

Surviving the Streets: Experiences of LGBTQ Youth, YMSM, YWSW Engaged in Survival Sex

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TERMINOLOGY

Youth engaged in survival sex: The terms “youth engaged in survival sex” and “youth who exchange sex for money and/or material goods (e.g. shelter, food drugs, etc.)” are used here to reflect young people’s experiences of involvement in the commercial sex market in their own terms. These terms describe a behavior as opposed to labeling the youth themselves.



METHODS

- Interviews with N=283 LGBTQ youth, YMSM, YWSW
- Eligibility criteria:
 - 13-21 years old, self-identified as LGBTQ, YMSM or YWSW
 - involved in survival sex in NYC (i.e., receives payment in the form of cash or other in-kind payment in exchange for sex and trades in the New York City area)
- Respondent driven sampling: participants recruit other youth to the study
- Worked in partnership with Streetwise and Safe (SAS), a New York City based organization
- Researchers trained youth leaders to conduct in-depth interviews
- Anonymous and confidential



FINDINGS

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS: BIRTHPLACE

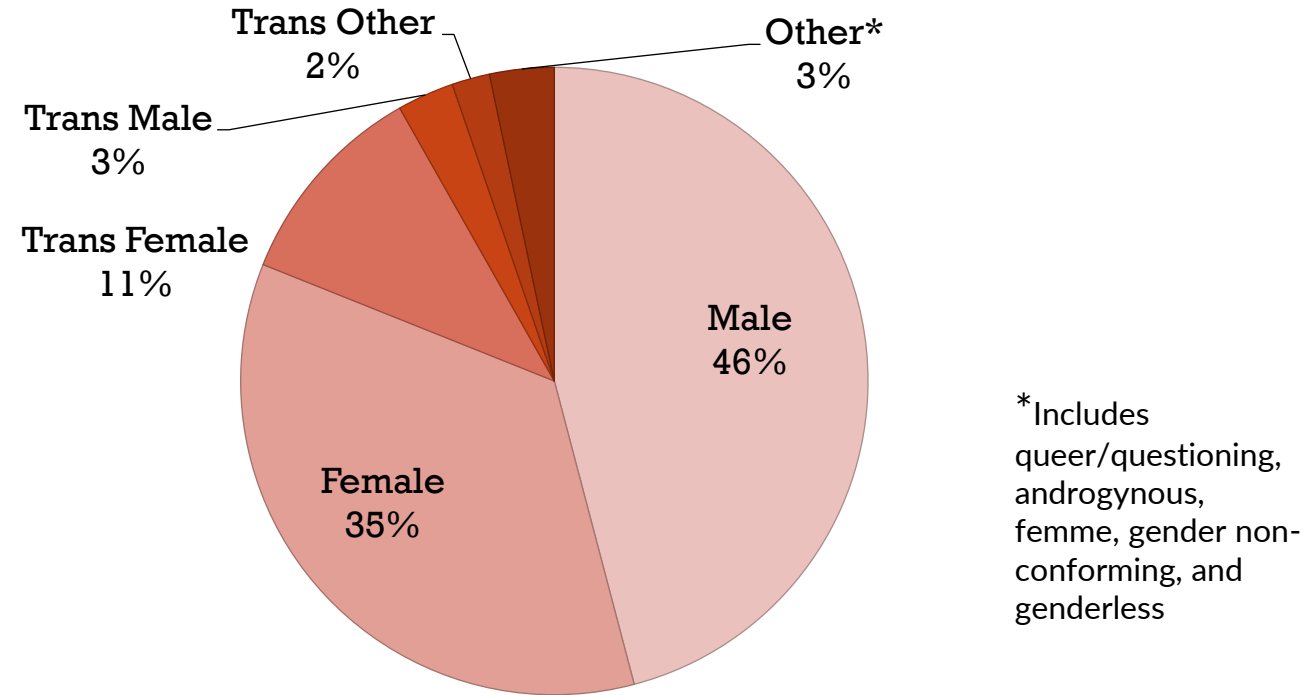
- 2 in 3 youth were born (63%) and/or raised (65%) in New York City.



- Approximately 3 in 4 respondents were born and/or raised in the tri-state area of New York City, New Jersey and Connecticut.



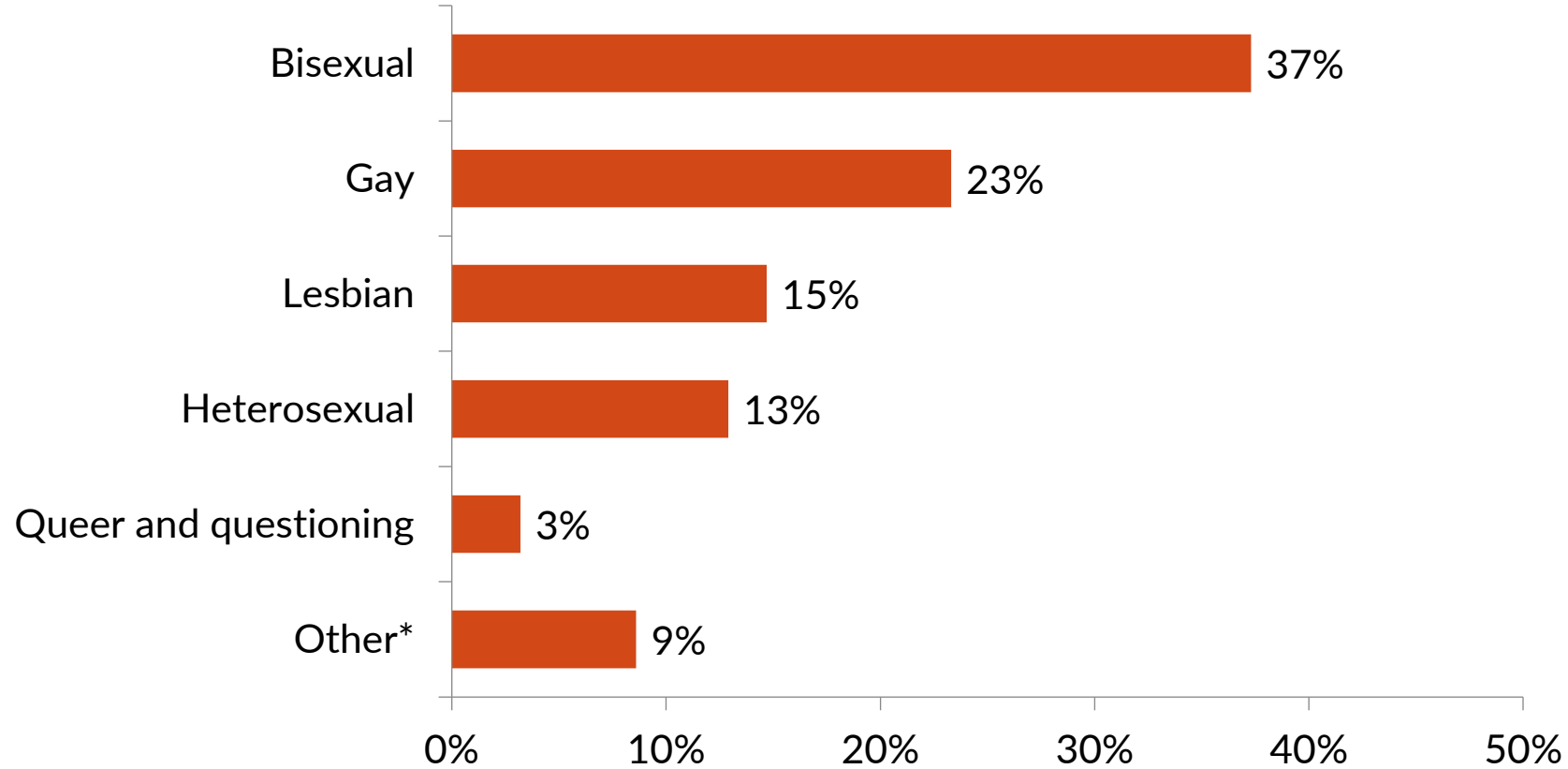
GENDER



- Half identified as male, one-third as female
- 11% identified as transgender female, 3% identified as transgender male



