

Arrest and Incarceration as Turning Points in Exit From Commercial Sexual Exploitation: A Qualitative Secondary Data Analysis

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Abstract: This qualitative secondary data analysis (SDA) examined arrest and incarceration as potential turning points in the exit trajectories of women who survived commercial sexual exploitation. Narrative responses from 189 participants in a national mixed-methods dataset informed analysis of open-ended reflections on how confinement shaped safety-oriented decision-making, sobriety, and recovery efforts. Thematic analysis yielded three domains of meaning-making: enforced separation from traffickers, exploitative environments, and substances; involuntary sobriety with increased cognitive clarity; and reflective insight related to identity, safety, spirituality, and readiness for change. Survivors frequently described jail or prison as a rare period of physical protection and introspection, while also reporting post-release barriers that increased vulnerability to re-exploitation, including criminalisation of victim-related behaviours, limited trauma-informed services (TIS), and economic instability. Findings supported TIS identification within correctional settings and coordinated cross-sector responses that strengthen outreach, continuity of care, and access to housing and recovery resources. Implications include evaluating justice-system touchpoints as leverage points for sustained exit and reintegration when survivor-centred pathways are available during and immediately following confinement.

Keywords: commercial sexual exploitation, incarceration, sobriety, recidivism, survivor-informed care

Public Significance Statement

Women who survived sex trafficking described incarceration as a rare moment of safety, sobriety, and clarity that supported their desire for change. These findings emphasise the need for trauma-informed practices in correctional settings and strong collaboration with shelters and service providers. Enhancing identification, support, and continuity of care can help survivors transition from incarceration to long-term recovery.

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Criminal-legal responses to commercial sexual exploitation often occur in contexts of violence, degradation, and constrained choice, yet public discourse commonly reduces survivor behaviour to a simplistic question: “Why doesn’t she just leave?” Empirical studies have documented barriers to exit, including coercion, resource deprivation, trauma-related constraints, and system-level obstacles that limit safety-seeking options (Allert, 2021; Cimino, 2023; Pfeffer *et al.*, 2023). Scholarship has comparatively less often examined the specific moments or conditions that survivors identify as initiating readiness to pursue emancipation from trafficking. Incarceration, typically conceptualised through a punitive lens, has rarely been examined as a setting in which survivors report reflection, introspection, or readiness for change (Allert & Wyatt, 2025; Polaris Project, 2022; US Department of State, 2024a, 2024b). A criminal behaviour readership benefits from examining how these justice-system touchpoints may operate as mechanisms that shape exit trajectories.

Survivor-informed research increasingly emphasises methodologies and programming that prioritise trauma-responsive engagement and the lived realities of exploited persons (Campbell *et al.*, 2021; Cimino, 2023; Le, 2023). The present article advances that priority by foregrounding narratives in which motivations to exit emerged during incarceration and by centring survivor-identified service gaps within correctional environments. Survivor accounts highlighted the perceived necessity of visible outreach in jails and prisons and stronger partnerships with shelters and service providers capable of offering viable pathways away from exploitation. Survivor narratives also suggested that early movements toward safety, restoration, and sustained change may begin in carceral settings when separation from exploiters and substances creates a narrow window of cognitive and emotional clarity. The next section situates this contribution within the study’s purpose and analytic approach.

The present study used qualitative secondary data analysis (SDA) within the broader *Exiting Exploitation: Motivations, Helps, and Hindrances* project (Allert & Wyatt, 2025) to examine survivor reflections on arrest, incarceration, recidivism, and the experience of separation and sobriety in jail or prison contexts. Narrative responses from the Exit Motivations Survey were analysed to understand how confinement may function as both a disruptive event and a potential window for intervention. Participants described heightened awareness, spiritual awakening, fear of returning to exploitation, and a desire for a new life during enforced separation from exploiters and substances. Survivor meaning-making during confinement provided a justice-system lens on how exit readiness can emerge under constrained circumstances.

