
Background Previous research into age-related variables relevant to girls and young women being involved in commercial sexual exploitation (including prostitution) has not distinguished between its onset and limitation to adolescence and its early onset and persistence into adult life. 

Aims: The aims of this study were to examine variables associated with adolescent versus adult onset of commercial sexual exploitation and identify potential risk and resiliency factors differentiating adolescence-limited sexual exploitation and early-onset-adult persistent exploitation. Method: Interviews with 174 vulnerable mostly African-American women, 23% of whom reported commercial sexual exploitation in adolescence and/or adulthood, yielded data, which were analysed using multinomial logistic regressions. Results: Adolescent sexual victimisation, younger age at first alcohol/drug use, being a victim of intimate partner violence and sense of stigmatisation of sexual self/others were all variables associated with adolescent onset of commercial sexual exploitation. Educational attainment differentiated adolescence limited from adolescent-adult persistent exploitation; exploitation had ceased by adulthood among over two-thirds of those who completed at least high school education, but only 13% of those exploited into adult life had finished high school. Conclusions and implications for practice: • As level of education was linked to cessation of exploitation by adulthood, support for vulnerable girls to complete education at least to high school level may be protective. • The link between early onset of substance misuse and persistent exploitation suggests that education and support specifically targeted within this field could reduce likelihood of persistent abuse. Work directed at improvement of self-image may also reduce risk of persistent exploitation.