SEXUAL ORIENTATION

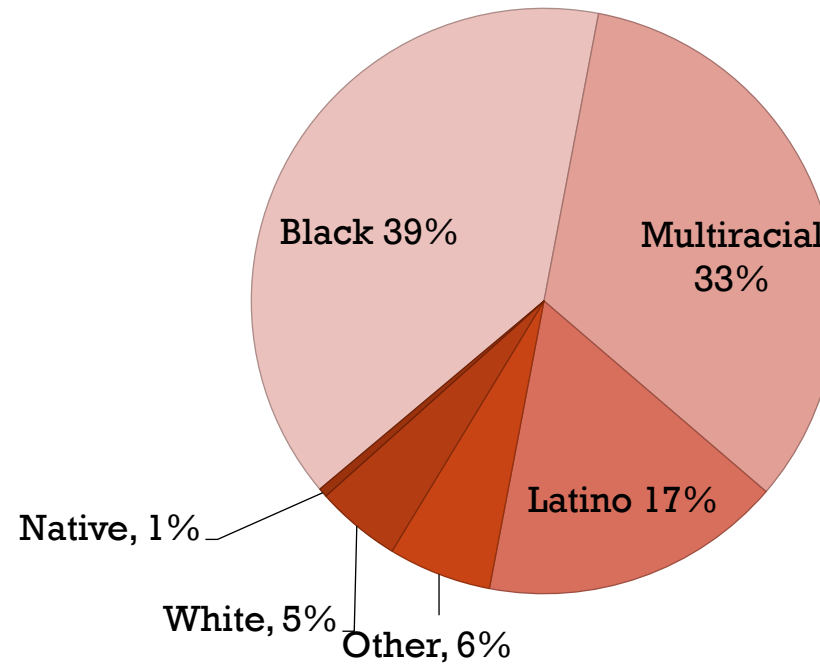


- 38% identified as gay or lesbian
- 13% identified as straight
- 37% identified as bisexual