Prior scholarship has rarely examined interventions at the moment of exit and has produced a limited body of work addressing post-exit trajectories (Allert, 2021; Dell *et al.*, 2019; Furlong & Hinnant, 2024). The present study contributed to this gap by elevating survivor accounts that described incarceration as a perceived turning point within exit trajectories. TI reporting practices guided analytic decisions to preserve participant language and to prioritise survivor-defined service needs (Gerassi, 2017; Macy & Johns, 2011). The analysis emphasised survivor calls for earlier identification, timely intervention, and relational engagement within systems that frequently encounter exploited persons.

Prevalence estimates for sex trafficking histories among incarcerated women remain imprecise, yet available research and practitioner-oriented evidence suggest elevated exposure to commercial sexual exploitation in this population (Allert, 2021; Furlong & Hinnant, 2024). Findings indicated the importance of evaluating correctional training for trafficking identification and strengthening survivor-centred TI pathways during confinement and reentry. Diversion options, restorative justice approaches, and reentry supports tailored to survivor needs merit empirical evaluation as mechanisms that may reduce re-exploitation risk and improve continuity of care. Survivor narratives underscored that jail and prison settings often constitute critical service-contact points for outreach and linkage to safety.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study used qualitative secondary data analysis (SDA) to examine survivor reflections on arrest, incarceration, recidivism, and the experiences of separation and

sobriety in jail or prison contexts. The SDA was derived from a broader convergent mixed-methods investigation of exit experiences among individuals who had been commercially sexually exploited. The parent study employed a cross-sectional survey design that collected quantitative and qualitative data concurrently. Structured closed-ended items assessed patterns related to belief systems, motivational factors, and lived experiences, and open-ended prompts elicited narrative reflections from survivors.

SDA supports the reuse of existing datasets to address new or more focused research questions when additional primary data collection is impractical or ethically complex (Doolan *et al.*, 2017; Smith *et al.*, 2011). Methodological advantages include efficient hypothesis development, expanded analytic yield from survivor-informed datasets, and reduced research burden on populations with heightened vulnerability (Raman, 2021; Wickham, 2019). Methodological constraints include missing contextual information, limited capacity to determine temporal ordering, and an inability to establish causality (Cheng & Phillips, 2014; Saarela *et al.*, 2012). Recommended SDA practices emphasise clearly specified research questions, deep familiarity with the dataset, and analytic strategies that remain appropriate to the data structure and limitations (Schwartz *et al.*, 2013; Smith *et al.*, 2011). Application of SDA to sex trafficking, co-occurring SUDs, BT (Freyd, 1996), and trauma-coerced AT (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1969) supports deeper examination of survivor-defined needs and system touchpoints relevant to intervention planning (Hien *et al.*, 2015).

Qualitative methods within the SDA supported focused analysis of a specific domain within the larger dataset and preserved interpretive depth in survivor meaning-making. The analysis used open-ended survey responses as the primary data source for thematic interpretation. Creswell and Plano Clark's (2023) convergent mixed-methods framework informed the parent design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and analysed separately before integration for interpretation.

The primary survey was deployed via SurveyMonkey (2025), a secure online platform selected for accessibility, anonymity, and data protection features consistent with remote participation. Platform-based administration supported participant control over disclosure and reduced the risk associated with face-to-face recruitment for a historically marginalised population. Ethical protections aligned

with the Belmont Report principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research [NCPHSBBR], 1979). The present SDA maintained those commitments by treating survivor narratives as the primary unit of meaning within a TI analytic process.

Instrument Development

The SDA drew qualitative data from a 33-item instrument developed by the Institute for Survivor Care with sustained input from a five-member advisory panel of sex trafficking survivors. Survivor advisors reviewed item content and tone to support trauma-informed principles, linguistic accessibility, and experiential authenticity (Cimino, 2023; Le, 2023; SAMHSA, 2014). Participatory development approaches have been described as strengthening ecological validity and ethical rigour in anti-trafficking research by improving trust and data quality while reducing risk of retraumatization (Busch-Armendariz *et al.*, 2018; Musto *et al.*, 2020).

