

**LAURIE SCHAFFNER**


*Associate Professor,  
Sociology; Gender and  
Women's Studies; and  
Criminology, Law, and  
Justice UIC*

Dr. Schaffner's research deploys critical perspectives of youth in trouble with the law, with an emphasis on political responses by the juvenile corrections systems, both legal and psychiatric. Her work has earned awards from the American Sociology Association, the Society for Applied Anthropology, and the American Society of Criminology.

**IRRPP:**

- *funds research*
- *trains scholars to join policy discussions*
- *collaborates on social justice projects with community organizations*
- *hosts events*
- *learn more at [irrpp.uic.edu](http://irrpp.uic.edu)*

**RACIAL HYPERSEXUALIZATION: CHICAGO  
YOUTH INVOLVED IN THE STREET SEX TRADE**
**Introduction**

The commercial sexual exploitation of children has gained immense traction in national discourse since the turn of the millennium. Millions of dollars have been invested by various government departments since the inception of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 2000.

This study of commercially sexually exploited children was part of a nationwide six-city study funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention at the Bureau of Justice aimed to detail the prevalence, characteristics, and needs of this population. Between 2011 and 2013, 252 interviews were collected with young people who either traded sex for survival, money, or other needs before the age of 18.

While the current dominant narrative focuses on the commercial sexual exploitation of young white girls, the overwhelming majority of youth who self-selected to come forward for interviews in the Chicago study were youth of color. This research therefore explored the ways in which contemporary racial hypersexualizations affect young people of color's participation in Chicago's street sex trade. Racial hypersexualization refers to the ways in which images and actions of sexual brutality against African Americans from the era of slavery to the present are deployed to denigrate, disenfranchise, and dehumanize Black people.

**Findings**

- Hypersexual racialized imaginaries of the Black body permeate our culture and have lasting effects long after they have been debunked and critiqued.
- The fetishizing of African-American sexuality has expanded in our society. Media and markets frequently present provocative images and language fetishizing African American sexuality to sell news and products to prime-time TV, digital, and press viewers.
- African American youth involved in Chicago's street sex trade adhere, participate, and perpetuate social myths regarding anti-Black racism and Black sexualities.
- Structural forces such as extreme segregation, housing instability, contemporary youth cultural imagery, and lack of access to symbolic and material resources contribute to the racial hypersexualizations of youth of color and their participation in the street sex economy.

**Recommendations**

Millions of dollars are funneled from the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, and the Department of Health and Human Services to support various state and local legislative agendas, law enforcement agencies, and NGOs, often blurring the lines among anti-terrorism/anti-immigration/and anti-trafficking, all with the goal of rescuing commercially sexually exploited children. However, this approach has not worked because many of the youth involved in the sex trade do not meet the definition of commercially sexually exploited children, which requires that the child admit they have been forced or coerced to engage in sexual behavior and testify against their trafficker. The great majority of youth involved in the study generally frame their situation as one born of the need for housing, food, meaningful work, and families and therefore they are not offered assistance as a commercially sexually exploited child. Moreover, many of those who are apprehended tend to want to escape their rescuers. Government and NGO agencies looking to effectively intervene in youth's participation in the sex trade need a more sophisticated understanding of the ways in which racism, sexism, and transmisogyny intertwine in youth participation in the sex trade. This means listening to the young people who are in a sex for survival trade about what they identify as their needs. It also means funding and supporting efforts to create critical pedagogy that interrupts and reframes Black sexuality for these youth and in our culture at large.