*Includes open, pansexual, no preference, and no label



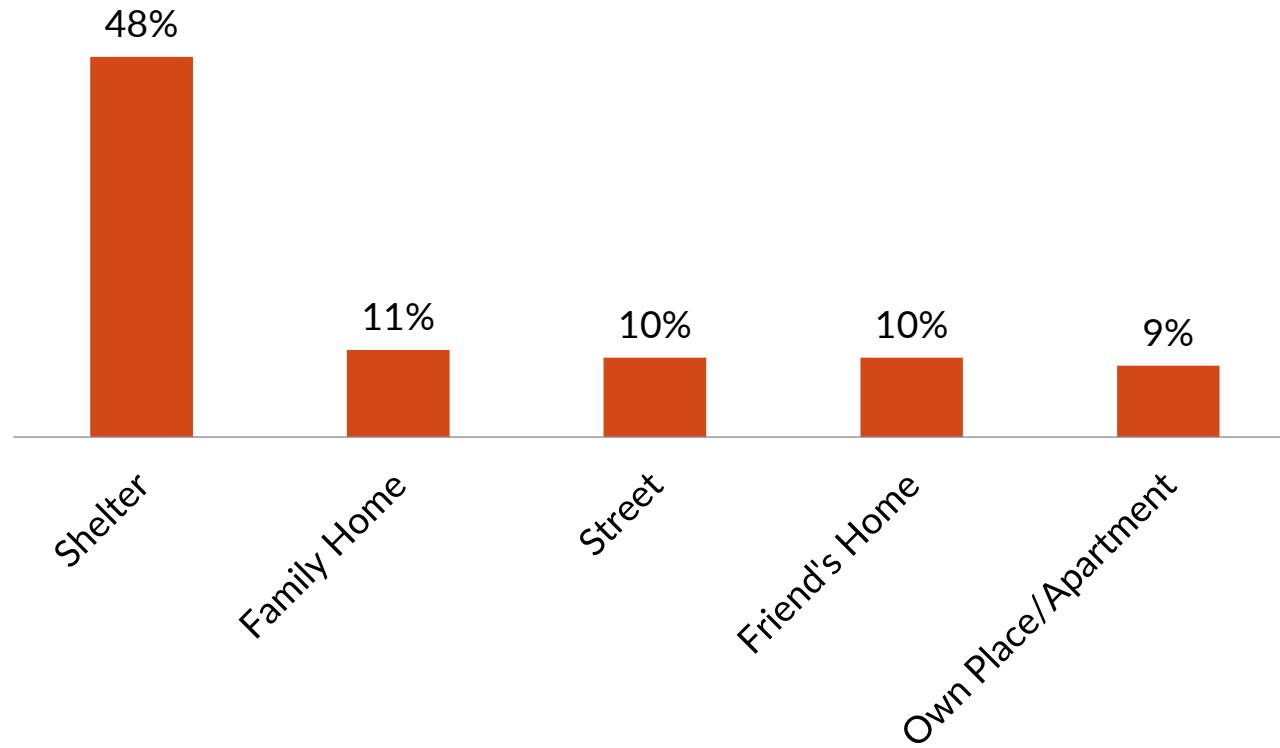
RACE



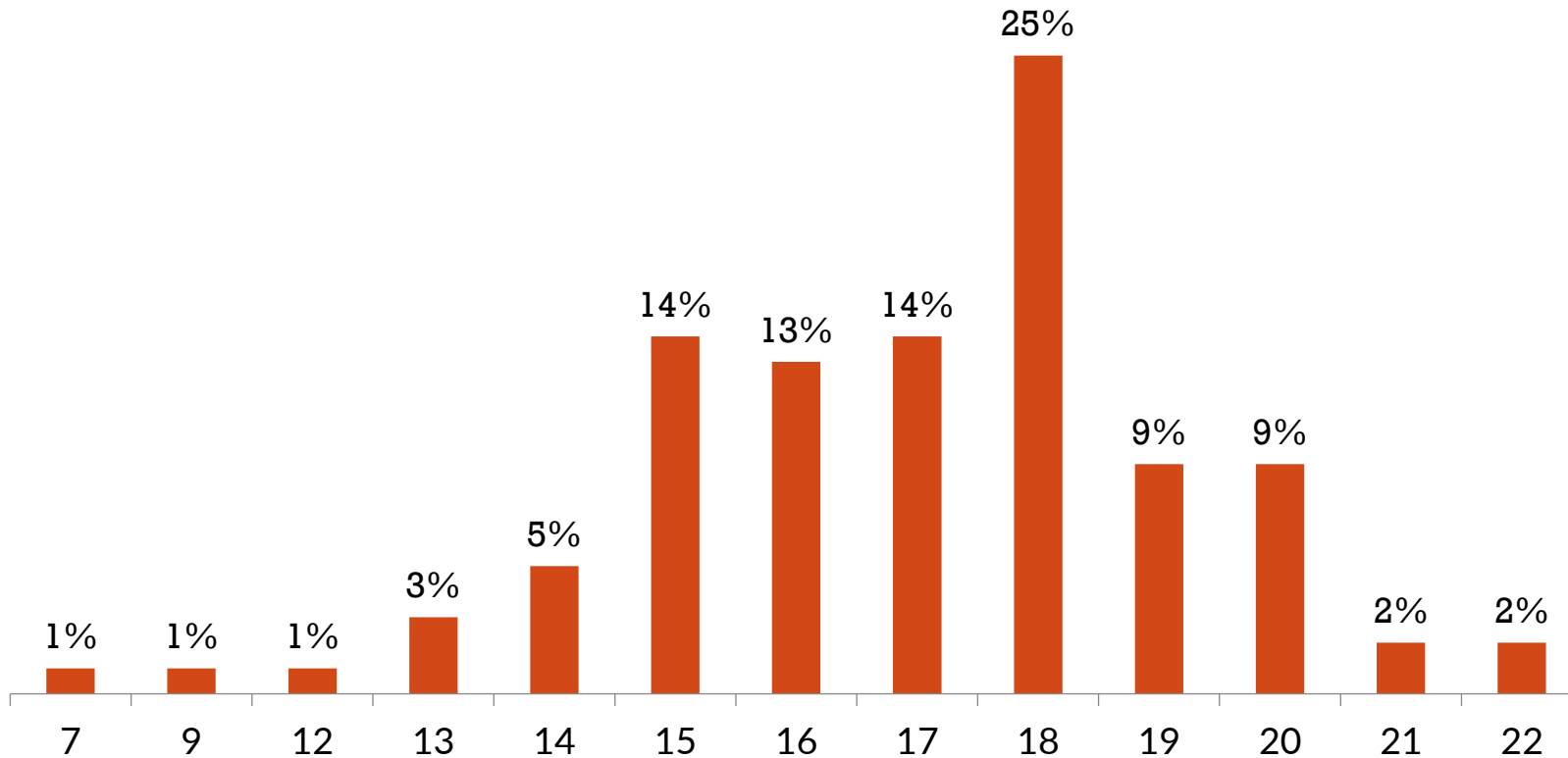
- Majority of youth were people of color
- 39 % identified as Black/African-American
- 17% as Hispanic/Latino
- 33% with more than one race and/or ethnicity (most commonly Black and Latino)



LIVING SITUATION



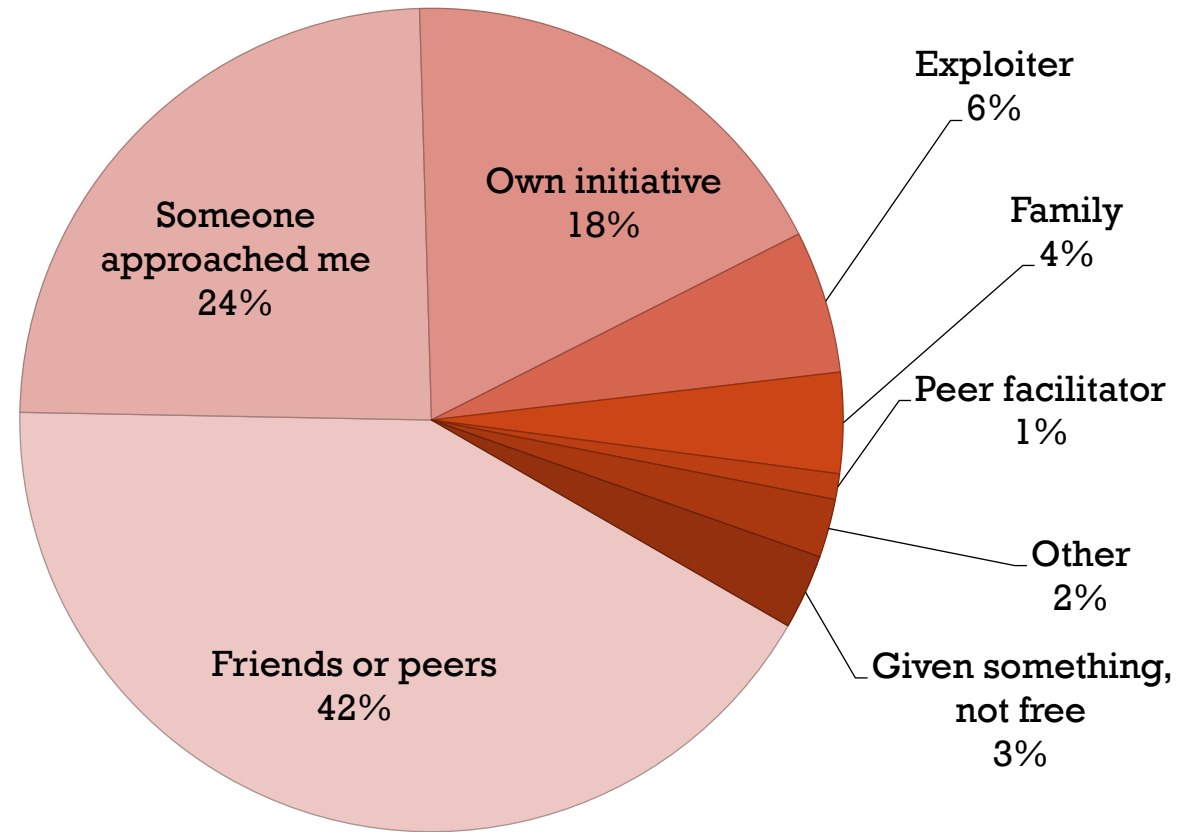
AGE FIRST ENGAGED IN SURVIVAL SEX



- Average age was 17 years old
- Most youth were 15 to 18; full range was 7 to 22



HOW FIRST ENGAGED IN SURVIVAL SEX



HOW I GOT INVOLVED

“I don’t remember it that vividly, all I know is just that I was starving. ...My friend was like, ‘come to the stroll, trust me, you’ll get somebody.’ I was hungry, I was cold, so I did it.”

- *21 years old, black, gay, male*



HOW I GOT INVOLVED

[I didn't really think about], you know, trading sex for anything whenever I first moved here. And then when I got here, I realized that it was just so popular because there were so many people in my situation that were unemployed and they needed money and that it was just so widely, you know, it was so easy to get into. I was a very conservative person. I didn't really think about doing that but times got really, really hard and I didn't eat for about a week and I didn't have anywhere to stay. I was sneaking on the train and so I decided that I was going to clean myself up a little bit. Decided to go out there and do what I have to do.

