. Current literature identifies that female adolescents tend to be more likely to engage in transactional sex than males in low- and middle-income countries, while the inverse is true in high-income countries [5]. Moreover, it is important to also recognize that transactional sex is inherently a form of sexual exploitation and abuse when adolescents or children under 18 are engaged.

Public discourse on transactional sex typically equate transactional sex with sex work, emphasizing the role of the man as the client and the holder of power in the client–sex worker relationship [10,11]; in this way, men may align themselves with conceptions of masculinity that prioritize sexual control. In contrast, adolescent boys and young men who exchange sex for money or goods may be perceived to be transgressing community norms around appropriate and expected male behaviors and may experience marginalization or violence as a result. Although less is known about transactional sex, male sex work also tends to be associated with men having sex with men [11] further challenging traditional conceptions of masculinity or machismo culture. For example, adolescent boys in postconflict Colombia have reported a pressure to acquiesce hegemonic norms, including the use of violence perpetration to assert masculinity or avoid violence victimization [12]. Indeed, research shows that male sex workers lack power in their work and personal relationships [13–15], increasing their vulnerability to violence by both clients and intimate partners [16]. Although not extensively researched among those engaged in transactional sex, these dynamics may transcend sex work given the power differentials inherent to transactional sex.

Individuals involved in transactional sex are acutely vulnerable to violent experiences, with one systematic review estimating past-year the prevalence of violence among individuals engaged in transactional sex for commercial purposes to be between 32% and 55% [17]. This same systematic review highlighted the gap in research examining the contextual factors that shape the violence experienced by those engaged in transactional sex for commercial purposes. Those engaged in transactional sex encounter numerous potential perpetrators; in addition to common perpetrators of violence, such as intimate partners, those who are directly connected to the transaction of sex (e.g., clients) pose a threat as well. Another potentially harmful correlate of transactional sex is indirect exposure to violence, such as witnessing violence or secondary traumatization from others sharing their violent experiences as described by research among girls across Uganda and adolescent boys and girls from Johannesburg, South Africa [18,19]. Both direct and indirect violence can have substantial health, social, and financial consequences across the life course [20,21], particularly when these experiences occur during adolescence or young adulthood. Given concerning rates of transactional sex among adolescents in some contexts [22–24], an improved understanding of pathways and experiences of adolescents engaged in transactional sex is needed.

Colombia provides a unique context to explicitly examine violence exposure among adolescent boys and young men with a lifetime history of engagement in transactional sex. As an upper middle-income country, it is not surprising that engagement in transactional sex among 13- to 24-year-old males is similar to females in Colombia [25]. Moreover, the protracted conflict in Colombia has heightened expectations of masculinity, or machismo, which may further complicate the experiences and risk of violence among men and boys who transgress social norms by engaging in transactional sex [26]. However, there is little research examining the transactional sex experiences of adolescent boys and young men globally or in Colombia [26]. What is clear is that the Colombian government has taken a highly prosecutorial legal stance to address sexual violence, including Law 1719 of 2014 [27]; however, the implementation of those protections are limited without institutional and societal backing for adolescent boys and young men engaging in transactional sex. Although little is known regarding how the protracted conflict violence has permeating societal constructs or norms related to violence, the compounding legal precarity and likely stigmatization of transactional sex may exacerbate the risks and impacts of violence among men and boys who have engaged in transactional sex.

Recognizing the acute vulnerability among those engaged in transactional sex and the scarcity of research among adolescent boys and young men engaging in transactional sex, *this analysis examined the associations between lifetime transactional sex and experience of violence among 13- to 24-year-old males using data from the 2018 Violence Against Children and Youth Survey (VACS) from Colombia.*

Methods

Data

The 2018 VACS in Colombia collected representative, quantitative, cross-sectional data from two strata [25]. One was representative of the entire nation (national stratum), and the other represented population from 170 municipalities historically affected by conflict (priority municipalities stratum) that are contained within the national stratum. This analysis uses the publicly available VACS data from both strata.

Administered in nearly 20 countries, the VACS collect data on physical, emotional, and sexual violence victimization and perpetration among 13- to 24-year-old females and males. Data also include basic demographics, health, behaviors, and attitudes. The VACS is the first nationally representative survey to estimate violence against children and youth in Colombia, and Colombian VACS is the first to include a separate and representative sample from priority municipalities that historically have experienced conflict.