Instrument language was intentionally aligned with survivor terminology and conceptual categories rather than externally imposed clinical labels. Busch-Armendariz *et al.* (2018) described survivor co-creation as a mechanism for improving accuracy and engagement in trafficking-related research, and Musto *et al.* (2020) emphasised participatory design as an ethical safeguard that supports relational integrity. Advisory panel review included screening for potentially distressing or coercive phrasing, followed by item revision to reinforce autonomy and choice (Busch-Armendariz *et al.*, 2018; Musto *et al.*, 2020). SAMHSA's (2014) trauma-informed principles guided revisions emphasising safety, trustworthiness, empowerment, and participant control.

The final instrument included dichotomous items, Likert-type scales, and open-ended questions. Open-ended responses served as the primary qualitative data source for the present SDA. Narrative prompts invited reflection on pathways into exploitation, motivations for exit, and evaluations of systems and supports encountered during survivor journeys (Allert & Wyatt, 2025). Prompts also captured reflections on arrest, incarceration, and interactions with helpers, along with recommendations for improving outreach and recovery services. Item design allowed participants to skip questions to support autonomy and minimise harm consistent with Belmont guidance (NCPHSBBR, 1979)

Participants Recruitment and Incentives

Participant data for this SDA were drawn from the national Exit Motivation Survey conducted by the Institute for Survivor Care as part of a larger convergent mixed-methods study (Allert & Wyatt, 2025). Recruitment strategies for the original dataset involved a multi-tiered outreach approach, including direct email invitations to 220 trafficking shelters listed in the Institute's national database. Outreach also extended to survivor-led organisations and public figures identified as survivors of sex trafficking, who were encouraged to disseminate the survey link through personal and professional networks. This strategy generated a snowball sampling effect consistent with established best practices for engaging hidden or hard-to-reach populations (Noy, 2008; Sadler *et al.*, 2010).

To promote safety, accessibility, and trust, verification of trafficking survivor status was not required. This decision aligned with TI research protocols and ethical guidelines, emphasising minimal risk, emotional safety, and participant autonomy (Campbell *et al.*, 2021; NCPHSBBR, 1979). Participation was voluntary, and respondents reviewed an informed consent statement before beginning the digital survey. In shelter-based environments, staff members facilitated verbal consent when appropriate.

Each participant was offered a \$15 gift card as a token of appreciation for their time. This noncoercive incentive affirmed the value of survivor contributions without pressuring participation. The survey design maintained autonomy by allowing respondents to skip any question, thereby reinforcing TI engagement principles outlined in the Belmont Report (NCPHSBBR, 1979).

Although the survey was open to survivors of any sex, all responses included in the final dataset were from women. Accordingly, feminine pronouns are used throughout this article. The authors acknowledge that men also experience sexual exploitation and encourage future research exploring their pathways and service needs.

The original dataset included 194 total responses. Following a data-cleaning process that removed five incomplete or duplicate entries, the final analytic sample comprised 189 survivor responses (De Vaus & de Vaus, 2013). Relative to other studies involving shelter-based or program-specific samples, this dataset is among the largest known samples in the peer-reviewed literature. For example, Murphy *et al.* (2016) interviewed 35 participants across multiple sites, and Roe-Sepowitz *et*

al. (2014) analysed responses from 66 women in a prostitution diversion program. These contrasts highlight the challenges inherent in large-scale survivor-engaged research and underscore the credibility and transferability of the current sample.

Ethical Considerations and Anonymity Procedures

The present SDA was conducted in accordance with ethical standards designed to protect participants from harm and uphold TI principles throughout all stages of the research process. All original data collection procedures adhered to the foundational ethical guidelines articulated in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research [NCPHSBBR], 1979), specifically the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Respect for persons was demonstrated through informed consent protocols, an explicit option to decline any survey item, and the use of an encrypted web-based platform to ensure anonymity (SurveyMonkey, 2025). Beneficence was operationalised through the avoidance of triggering language, optional participation across all survey components, and the exclusion of any personally identifiable information. The principle of justice was reflected in the broad dissemination of the survey to survivors regardless of program affiliation, demographic characteristics, or stage of recovery.