- *21 years old, white, straight, transsexual*



HOW I GOT INVOLVED

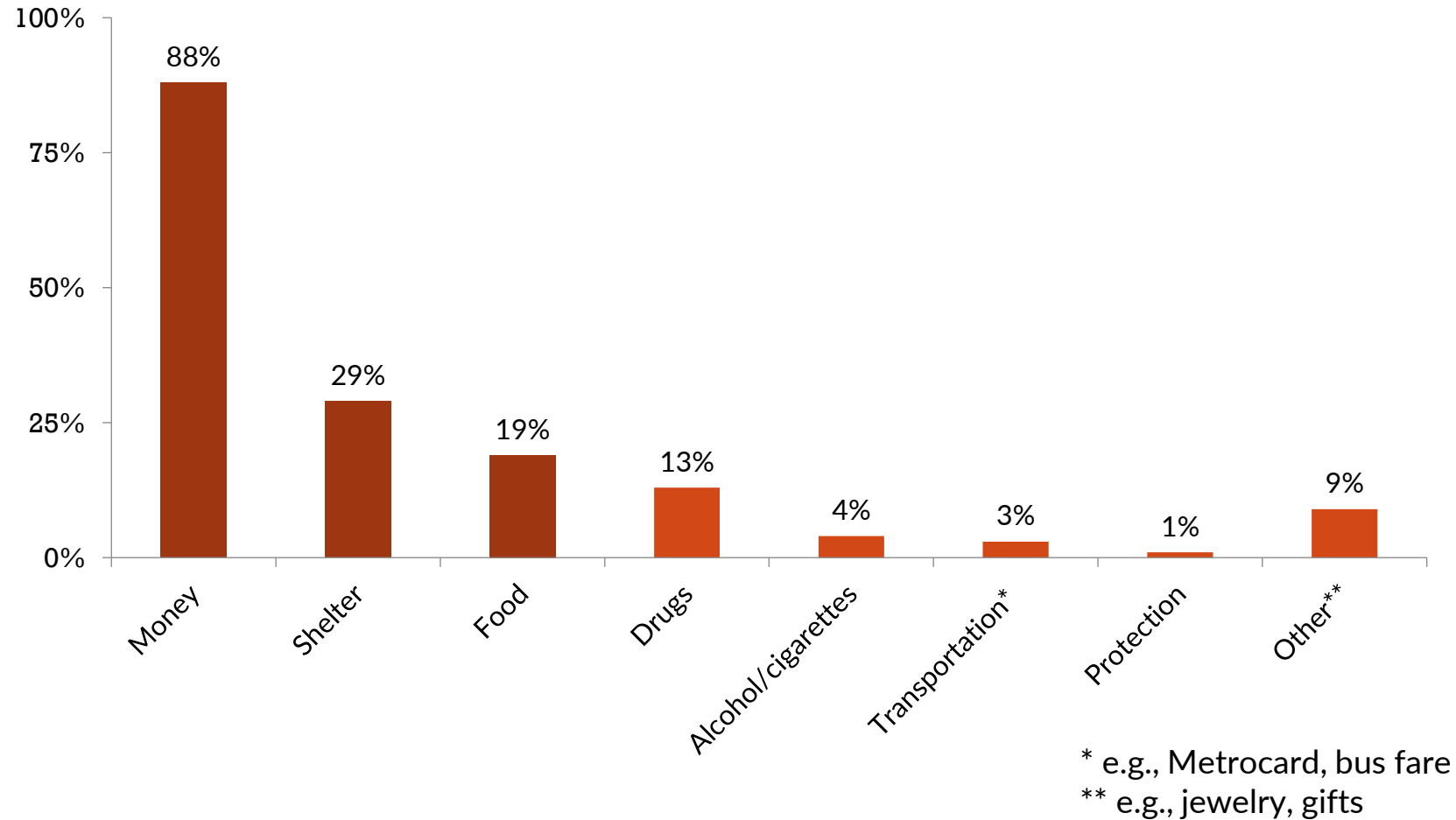
It came to the point where my mother had kicked me out of the house, and I was staying with him. So pretty much he was paying everything for me, so I really didn't really have a choice. I didn't know how to handle it, because he was still basically giving me my financial needs, so I couldn't—I would say no then he just came like, “I know you need to take care of your girlfriend” and stuff like that and I couldn't . . . I couldn't say no, because at the time she was pregnant . . . I figured I am sacrificing myself, my body for somebody else—I felt like I'm doing a good thing.

■

20 years old, black, male, heterosexual



WHAT DO YOU RECEIVE IN EXCHANGE FOR A SEXUAL ACT



SITUATIONS INVOLVING AN EXPLOITER

**14.5% of youth had been in an
exploitative situation involving a
trafficker**

(evidence of force, fraud and coercion)

FEELINGS ABOUT TRADING SEX

DESIRE TO STOP ENGAGING IN SURVIVAL SEX

- 72% of youth reported wanting to stop at some point or immediately
- 21% said they had already stopped
- 7 % said they had no desire to stop



COMPLEXITIES

There are many positive things about trading sex. You can trade sex for the life of your kids, you can trade sex to keep your apartment, you can trade sex to feed yourself...Some people think that the sex trade is the worst thing you to do cause your selling yourself...but when it boils down to it, if you have no food in your stomach, if you have no transportation, but you have a man in your face willing to give you money for a half hour, you put your pride to the side, you throw everything out the window and you forget who you are and you forget what you're doing and you learn to be someone else.

19 years old ,Latino, gay, male



POSITIVES OF TRADING

It's not as bad as sleeping under the bridge, it's not as bad as going without food, it's not as bad as walking around slanging [selling cocaine or other narcotics]. It's not as bad as being that person without, period.

- *19 years old, Latina & Black, bisexual, female*



NEGATIVES OF TRADING

First there's the safety issue; you don't know what's going on...you don't basically have control over the situation in a way, so you never know if this person might physically abuse you [...] It also brings out your fear because you never know what's going to happen. There's also the nervousness about what will happen if your friends find out, how they will look at you or stuff like that. [..] there is a whole emotional aspect to it and that's because it's like it's a memory that's scarred in to your life and it's hard to cope with it especially how like you have to keep things away from friends or family, and it's like its hard and even if you open up to some people, it's like you don't know how they are going to react and it's something you always want to release, so it's really hard.

■ *21 years old, Latino, bisexual, male*



DESIRE TO STOP ENGAGING IN SURVIVAL SEX

I just need my own apartment and stuff, I need my own apartment a stable job like not even a stable job, I [would] work at Burger King if it could pay my rent, and pay my little expenses and [with] a little left over yeah, I would do that...I'm not a complex person. I'm very content with my life.

■ *21 years old, gay, black, male*



CRIMINAL JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT

RUN-INS WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT

- Over two-thirds (71%) of the sample reported having had a run-in (stop, question and/or frisk or other police encounter) with law enforcement.
 - Most (51%) reported that they happened rarely (e.g., couple times per year).
 - Over a quarter (26%) said such encounters happened occasionally (e.g., couple times per month).
 - 19 percent said they happened frequently (e.g., couple times per week)



FREQUENT RUN-INS

Interviewer: How often have you had run-ins with the police?