Samples from national stratum and the priority municipalities stratum utilized a three-stage sampling design. In the first stage, enumeration areas (EAs) were selected. All EAs were eligible for the national data collection, while only 170 municipalities historically affected by the protracted armed conflict were eligible for the priority data collection [28]. Moreover, a split-sampling approach was employed for both samples whereby separate EAs were designated for female and male respondents. In the second stage, households were randomly selected within sampled EAs. In the third stage, one eligible participant was randomly selected from sampled households.

Table 1
Demographics of males aged 13–24 in Colombia

	National		Priority		Between within national	Between within priority	Difference between datasets		
	Full sample (n = 1,286%)	No lifetime history of transactional sex (n = 1,251%)	Lifetime history of transactional sex (n = 35%)	Full sample (n = 1,203%)				No lifetime history of transactional sex (n = 1,175%)	Lifetime history of transactional sex (n = 28%)
	% Yes (95% CI)	% Yes (95% CI)	% Yes (95% CI)	% Yes (95% CI)				% Yes (95% CI)	% Yes (95% CI)
Transactional sex	2.23 (0.93–3.52)	N/A	N/A	1.84 (0.80–2.89)	N/A	N/A	-		
Lifetime Demographics	96.79 (95.05–98.53)	96.73 (94.94–98.53)	98.04 (94.28–101.80)	93.52 (91.00–96.04)	93.52 (90.97–96.07)	95.34 (85.53–105.15)	-		
Completed primary school	19.78 (14.40–25.17)	19.52 (13.99–25.04)	37.99 (19.00–56.98)	21.68 (17.39–25.96)	21.58 (17.19–25.97)	27.55 (-3.19 to 58.29)	-		
Ever married or living with partner as if married							-		
	Mean (95% CI)	Mean (95% CI)	Mean (95% CI)	Mean (95% CI)	Mean (95% CI)	Mean (95% CI)			
Age	18.45 (18.12–18.77)	18.4 (18.07–18.73)	20.11 (18.89–21.34)	18.37 (18.01–18.74)	18.31 (17.93–18.68)	22.15 (21.30–23.00)	-		
							Diff		

CI = confidence interval; N/A = not applicable.

This analysis utilizes the male sample only, whereby 7,536 and 6,265 households were surveyed in the national and priority data collection, respectively. Within these households, a final sample included 1,299 and 1,211 males for the national and priority samples, respectively.

Written consent was provided by caregivers and respondents 18 years or older. Informed consent was provided by all respondents under the age of 18 with prior permission by caregivers. Data collection was conducted in private spaces and all study protocols were approved by ethics committees: the Ethics and Research Methods Committee of the National Institute of Health of Colombia and the Institutional Review Board of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [25].

Measures of interest

The primary predictor variable was lifetime history of transactional sex. This binary variable was informed by the question, “Have you ever had sex with someone because this person provided you with material support or help in any other way?” Respondents received a “1” if answering “yes” and a “0” if answering “no.”

The outcomes of interest in this analysis were organized into three groups: (1) direct sexual, emotional, and physical violence victimization; (2) physical violence perpetration; and (3) witnessing of violence. Lifetime sexual violence victimization was measured based on experience by any perpetrator. Excluding transactional sex among children, four types of sexual violence were measured in the VACS: unwanted sexual touching, unwanted attempted sex, pressured/coerced sex, and physically forced sex. Lifetime emotional violence victimization was measured based on four questions about ever experiencing any of the various types of violence by parents or adult caregivers: being told that the respondent was not loved or did not deserve to be loved; saying they wished the respondent had never been born or were dead; and ridiculing or putting down the respondent and threatening to get rid of the respondent.

Physical violence victimization was based on four questions asking about ever experiencing any of the following: slapping, pushing, shoving, shaking, or intentionally throwing something; punching, kicking, whipping, or beating with an object; choking, smothering, trying to drown, or intentional burning, and threatening with a knife, gun, or other weapon. Respondents were asked as to whether they had experienced any of these forms of violence from four perpetrator types: intimate partners, parents or adult caregivers, peers, or authority figures. Four binary variables were created to capture lifetime victimization by each of these four perpetrators, as well as a fifth binary variable reflecting physical violence victimization by any perpetrator. The perpetration of any of these forms of physical violence against a non-intimate partner was used to measure lifetime violence perpetration.