The original study also integrated SAMHSA's (2014) TI care principles, emphasising safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural and gender sensitivity. These principles were embedded in both the design and distribution of the survey through transparent communication, trauma-sensitive question development, and participant autonomy in engagement. Participants were never asked to identify their traffickers or disclose current criminal activity, and no response was required to receive the voluntary incentive. Additional procedures were implemented to minimise power differentials, reduce the risk of retraumatisation, and support authenticity and agency in participant responses.

Confidentiality and noncoercive participation were prioritised at every stage. Shelter staff were instructed not to assist with or interpret responses, thereby ensuring that participants could complete the survey independently and privately. To maintain anonymity, participants were asked not to include identifying information. Former shelter residents were provided the option of using a third-party email address, such as that of a trusted friend or agency, to receive their gift card. Participants currently

residing in shelters were permitted to use a staff member's email address solely for incentive delivery, without disclosing personal information.

All incentive funding was provided through an anonymous donor, and no financial compensation was tied to response content or completeness. After survey closure, all email addresses, names, program references, and other identifying markers were removed from the dataset before analysis. In accordance with ethical best practices in trauma-focused research, IP addresses and email records were disassociated from response files to ensure participants' digital anonymity (NCPHSBBR, 1979). These safeguards reflect the research team's commitment to preserving participant dignity, promoting TI scholarship, and ensuring that survivors' voices are represented with respect, confidentiality, and emotional care.

Data Analysis

The present SDA examined the qualitative component of a larger mixed-methods dataset (Allert & Wyatt, 2025) by analysing participants' open-ended survey responses. The qualitative corpus consisted of the available non-empty narrative responses to incarceration-related open-ended items within the Exit Motivation Survey dataset (N = 189; Allert & Wyatt, 2025). An inductive thematic approach was used to examine survivor reflections on arrest, incarceration, recidivism, and internal shifts described during periods of sobriety and separation. The analytic process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: data familiarisation, initial code generation, theme development, thematic review, theme definition, and synthesis.

Analysis began with immersive, line-by-line reading of raw narrative data to generate initial codes, followed by iterative synthesis, clustering, and thematic mapping. SDA supported a focused exploration of a specific domain within a dataset originally designed for broader purposes, allowing closer examination of meaning-making in survivor accounts (Cimino, 2023; Le, 2023). Analytic decisions emphasised experiential nuance and contextual interpretation consistent with trauma-responsive qualitative research (Kara, 2018; Padgett, 2017).

To enhance credibility, the study used a consensus-oriented coding strategy. The lead analyst developed initial codes and themes, and a second team member reviewed coding decisions for coherence and thematic alignment. Formal interrater reliability coefficients were not calculated; instead, analytic memo-writing, peer debriefing, and

iterative team dialogue supported rigour and transparency in the analytic process (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). Prompt-level response counts for incarceration-related open-ended items were not available in the de-identified dataset export, preventing the reporting of the number of narratives contributed to each prompt.

All responses were de-identified before analysis, and demographic variables were reported in aggregate to reduce the risk of re-identification. Following empirical guidance for reporting anonymous surveys, demographic subgroup categories were collapsed to avoid reporting cells with fewer than 10 observations (Frederick, 2021). These procedures supported ethical reporting standards in qualitative research with trauma-affected populations (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). The SDA extended the interpretive depth of the parent study by concentrating on incarceration as a justice-system touchpoint within survivor-described exit trajectories (Allert & Wyatt, 2025).