Interviewee: Oh God almost every day. I'll try to sleep on the train, I wake up to police, I try to sleep in abandoned buildings, wake up to police, walk down the street - the police walk up to me.

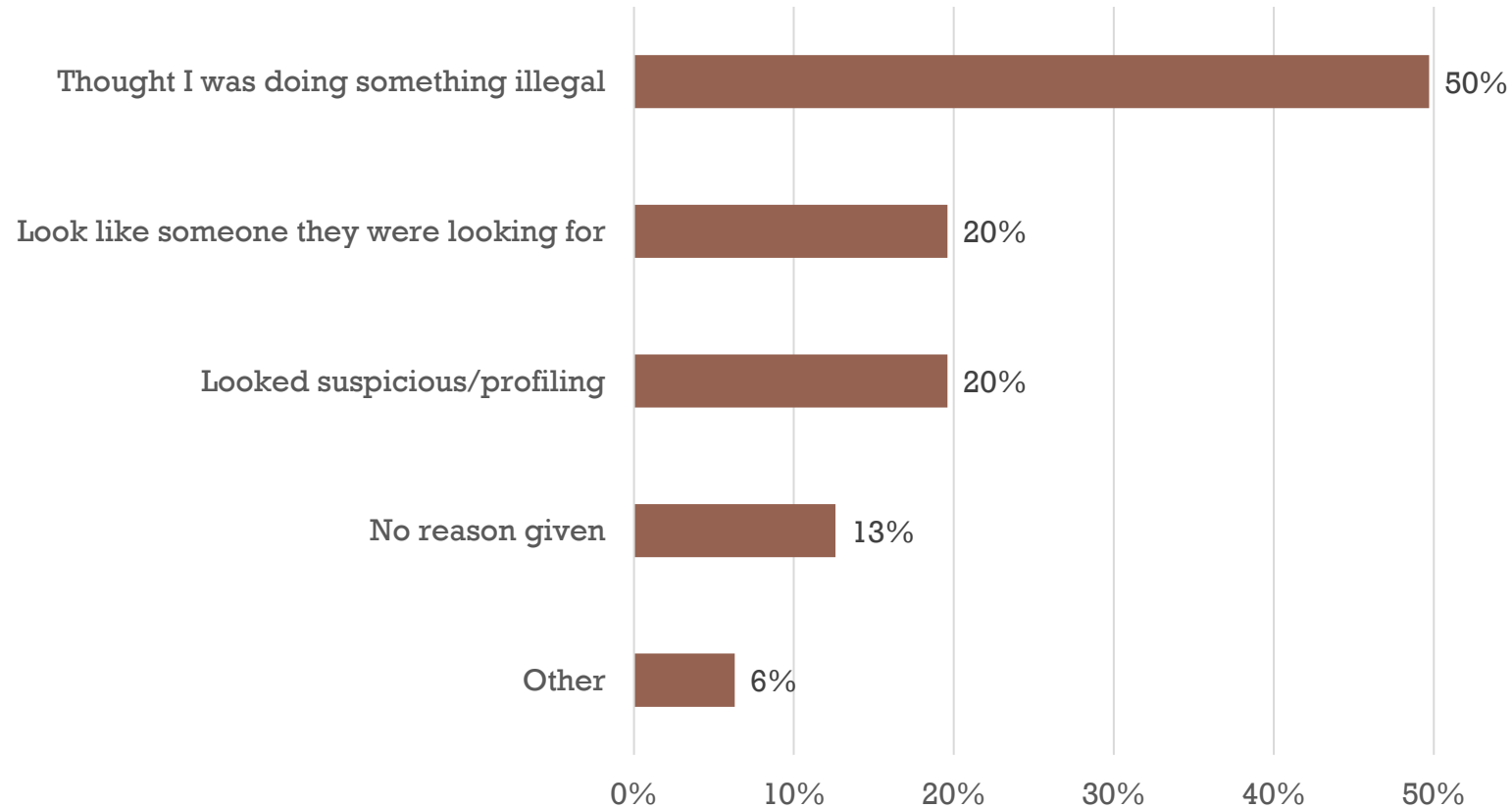
Interviewer: And how long would you say you have been having interactions with the police like that every day?

Interviewee: Since I was young...[since] I was 14, I don't know, they'll always find something.

20 years old, bisexual Latino male



REASONS POLICE GAVE FOR STOPPING YOUTH



Notes: “Other” includes having a large bag on the subway, being with someone suspicious, and keeping the community safe; $n = 143$ of the 198 youth who reported run-ins with police.



FITTING A DESCRIPTION

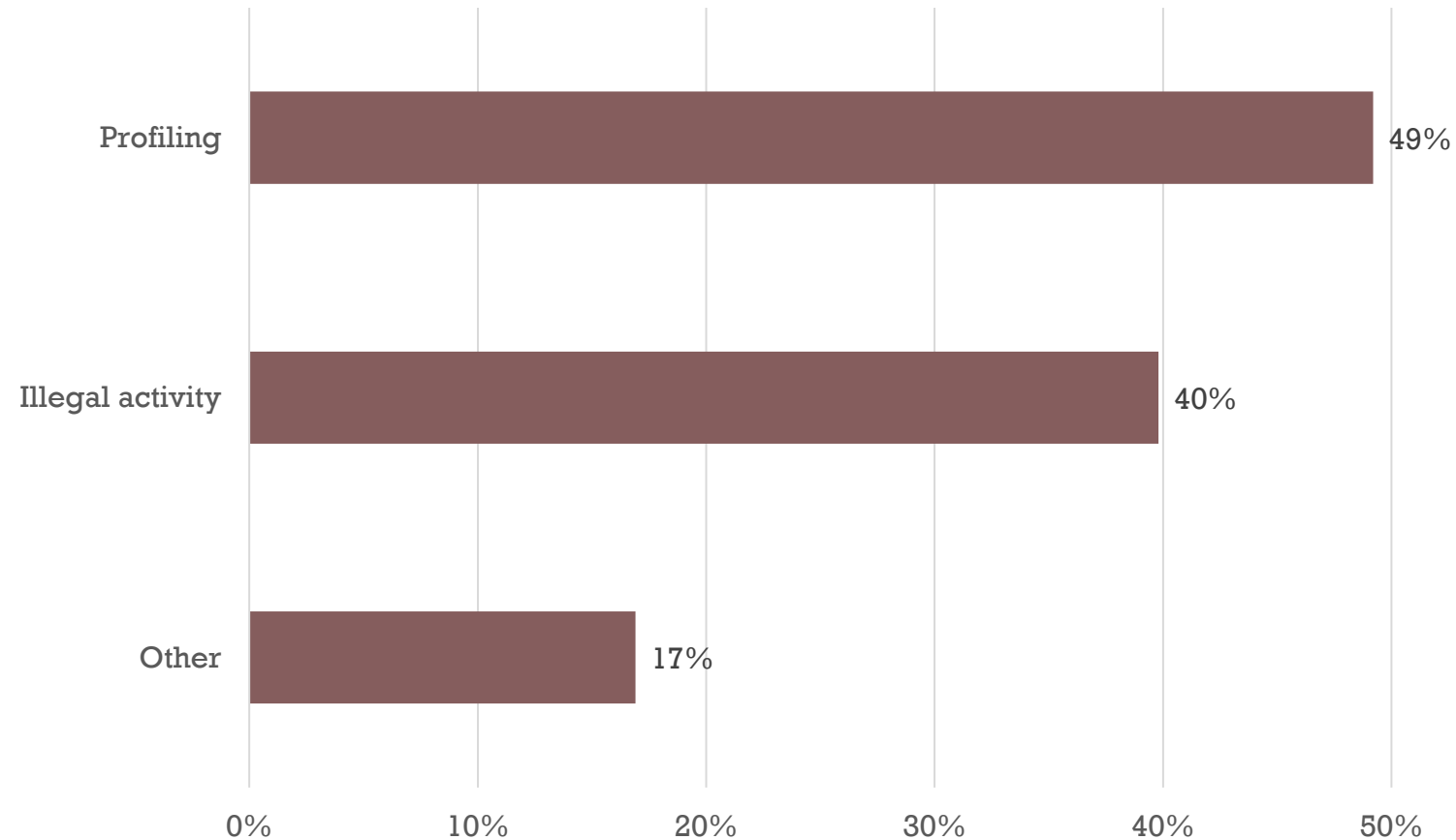
Interviewee: The last time I fit the description of whoever, somebody called the police and told them that a black male was walking across who had a grey hoody, a black bandana, and he was armed and dangerous, and assaulted a woman. I left the house five minutes [before I was stopped]. I'm the only person on the street and I happen to be black, I am wearing a grey hoodie, a grey hat, grey pants and grey sneakers, so I over-matched the description even though I didn't have a handgun or assault no woman. I had marijuana on me.