Lifetime witnessing of violence was grouped by inside and outside of the household. Witnessing violence inside of the household was measured by respondents affirming if he had witnessed their father hit their mother and/or if he witnessed a parent hitting a sibling. Witnessing violence outside of the household was measured by respondents affirming if he had witnessed someone being attacked as part of the internal political conflict or witnessed someone being attacked as part of community violence.

Table 2

Violence and transactional sex history among males aged 13–24 in Colombia

	National			Priority			Between within national	Between within priority	Difference between datasets
	Full sample (n = 1,286)	No lifetime history of transactional sex (n = 1,251)	Lifetime history of transactional sex (n = 35)	Full sample (n = 1,203)	No lifetime history of transactional sex (n = 1,175)	Lifetime history of transactional sex (n = 28)			
	% Yes (95% CI)	% Yes (95% CI)	% Yes (95% CI)	% Yes (95% CI)	% Yes (95% CI)	% Yes (95% CI)			
Physical violence victimization, ever									
Intimate partner violence	9.78 (6.30–13.26)	9.20 (5.71–12.70)	39.02 (20.12–57.93)	9.85 (6.85–12.85)	9.43 (6.46–12.40)	33.23 (11.39–55.07)	-	-	-
Caregiver violence	21.77 (16.40–27.13)	21.17 (15.70–26.64)	53.83 (35.39–72.27)	24.64 (19.09–30.18)	24.32 (18.72–29.91)	40.01 (14.97–65.06)	-	-	-
Peer violence	37.48 (29.86–45.09)	37.19 (29.38–45.01)	53.44 (45.30–61.58)	33.39 (28.19–38.59)	32.71 (27.48–37.94)	67.05 (46.42–87.67)	-	Diff	-
Authority figure violence	9.77 (5.93–13.62)	9.33 (5.45–13.20)	28.31 (10.96–45.66)	7.87 (5.36–10.38)	7.79 (5.23–10.34)	13.20 (-0.39 to 30.35)	-	-	-
Any perpetrator	46.70 (38.53–54.86)	46.23 (37.86–54.61)	69.14 (59.48–78.80)	44.70 (39.27–50.14)	44.20 (38.69–49.70)	70.32 (51.49–89.14)	-	-	-
Other violence victimization, ever									
Sexual violence (any perpetrator)	12.54 (8.59–16.48)	12.16 (8.17–16.16)	31.22 (13.91–48.52)	14.42 (10.23–18.60)	13.59 (9.43–17.75)	58.39 (33.74–83.03)	-	Diff	-
Emotional violence (non-intimate partner)	15.92 (11.77–20.06)	15.05 (10.85–19.24)	51.35 (32.26–70.44)	16.02 (11.79–20.25)	15.26 (11.12–19.41)	56.01 (32.86–79.15)	Diff	Diff	-
Perpetration, ever									
Physical violence (non-intimate partner)	22.78 (17.26–28.31)	22.50 (16.82–28.17)	41.33 (22.89–59.77)	16.29 (12.09–20.49)	16.03 (11.82–20.23)	27.61 (3.97–51.26)	-	-	-
Witnessing violence, ever									
Parent-parent violence	16.32 (12.28–20.36)	15.85 (11.74–19.96)	39.15 (20.26–58.05)	15.91 (12.18–19.64)	15.79 (12.05–19.53)	21.98 (1.06–42.91)	-	-	-
Parent-sibling violence	24.65 (18.34–30.97)	23.94 (17.55–30.33)	56.83 (30.85–82.82)	19.72 (14.38–25.06)	19.15 (13.85–24.45)	50.07 (21.99–78.15)	-	-	-
Internal conflict	16.66 (11.80–21.51)	15.73 (10.75–20.72)	39.49 (21.29–57.70)	22.73 (18.19–27.27)	22.59 (17.94–27.25)	32.93 (17.34–48.52)	Diff	Diff	-
Community violence	54.70 (48.43–60.98)	53.86 (47.44–60.27)	96.60 (92.80–100.40)	51.64 (45.74–57.55)	50.99 (45.03–56.94)	88.86 (77.03–100.69)	Diff	Diff	-
Witnessing violence inside of household	31.38 (25.73–37.02)	30.53 (24.82–36.24)	67.24 (37.77–96.70)	26.89 (21.31–32.48)	26.34 (20.76–31.92)	57.07 (32.03–82.11)	Diff	-	-
Witnessing violence outside of household	57.36 (50.93–63.80)	56.31 (49.71–62.90)	96.60 (92.80–100.40)	55.39 (49.76–61.03)	54.77 (49.08–60.46)	91.49 (81.79–101.19)	Diff	Diff	-
Witnessing violence inside and outside of household	65.23 (59.54–70.91)	64.39 (58.58–70.20)	98.15 (94.40–101.91)	63.84 (58.30–69.39)	63.39 (57.78–68.99)	91.98 (82.37–101.58)	-	Diff	-

CI = confidence interval.