Respondent Profile

Respondent data were drawn from the Exit Motivation Survey administered by the Institute for Survivor Care (Allert & Wyatt, 2025). The analytic sample included 189 participants ($N = 189$). All respondents in the analytic sample reported female sex, although the survey was open to survivors of any sex. To safeguard anonymity, the survey did not collect identifying demographic information such as geographic location, housing status, employment, or program enrollment. Demographic items were limited to sex, current age, and age at first commercial sexual exploitation. Demographic reporting procedures followed guidance for anonymous survey research intended to reduce re-identification risk in sensitive populations (Frederick, 2021). The omission of contextual and location-based variables supported confidentiality protections consistent with trauma-informed research principles. Participants ranged in age from 14 to 64 years ($M = 38.60$, $SD = 11.23$), with a modal age of 41 (see Table 1).

Findings and Discussion

Arrest and Incarceration as Catalysts for Exit

Findings from the original study by the Institute for Survivors Care (Allert & Wyatt, 2025) revealed that arrest and incarceration functioned as unexpected yet critical catalysts in the exit process for many survivors. Of the ($N = 189$) respondents surveyed, 27.9% ($n = 53$) indicated that being arrested played a central role in their

Table 1: Age Distribution of Survivors at the Time of Survey

<i>Age Band (Years)</i>	<i>Count (n)</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>	<i>Interpretation (SDA Frame)</i>
13–19	5	2.6%	Represents early-entry survivors who exited exploitation at a younger developmental stage.
20–29	30	15.8%	Reflects emerging-adult survivors navigating instability and transition.
30–39	65	34.4%	Largest group; aligns with midlife patterns of exiting exploitation after extended involvement.
40–49	65	34.4%	Suggests prolonged exploitation trajectories requiring long-term systemic intervention.
50–59	18	9.5%	Indicates later-life exits shaped by accumulated trauma and health burdens.
60–64	6	3.1%	Rare but important subgroup representing late-life survivorship.

Note: $N = 189$. Percentages reflect age at the time of the survey. The interpretive column situates age distributions within the SDA by highlighting developmental and contextual implications for survivor recovery pathways.

decision to leave exploitation. Among those who provided further context ($n = 95$), 21.0% ($n = 20$) described their arrest as unplanned, 9.5% ($n = 9$) stated they were coerced into criminal activity, and 7.4% ($n = 7$) reported that they intentionally sought arrest as a means of escape. In total, 81.0% of those arrested reported subsequent incarceration, with an average sentence length of 7.8 months (median and mode = 4 months). After excluding three statistical outliers, the adjusted mean time served was 5.4 months. Participants often described this period of confinement as one that offered temporary safety, physical stabilisation, and mental clarity, an outcome consistent with Preble *et al.* (2019), who noted that for some sex workers, jail represented a rare moment of respite, and with Pfeffer (2024), who described incarceration as an inadvertent but meaningful intervention point in the trajectory out of exploitation.

Institutional data from the Institute for Survivor Care's National Case Management System (NCMS), which includes 3,924 survivor records from 35 U.S.-based shelters as of June 2025, reflected consistent trends. Among the 170 records detailing arrest or incarceration history, 21.6% ($n = 37$) involved juvenile detention and 63.7% ($n = 108$) involved adult incarceration. Juvenile charges ranged from truancy and running away to aggravated assault and attempted murder. In the adult dataset, the most frequently cited charge was "prostitution," which appeared

196 times, followed by possession, theft, assault, DUI, and probation violations. One respondent reported 47 separate prostitution-related arrests, underscoring the repeated criminalisation of survivors and highlighting system-level failures to recognise indicators of trafficking.

In total, 62.1% of survivors in the original study reported that incarceration ultimately “turned out for their good,” and 74 respondents explicitly stated that time in custody positively contributed to their decision to exit permanently. These findings suggest that arrest and incarceration, when accompanied by outreach, TI care, or diversionary services (Love *et al.*, 2018a, 2018b), may serve as overlooked entry points into recovery (Richard & La Pierre, 2024). The qualitative findings from this SDA are organised into three interrelated themes: Theme 1: Separation from Traffickers and Substances of Abuse; Theme 2: Sobriety and Time for Reflection; and Theme 3: Spiritual and Cognitive Reorientation During Confinement.