Interviewer: What ended up happening as a result of them stopping you?

Interviewee: I went to jail. Got possession charges.

--20 years old, gay, multi-racial, male

WHY YOUTH THOUGHT POLICE STOPPED THEM



Notes: “Other” includes looking young, checking big bags, making sure a youth was safe, and mistaken identity; $n = 118$ of the 198 youth who reported run-ins with police.



PROFILING

Interviewee: I only got stopped and frisked twice.

Interviewer: For what?

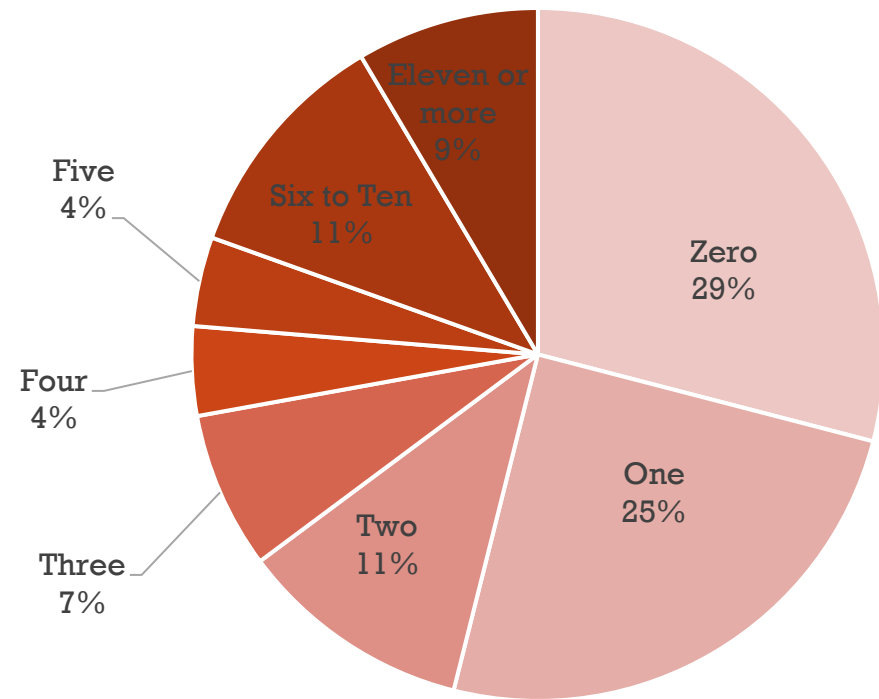
Interviewee: Prostitution. They thought I was going to get into a car but I really didn't because I already knew they [the police] were coming through the blocks.

Interviewer: So you said it happened twice, why do you think they stopped you?

Interviewee: Because they were being judgmental

-- 20 years old, Afro-Caribbean, bisexual, male

NUMBER OF ARRESTS



■ 0 ■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5 ■ 6 to 10 ■ 11 or more



FREQUENCY OF ARRESTS

Interviewer: How many times have you been arrested?

Interviewee: As an adult or in my life?

Interviewer: In your life.

Interviewee: More than all your fingers and toes and my fingers and toes and probably all my friends. *Interviewer:* And so you're saying you've been arrested what 20, 40 times?

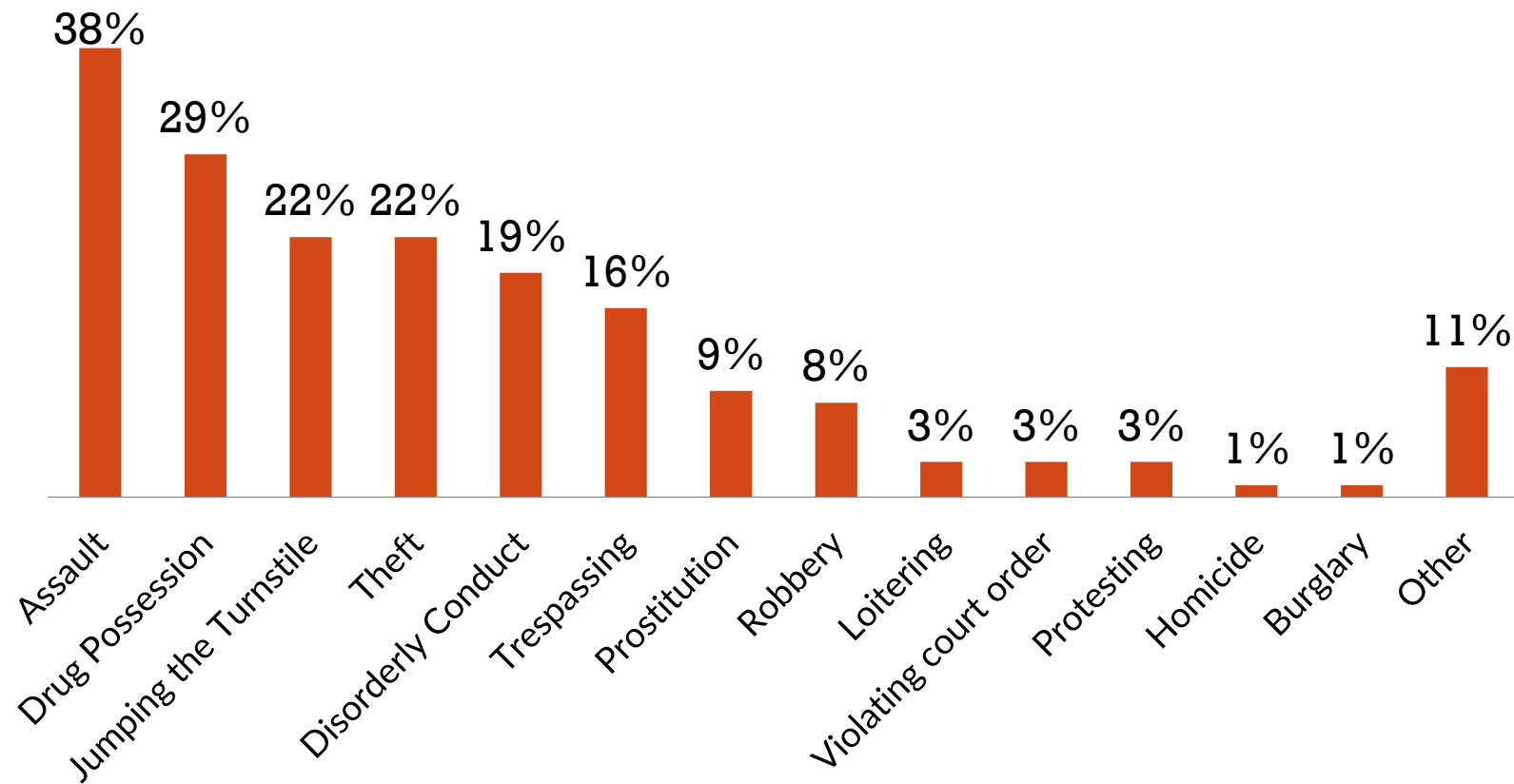
Interviewee: Like 75. I went to juvenile prison.