Table 3
Results of multivariate logistic regression of lifetime transactional sex history and direct violence experience among males aged 13–24 in Colombia, using the 2018 Violence Against Children and Youth Survey

	Physical violence victimization			Sexual violence victimization		Emotional violence victimization		Physical violence perpetration	
	Intimate partner violence	Caregiver violence	Peer violence	Authority figure violence	Any perpetrator	Any perpetrator	Caregiver	Non-intimate partner	
	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	
National Males	5.23*** (2.06–13.32)	4.11* (1.30–12.96)	1.76 (0.61–5.10)	3.79* (1.06–13.64)	2.42 (0.77–7.61)	2.88 (0.74–11.18)	7.23** (2.23–23.48)	2.19 (0.69–7.00)	
Priority Males	5.41* (1.07–27.38)	2.26 (0.68–7.51)	4.98* (1.34–18.46)	1.87 (0.40–8.65)	3.74 (0.93–15.04)	9.49*** (2.82–31.96)	8.74*** (2.83–26.93)	2.32 (0.61–8.83)	

Covariates included age, primary schooling, and marital status. Each cell represents a separate model (i.e., 16 models total).

aOR = adjusted odds ratio; CI = confidence interval.

Values in bold represent when odds ratios have a p -value < .05.*** p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05.

Covariates included marital status, primary schooling, and age. Marital status was measured as a binary variable based on if the respondent had ever been married or lived with a partner as if married. Primary schooling was measured as a binary variable based on whether the respondent had finished primary schooling. Age was measured as a continuous variable.

Analysis

To assess the robustness of findings of an uncommon experience, lifetime history of transactional sex among males aged 13–24, analysis was replicated in both the national and priority samples. We first estimated the prevalence of lifetime transactional sex and overall violence exposure using descriptive statistics. Multivariable logistic regressions were then used to estimate the association between engagement in transactional sex and the three groups of outcomes, controlling for covariates. Each model for direct violence victimization (seven variables), violence perpetration (one variable), and witnessing of violence (seven variables) was estimated for the national and priority sample. Thus, a total of 30 models were estimated. Equation 1 presents the structural model estimated:

$$\ln\left(\frac{p_i}{1-p_i}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{1i} + \beta_2 X_{2i} + \dots \beta_p X_{pi} \quad (1)$$

where the natural logarithm of the odds of a violence outcome $\ln\left(\frac{p_i}{1-p_i}\right)$ is a linear function of the lifetime history of transactional sex indicator variable and the abovementioned covariables (X_{1i}, \dots, X_{pi}).

All observations were weighted to be representative of males aged 13–24 and standard errors were adjusted for the complex sampling design. Combined missing observations were dropped and only accounted for fewer than 5% of the total. All results include 95% confidence intervals (CIs). Overlapping CIs were examined to determine if there were differences within the samples or between samples. All analyses were conducted in Stata 15 [29].

Results

Demographic characteristics between the samples were similar. Approximately 2% of males aged 13–24 engaged in transactional sex across their lifetime in both the national ($n = 35$; 95% CI: 0.93–3.52) and priority samples ($n = 28$; 95% CI: 0.80–2.89) (Table 1). The average age of respondents was 18.45 in the national sample (95% CI: 18.12–18.77) and 18.37 in the priority sample (95% CI: 18.01–18.74). Nearly all males completed primary school in both the national (96.79%; 95% CI: 95.05–98.53) and priority (93.52%; 95% CI: 91.00–96.04) samples.

Although the CIs were wide within the subgroup analysis, we did not find differences when comparing the 19.78% of males who were married in the national sample (95% CI: 14.40–25.17) and the 21.68% married in the priority sample (95% CI: 17.39–25.96). Age was the only demographic variable that differed when examining CI results between males with and without a lifetime history of transactional sex. In the priority sample, males who engaged in transactional sex were older (22.15; 95% CI: 21.30–23.00) than those who had not engaged in transactional sex (18.31; 95% CI: 17.93–18.68).