Theme 1: Separation from Traffickers and Substances of Abuse

Separation from traffickers, exploitative environments, and substances of abuse through arrest and incarceration created a critical interruption in the cycle of exploitation. Survivors described arrest and detention as providing a reprieve from traffickers, enablers, and environmental triggers. Prior research has documented that justice system contact, particularly when combined with TI identification and diversion efforts, can offer an unintended but potentially life-saving intervention point for trafficking victims (Connell *et al.*, 2015; Roe-Sepowitz *et al.*, 2014). Although arrest is often controversial, especially for those trafficked under force and coercion, survivors emphasised that separation, even when punitive, often constituted the first moment in which they were identified and offered services (Rafferty, 2016).

Participants’ narratives underscored the centrality of physical and relational distance from exploitative contexts. As one respondent stated, *Find victims who are currently locked up for prostitution or anything to do with it... and reach out to them while they are in jail. That’s when we need it the most.* Others underscored the urgency of meeting women *where they are at* and described jails as being *full of women doing short-term sentences who are victims who often end up going right back to their trafficker afterwards.* These reflections illustrate that distance from exploitative environments, whether self-initiated, coerced, or unintended, can offer survivors an opening to

consider alternative pathways. As one participant observed, *servng time makes you reach out for help after being in there for a few months. The first day ain't gonna do it.* This subtheme highlights the importance of physical separation from traffickers and substances of abuse, as both a crisis and an opportunity for intervention. Survivors' comments included:

- *Find victims who are currently locked up for prostitution or anything to do with it... and reach out to them while they are in jail. That's when we need it the most.*
- *The prisons are full of women doing short-term sentences who are victims and end up going right back to their trafficker afterwards.*
- *Go to the jails. Meet women where they are at. Street Corners, Ads, etc.*
- *I want to do jail ministry. There are a lot of girls in there that are lost and don't know how to get away, or are addicted to drugs and don't want to get away.*
- *I think all County jails should have a human trafficking advocate.*
- *Have more programs in jail that help women. For me, servng time makes you reach out for help after being in there for a few months. The first day ain't gonna do it.*
- *Look into people who are in jail for drugs.*

Several respondents explicitly called for system-level changes within correctional contexts. *I think all County jails should have a human trafficking advocate, and have more programs in jail that help women. For me, servng time makes you reach out for help after being in there for a few months. The first day ain't gonna do it.* Others drew attention to substance-related pathways into incarceration, stating *Look into people who are in jail for drugs.* Collectively, these comments portray separation through incarceration as both a crisis and an opportunity, disrupting exploitative dynamics long enough for survivors to consider alternative futures.

Taken together, the narratives affirm that while arrest and incarceration are not inherently therapeutic, they can generate liminal spaces in which survivors are temporarily removed from traffickers, substances, and high-risk environments. Prior scholarship has emphasised that initial law enforcement contact, though often punitive, can operate as an inadvertent intervention point when paired with TI identification and diversion strategies (Connell *et al.*, 2015; Roe-Sepowitz *et al.*, 2014). Survivor narratives in this SDA further suggest that physical distance from exploiters may foster initial readiness for change, particularly when women

are met with dignity, support, and clear pathways into services. These findings underscore the importance of leveraging moments of separation (Rafferty, 2016) as pivotal opportunities within the broader continuum of survivor recovery and service engagement.

Theme 2: Sobriety and Time to Reflect

Sobriety emerged as a secondary yet vital benefit of incarceration, providing an unanticipated detox period for survivors entrenched in substance use cycles. Many participants described jail as the first time they had been physically sober in years and associated that sobriety with a renewed desire for long-term change. One survivor reflected, *The jail time made me sober up... I needed to think clearly*, while another recalled, *it gave me time to clean up and think about where my life was going*. For numerous respondents, this involuntary withdrawal period was essential in regaining mental clarity and physical strength.