Interviewer: Okay, okay, so when did you start getting arrested?

Interviewee: When I was 12.

21 years old, pansexual, multiracial, female

ARREST CHARGES



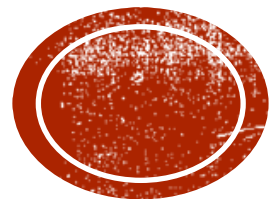
ARREST EXPERIENCE

Interviewee: He started choking me before we got in the patrol car, so I was upset about that. But I went about it the wrong way I was just screaming and acting a fool and flailing, had I been quiet and just you know remembered his number...his supervisor was even a little worried because I kept screaming, 'I'm going to do something, I remember all your badge numbers, I will write a report on you guys.'

Interviewer: How did he come to be choking you?

Interviewee: He was telling me to shut up, he was telling me to shut up because I was screaming for help. There were people watching and I said, 'somebody get help, get help, they are arresting us for no reason, get help get help.' And then he started choking me, telling me to shut up.

---20 years old, gay black and Latino male



PERCEPTIONS OF LAW ENFORCEMENT

Almost two-thirds (**63** percent) of the youth described their interactions with law enforcement as at least occasionally negative, **20** percent as neutral, and **18** percent as at least occasionally positive.

PERCEPTIONS OF LAW ENFORCEMENT

Interviewee: I don't really like them. I think they abuse their authority, and I have witnessed them treat people of my kind in a type of way.

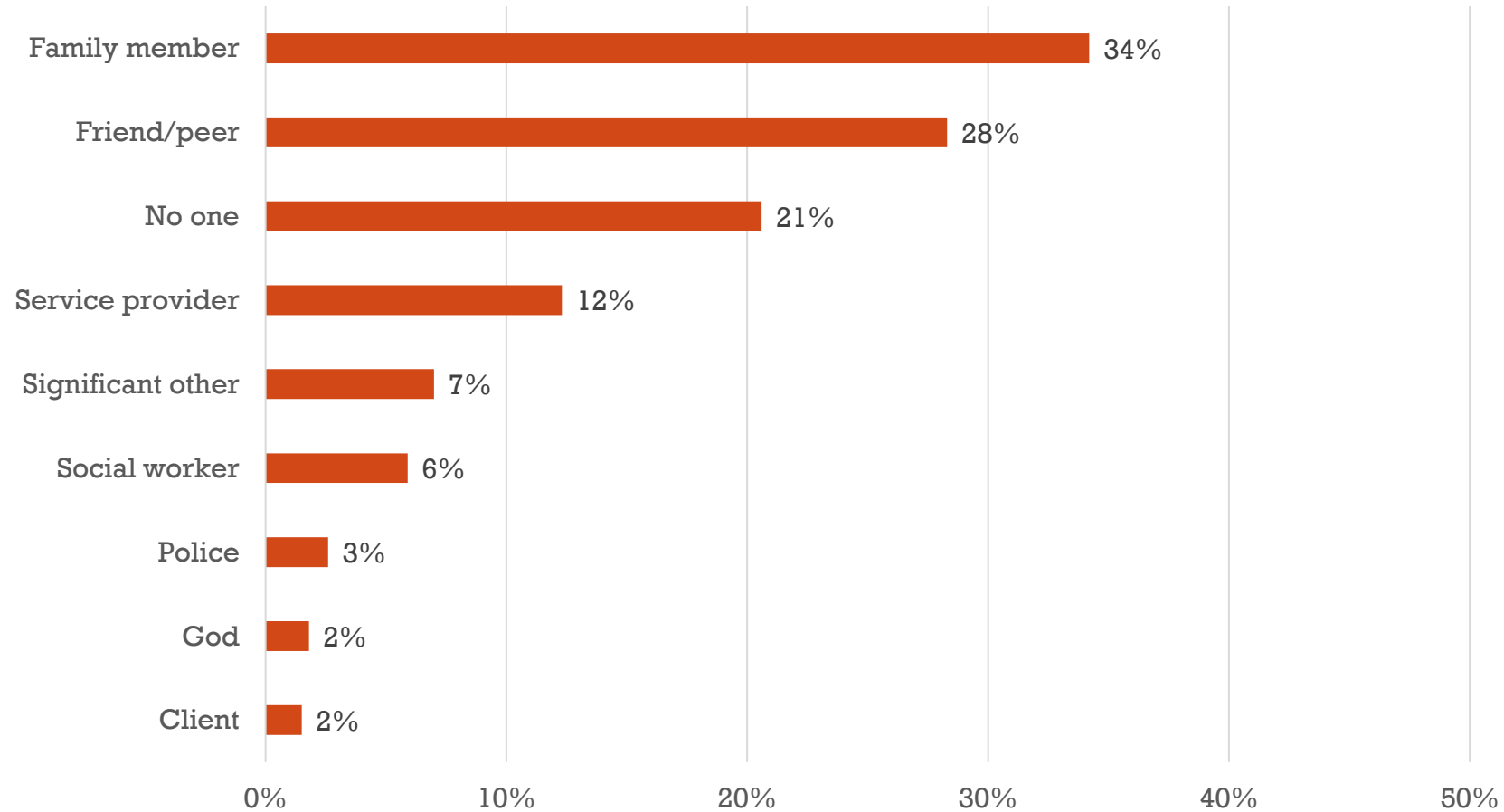
Interviewer: By people of my kind you mean . . . ?

Interviewee: Trans women. . . . If I was to get robbed at gunpoint or something, there's a great chance that I won't even report it because I'm a sex worker. And there's a great chance because I'm trans that I feel like I'm an easy target sometimes for those types of crimes because people, I feel like people really don't care what's going on with us anyway. So it's just like . . . I think they're trying their best but they'll be like, well we have to kind of wash our hands with this because you know, there's not much we can do about what happened or because the life style that they were living. It's just kind of sad, but it's true.