Table 4
Results of multivariate logistic regression of lifetime transactional sex history and witnessing violence among males aged 13–24 in Colombia, using the 2018 Violence Against Children and Youth Survey

	Witnessing domestic violence, ever		Witnessing violence inside of household		Witnessing violence outside of household		Witnessing violence inside or outside of household	
	Father-on-mother	Parent-on-sibling	Internal conflict	Community violence	Witnessing violence outside of household	Witnessing violence inside of household	Witnessing violence inside or outside of household	Witnessing violence inside or outside of household
	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)
National Males	3.79* (1.02–14.09)	4.33* (1.23–15.27)	4.99* (1.44–17.30)	3.02* (1.04–8.79)	22.63*** (5.36–95.57)	20.78*** (4.75–90.91)	28.32*** (4.02–199.37)	28.32*** (4.02–199.37)
Priority Males	1.78 (0.45–7.09)	4.97* (1.45–17.09)	4.42* (1.34–14.56)	1.23 (0.36–4.24)	6.96** (2.08–23.24)	7.82** (2.11–28.99)	7.24** (1.74–30.12)	7.24** (1.74–30.12)

Covariates included age, primary schooling, and marital status. Each cell represents a separate model (i.e., 14 models total).

aOR = adjusted odds ratio; CI = confidence interval.

Values in bold represent when odds ratios have a *p*-value < .05.****p* < .001, ***p* < .01, **p* < .05.

Experiences of violence were similar across the full national and priority samples; however, differences were observed for some variables when comparing the transactional sex subgroups (Table 2). Lifetime physical violence victimization was 46.70% (95% CI: 38.53–54.86) in the full national sample and 44.70% (95% CI: 39.27–50.14) in the full priority sample. Prevalence disaggregated by perpetrator ranged from 9.77% and 7.87% from authority figures to 37.48% and 33.39% from peers in the full national and priority samples, respectively. Only one physical violence variable differed when examining CI results between males with and without a lifetime history of transactional sex in the priority sample; in the priority dataset, 67.05% of males who engaged in transactional sex experienced peer violence (95% CI: 46.42–87.67) compared to 32.71% of males who did not have that lifetime experience (95% CI: 27.48–37.94). Lifetime physical violence perpetration against non-intimate partners was 22.78% (95% CI: 17.26–28.31) in the full national samples and 16.29% (95% CI: 12.09–20.4) in the full priority sample.

Lifetime sexual violence victimization was 12.54% (95% CI: 8.59–16.48) in the full national samples and 14.42% (95% CI: 10.23–18.60) in the full priority sample. In the priority sample, 58.39% of males who engaged in transactional sex experienced sexual violence (95% CI: 33.74–83.03) compared to 13.59% of males who did not have that lifetime experience (95% CI: 9.43–17.75). Lifetime emotional violence victimization was 15.92% (95% CI: 11.77–20.06) in the full national samples and 16.02% (95% CI: 11.79–20.25) in the full priority sample. In both samples, males who engaged in transactional sex experienced higher prevalence of emotional violence (51.35% and 56.01%) compared to males who did not have that lifetime experience (15.05% and 15.26%).

Similar to direct violence experiences, experiences of witnessing violence were similar across samples but not consistently similar between subgroups. Witnessing violence outside of the home was experienced more than witnessing violence inside of the home in both samples. Over half of respondents in the full national (57.36%) and priority (55.39%) samples witnessed violence outside of the home compared to 31.38% and 26.89% who had witnessed violence inside of the home in the full national and priority samples, respectively. Moreover, the most common form of violence witnessed outside of the home was community violence in both the full national (54.7%; 95% CI: 48.43–60.98) and full priority samples (51.64%; 95% CI: 45.74–57.55). The most common form of violence witnessed inside of the home in both the full national (24.65%; 95% CI: 18.34–30.97) and full priority samples (19.72%; 95% CI: 0.14.38–25.06) was violence perpetrated by a parent against a sibling. Multiple variables differed when examining results between males with and without a lifetime history of transactional sex including witnessing community violence, witnessing violence inside of the home, witnessing violence outside of the home, and witnessing violence inside and/or outside of the home. Males with a lifetime history of transactional sex were more likely to witness each of these forms of violence.