Empirical literature supports the observation that confinement-related sobriety can serve as a foundational moment in survivor recovery. Sex trafficking survivors are often forcibly addicted to substances by traffickers, creating substantial barriers to escape and treatment engagement (Meshelmiah *et al.*, 2018). Once they attempt to exit, survivors frequently encounter punitive policies such as mandatory sobriety at intake and eviction upon relapse, which can undermine recovery and exacerbate trauma (Gerassi, 2017). Survivors in this SDA voiced these tensions directly. One stated, *I had to get clean in jail before anyone took me seriously*, capturing the conditional nature of care access for women with co-occurring addiction.

Survivors also identified barriers rooted in public perceptions and system responses. Many noted that criminalisation and stigmatising attitudes impeded their willingness to disclose victimisation or seek help, a pattern echoed in research documenting how moral judgments shape decision-making at the point of arrest (Wiener, Berry, *et al.*, 2021; Wiener, Wiener *et al.*, 2024). Several participants articulated specific reforms, noting, *Give us a place to detox and a counsellor to talk to. That's what we need when we first get locked up, and make drug treatment part of jail if that's the only way we get it*. These reflections suggest that sobriety catalysed by incarceration must be paired with integrated, TI support systems if it is to translate into lasting recovery.

Promising programmatic models are beginning to address these needs. Initiatives such as Call to Freedom incorporate holistic case management, therapy, financial

assistance, and recovery housing, illustrating the potential of comprehensive support structures (Edwards *et al.*, 2023). Community-based programs that centre survivor voice and provide long-term relational continuity, rather than episodic detox alone, have been associated with more durable sobriety and reintegration (Gonzalez *et al.*, 2019). At the same time, efforts such as Project ROSE, which sought to divert individuals through law enforcement partnerships, have produced mixed evidence regarding long-term efficacy (Roe-Sepowitz *et al.*, 2014).

Within this SDA, survivors consistently linked sobriety during incarceration with a capacity for reflection and reorientation. Many used phrases such as *time to think*, *I got my mind back*, and *I saw things differently after being sober for a few months*, suggesting that detoxification created mental space to reassess relationships, risks, and possibilities. Their comments offer nuanced critiques of carceral responses:

- *Stop putting women in jail. It doesn't help.*
- *When being arrested, I would have talked to someone if I hadn't gotten prosecuted for it.*
- *We need more emergency houses to detox women so that they can realise that there is a way out.*
- *Have somewhere immediate to go without the request of being clean or sober. Take the survivor as is...*
- *Women need to know there is hope and help out there.*
- *Make accommodations for their children because their children come first in their minds.*
- *Have more programs in jail that help women. For me, serving time makes you reach out for help after being in there for a few months. The first day ain't gonna do it.*
- *Look into people who are in jail for drugs.*

These reflections portray incarceration as a point of forced detox and early recovery that may enable readiness for change but also highlight survivors' ambivalence about punitive structures. However, survivors also expressed deep ambivalence about this process. As one respondent declared, *Stop putting the women in jail. It doesn't help*, underscoring the tension between involuntary sobriety and the need for dignified, survivor-led pathways to healing. Several indicated that

the threat of prosecution inhibited help-seeking. *When being arrested, I would have talked to someone if I hadn't been prosecuted for it*, underscoring the effect of criminalisation on disclosure (Richard & La Pierre, 2024). Others emphasised the need for immediate, nonjudgmental detox options outside carceral settings, noting that sobriety prerequisites and zero-tolerance relapse policies (Gerassi, 2017) create additional barriers to care.

Others emphasised the urgent need for immediate, nonjudgmental detox services outside of carceral settings. *We need more emergency houses to detox women so that they can realise that there is a way out*, one wrote. Another echoed, *Have somewhere immediate to go without the request of being clean or sober. Take the survivor as is*. These statements align with empirical findings that sobriety-based eligibility requirements and zero-tolerance relapse policies create additional barriers (Gerassi, 2017) to care for women who are already traumatised and substance-dependent.