■

--21 years old, black, fluid, transgender female

WHO YOUTH GO TO WHEN IN TROUBLE



I HAVE NO ONE

“I try not to tell people a lot. That’s why when I cry, it just coming out cause there's so much.”

--20 years old, black, questioning, female

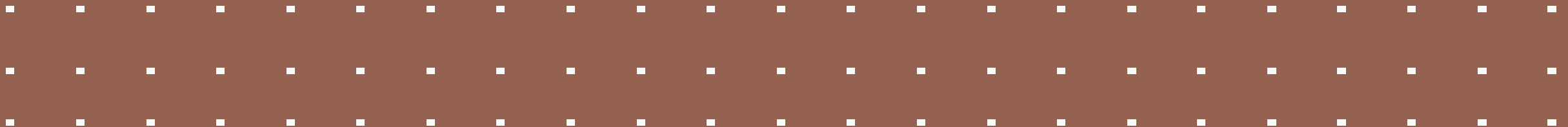
“I have trust issues with people so I don’t kind of do that . . . I write all the time. There are friends but I keep them at a distance for a reason.”

-- 18 years old, Latina, bisexual, female





CRIMINAL JUSTICE STAKEHOLDER RESPONSES



LGBTQ AFFIRMING PRACTICES/POLICIES

The lawyers are getting trained on signaling in court in an important way. They ask to approach the bench and then disclose the status of the youth. We've tried to work on educating the bar. . . . If kids don't tell you or show you—and gender-ambiguous cases are tough—if they don't tell you . . . we do training on speech and language.

-- Judge

SERVICES AND REFERRAL CHALLENGES

Because I don't want to send you somewhere and they say, oh we don't, and then you say, oh they couldn't. I need to know upfront, are you gay or are you not? Are you gay or you're not, is it dangerous or not, I need to know where to send . . . a shelter referral is dangerous . . . if you come and even if you don't self-identify, if you present as being effeminate, you're liable to get really hurt.

-- Probation Officer



ABILITY TO ASK SOGIE QUESTIONS

You would want to place [LGBTQ individuals] where they would be most comfortable and where they would be able to get something out of it. Because if you put them in a different setting, the harassment, the bickering, the jokes—it's not productive. . . . It would probably be helpful to have that category on the face sheet of our PSI, because it does come up in terms of corrections, especially if the person looks very much like a woman or looks very much like a man and has to be housed in certain facilities.

■

- Probation Officer

PERCEPTION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS

“The fantasy world that they’re living in [with] their ‘gay family’ is difficult to break. . . . We want to prevent crime, and this ‘gay family’ model sets up our grand larceny program.”

“They are interacting with harder, older youth—17 or older mostly in their 20s. They are the ones who turn those younger kids into criminals. Lots of them come from the ball scene [and are] caught up in their social network.”

“Training—both in the academy (LGBT sensitivity training)—prepares you to some extent, but for most people, if they’ve never been exposed to that scene before, they’re shocked. “



PERCEPTION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS

“We’ll arrest johns sometimes, but for the 17 and older population, they’re already committing more crimes. We get more bang for our buck in crime reduction when we arrest those people. That’s what stops the robberies.”

“Hustle starts with prostitution. If you don’t make any money doing that, then you resort to robbery. Then you move on to robbery and assault. The focus of the crime is some material good, some way to survive: money, food, shelter. Everyone has some kind of hustle—it’s which hustle they’re better at.”

PERCEPTION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS

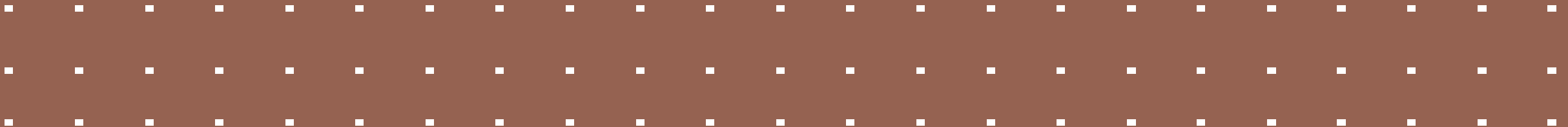
“The street activity is where we get pushback from residents. Even if they don’t care about prostitution or don’t think it should be illegal, they don’t want the activity in their neighborhood in public.”

“Law enforcement understanding is that some youth are over the age of 18 or those that are under 18 engage in survival sex out of their own volition and need, they feel that “there is very little trafficking involved, so we can’t use any of those resources.”





CHILD WELFARE INVOLVEMENT



CHILD WELFARE EXPERIENCES

I went through the ACS and that was because of my twin sister running around, being in the village and stuff, getting into trouble, getting locked up for prostituting and things like that. So, it affected me but I was old enough to know and lie to them. I lied to ACS, so they closed the case.

-- 19 year old, Male, Gay, Latino



CHILD WELFARE EXPERIENCES

My interactions with court system, the family court system, it's alright but it needs some improvement because I feel like me getting discharged from foster care and having to go into this lifestyle was unacceptable because I was prepared, I had a job, I was prepared for it and I just feel like they cut, they let me off short and it was just because of my age and that bothered me so much.

-- 19 year old, Male, Gay, Black

CHILD WELFARE EXPERIENCES

I think ACS they make matters worse. ACS never helped me. I feel like their approach is too aggressive and that the child turns into the freaking scapegoat of the family and it's just like unfortunate because ACS...don't get me wrong they do help people but like from my experience and other people's experience that I have heard about they weren't very pleasant.

-- 18 year old, Female, Queer, Mixed Race



RECOMMENDATIONS

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- Develop accessible street-based and comprehensive drop-in services and peer-led outreach.
- Improve safe and supportive short-term shelter, long-term affordable housing, and family-based placement options subject to periodic review.
- Create safe and supportive housing and placement protocols specific to transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals.
- Broaden access to and improve gender-affirming health care.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Adopt nondiscrimination, confidentiality, and complaint procedures in shelters, programs, and out-of-home placements.
- Develop living-wage employment opportunities.
- Improve food security among LGBTQ youth.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- End the Arrest-Based Response to Youth Engaged in Survival Sex, at the Federal, State, and Local Levels
- Design Law Enforcement Policies, Training, and Oversight and Accountability Measures to Improve Relationships with LGBTQ Youth, YMSM, and YWSW Engaged in Survival Sex and Decrease Police Misconduct
- Create Transparency, Oversight, and Accountability in Law Enforcement Policies, Practices, and Operations Targeting Youth Engaged in Survival Sex
- End Secure Confinement and Institutional Placements of Youth Arrested on Prostitution-Related Charges

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Guarantee Quality of Care and Periodic Review of Secure Confinement and Out-of-Home Placements
- Probation and Child Welfare Agencies Should Adopt Safe and Supportive Housing and Classification Protocols for Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming Youth
- Ensure That Youth Engaged in Survival Sex Meaningfully Participate in the Policies and Programs that Affect Their Lives
- Create Noncustodial Alternatives for Youth outside the Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Systems