Tables 3 and 4 show results from the regression analyses. When controlling for covariates, findings in Table 3 reveal that males with a lifetime history of transactional sex in the national and priority samples, respectively, have 5.23 (95% CI: 2.06–13.32) and 5.41 (95% CI: 1.07–27.38) greater odds of experiencing physical intimate partner violence. Moreover, males with a lifetime history of transactional sex have 7.23 (95% CI: 2.23–23.48) and 8.74 (95% CI: 2.83–26.93) greater odds of experiencing

emotional violence by caregivers in the national and priority samples, respectively. Each of the other forms of physical violence were significantly associated with lifetime history of transactional sex in either the national (caregiver and authority figure physical violence) or priority samples (peer physical violence and sexual violence); however, no other form of violence victimization was consistently associated with transactional sex in both samples. Findings did not reveal significant associations between lifetime history of transactional sex and physical violence perpetration in either sample.

Findings in Table 4 reveal more consistent associations between lifetime history of transactional sex and witnessing violence. Witnessing father-on-mother violence and witnessing internal conflict were the only two outcomes that were *not* associated with lifetime history of transactional sex in both the national and priority samples. Findings reveal that males with a lifetime history of transactional sex in the national and priority samples, respectively, have 4.99 (95% CI: 1.44–17.30) and 4.42 (95% CI: 1.34–14.56) greater odds of witnessing violence inside of the household. Moreover, males with a lifetime history of transactional sex have 20.78 (95% CI: 4.75–90.91) and 7.82 (95% CI: 2.11–28.99) greater odds of witnessing violence outside of the household in the national and priority samples, respectively.

Discussion

We examined the associations between transactional sex and experiences of violence among adolescent boys and young men in Colombia. The ubiquity of violence among this socially marginalized population is concerning, as findings from both national and priority samples revealed exacerbated risk for experiencing and witnessing multiple forms of violence. Adolescent boys and young men with a lifetime history of transactional sex were significantly more likely to experience violence victimization, particularly intimate partner violence (national adjusted odds ratio [aOR]: 5.23, 95% CI 2.06–13.32; priority aOR: 5.41, 95% CI 1.07–27.38) and parent or caregiver emotional violence (national aOR: 7.23, 95% CI 2.23–23.48; priority aOR: 8.74, 95% CI 2.83–26.93), than those without a lifetime history of transactional sex. Our findings also inform a gap in evidence examining the linkage between transactional sex and the broader violence environment among young males, as those with a lifetime history of transactional sex were significantly more likely to have witnessed violence within the home (national aOR: 4.99, 95% CI 1.44–17.30; priority aOR: 4.42, 95% CI 1.34–14.56) and outside of the home (national aOR: 20.78, 95% CI 4.75–90.91; priority aOR: 7.82, 95% CI 2.11–28.99).

By demonstrating that transactional sex was associated with experiencing and witnessing violence, our findings reveal a concerning exposure to violence among this population across multiple levels of the ecosystem. Since our transactional sex and violence variables measured lifetime experiences using cross-sectional data, we cannot determine directional linkages between these experiences. Nevertheless, exploring this violence exposure among adolescent boys and young men has important implications for service provision in Colombia nationally but also especially in the priority municipalities that have historically been affected by conflict. Below, we posit explanations and implications for potential causal pathway in either direction (e.g., transactional sex or violence having causal effect), as well as a noncausal association (i.e., mutual existence of transactional sex and violence with shared confounder).

We first hypothesize how *transactional sex may have a causal effect on violence*, particularly direct violence victimization. Given the prevalence of corporal punishment in Colombia [30] and despite recent progressive legislation against its use in the home [31], caregivers who know their son is engaging in transactional sex may use physical or emotional violence as an expression of disapproval. Research has already demonstrated that caregivers may encourage masculine or externalizing behaviors among their sons [32], so it is possible that physical violence may be used as a mechanism to conversely dissuade or punish perceived affronts to masculine behavior. Authority figures may similarly express disapproval through violence or may use violence as a retaliatory response to engagement in or refusal of transactional sex. Although less explored among males, intimate partners who broker their partner's sexual transactions may use violence to retaliate against and manipulate their partner(s) to engage in transactional sex [33]. Bearing in mind these myriad ways that transactional sex may cause violence based on relational dynamics, it is important that violence prevention and response programs deeply understand the social network of adolescent boys and young men at risk of engagement in transactional sex.

There are also reasons to hypothesize that *violence may have a causal effect on transactional sex*. Violence in early life has a downstream impact on well-being [34] which could, in turn, become a risk factor for future transactional sex. Research has already demonstrated that adult men who engage in transactional sex are more likely to report history of childhood sexual abuse than those who have not engaged in transactional sex [6,35,36]. In our analysis, males with a lifetime history of transactional sex had between 7.23 and 8.74 greater odds of experiencing lifetime emotional violence by caregivers in the national and priority sample, respectively. The high prevalence of emotional violence is worth highlighting because of the acutely negative consequences of experiencing emotional violence by a caregiver during childhood [37]. This finding speaks to a potential vulnerability in this population that could make young males more susceptible to resorting to risky sexual behaviors or other outward displays of emotional distress. Research has demonstrated that externalized behaviors, such as risky behavior and perpetrating violence, are associated with childhood trauma [38]; however, our findings do not report significant associations between transactional sex and violence perpetration. Instead, our findings beg the consideration of engagement in transactional sex as a potential externalized behavior resulting from childhood trauma.

A final position to consider is that, rather than having a causal pathway, *the linkage between transactional sex and violence may not be causal*. For example, unemployment may be a salient structural driver of both transactional sex and violence victimization. One study from Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries in Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain, and Portugal among adult men engaged in transactional sex found that country-level unemployment was significantly associated with engagement in transactional sex [6], while another study found that poverty was significantly associated with violence which could increase exposure to witnessing violence within and outside of the home [39]. At the individual level, another potential confounder of violence and transactional sex includes risky behaviors, such as drug use [40]. By addressing these and other potential confounders, the overall rate of violence and transactional sex may be simultaneously reduced. Given these environmental and personal complexities, taking a systems

perspective is important to understanding what renders adolescent boys and young men at risk.

These findings support the importance of addressing transactional sex at or near the onset of this behavior, during adolescence and young adulthood, to mitigate the future harms that are known to be associated with sustained engagement in transactional sex [5]. Many of the hypothesized pathways may also be applicable for other types of violence, implying that addressing root causes of violence exposure among this population may mitigate violence exposure among other populations. More holistically framed research is needed to disentangle the role of transactional sex within the broader violence experienced during early adolescence and young adulthood, as well as incorporating a person-centered perspective within research to understand the extent that transactional sex is or is not a priority issue for individuals who experience it.

Although a nuanced understanding of potential pathway(s) will inform better tailored programing and policies, early intervention is likely crucial to mitigate against the harms from transactional sex [5–8] and exposure to violence [34,41]. Moreover, sexual health should be integrated within programing for adolescent boys and young men engaged in transactional sex or at risk of engaging in transactional sex. This is particularly powerful in this context considering that these males may be transacting sex with other males [11] and that men who have sex with men in Latin America have 30 times greater odds of HIV infection than men in the general population [42]. More generally, sexually transmitted infections are known correlates with transactional sex along with substance use, mental health challenges, and violence victimization [5–8]. What this means is that holistic programing with an immediate focus on sexual health is essential given the multitude of ways that engagement in transactional sex can harm adolescent boys and young men.

Limitations

Limitations of our findings should be carefully considered. As highlighted in the Discussion section, the cross-sectional nature of the data is a temporal limitation that impedes our ability to make causal inference. Future research endeavoring to explore the hypothesized pathways should collect longitudinal data to better understand the position of transactional sex within the complex epidemic of violence among children and youth. The reliance on a binary lifetime variable was due, in part, to the limited frequency in reporting lifetime or past 12-month transactional sex among adolescent males and young men in Colombia. We also considered modeling lifetime engagement in transactional sex as a rare event; however, the frequency was higher than what would normally be utilized for Firth modeling. Instead, we elected to assess the robustness of findings of an uncommon experience, lifetime history of transactional sex among males aged 13–24, by replicating the analysis in both the national and priority samples. Another important limitation to consider is the self-reported nature of these data. Given the sensitivity of questions asked in the VACS, including the questions examining transactional sex engagement, it is important to consider reporting biases such as social desirability bias.

Conclusion

Examining violence exposure among adolescent boys and young men in Colombia with a lifetime history of transactional

sex is important for understanding their unique circumstances, as well as informing interventions to better fit the needs of this marginalized population. Although more research is needed to determine the extent of causal pathways, our findings highlight the ubiquity of violence and the criticality of supporting this group of adolescent boys and young men. Interventions for those with a history of transactional sex should address factors that may contribute to the stigmatization and marginalization, as well as drivers of violence and transactional sex. By focusing on this population, we hope to shed light on the varied ways that life experiences can shape violence and vice versa.

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