The critical window for intervention is often narrow, as survivors may be under surveillance and coercive control by traffickers. *Respond quickly. We don't have long windows of time without being watched*, cautioned one survivor, reflecting the urgency of rapid-access, low-barrier services. Some also voiced the need for holistic care that acknowledges parental responsibilities, *makes accommodations for their children, because their children come first in their minds*. Together, these reflections emphasise that while sobriety during incarceration may spark internal change, sustainable recovery requires timely, survivor-centred, and family-sensitive systems of support (Edwards *et al.*, 2023; Gonzalez *et al.*, 2019). As one respondent shared, *Yes, it gave me a chance to get out and mandated me to a program I had to complete*, while another recalled, *It gave me time away where I was safe. I had a clear mind to make the decision*.

Additional reflections reinforced these patterns:

- *Yes, it gave me a chance to get out and mandated me to a program I had to complete.*
- *I didn't want to live like that anymore after facing a life sentence. I realised it wasn't worth the risk, I didn't want to work for pimps anymore, especially after having to testify.*
- *Yes, it sobered me up, and I had an encounter with the spirit and read the whole Bible.*
- *The initial contacts I was offered through the courts were very helpful in getting the ball rolling.*

- This being my 4th time in prison, I not only knew I needed change, but I wanted something different and a better life.
- Yes, I was sent to a long-term program with the understanding I would go back to jail if I did not stay in the program.
- Yes, Made me realise how stupid I was for doing what I was doing.
- It slowed me down and brought me back to reality,
- It gave me time away where I was safe. I had a clear mind to make the decision.
- Every time I was incarcerated, it saved me. Each time, I was so far gone that if I hadn't been arrested, I would have died. It was helpful to get some clarity.
- very helpful, I was safe and could think about what I wanted to do with my life when I got out of jail.
- They offered me 15 years in prison, or I could go to a program and change my life.
- It was. I gave myself time to reflect and learn new coping skills.
- Yes, I always wanted better, and this lesson helped me move to that.
- Yes. It sobered me up and made me think straight, and I just needed a change, or I was going to die.
- Yes.....God was directing my path to FREEDOM.
- I was finally clean and away from trafficking, and now this is the opportunity to change my life.
- *A lot of inmates are very strong Christians, and they helped me. I have been diagnosed with schizoaffective bipolar disorder and would have psychotic episodes. When I was in jail, I was having one of those psychotic episodes, and the only thing that made the voices go away was when one of my cellmates would read the Bible. And it kept happening, so I knew something other than mental illness was going on. Since then, I read the Bible every night, and it has equipped me to live a life worthy of my calling. I can't even go back to my old life. I don't fit in with that anymore.*

Such reflections were often catalysed by structured diversion programs offered through the court system, with several survivors describing alternatives to prison

that prompted sustained recovery efforts. *They offered me 15 years in prison, or I could go to a program and change my life.* These accounts illustrate that enforced sobriety, while rooted in a coercive context, frequently generated cognitive clarity, emotional readiness, and openness to alternative pathways, particularly when paired with programmatic supports.

Theme 3: Spiritual and Cognitive Reorientation During Confinement

For many survivors, incarceration was not only a time of separation and sobriety but also a period of profound spiritual and cognitive reorientation. Several participants described transformative religious experiences and shifts in self-understanding while incarcerated. One survivor recounted, *Yes, it sobered me up and I had an encounter with the Spirit and read the whole Bible,* and another testified, *Yes... God was directing my path to FREEDOM.* These statements resonate with empirical work highlighting the role of faith, meaning-making, and spiritual resources in facilitating change among trafficking survivors (Allert, 2025; Hodge, 2020, 2021).

These testimonies align with empirical studies that underscore the crucial role of faith, safety, and support systems in facilitating lasting change for trafficking survivors (Allert, 2025; Edwards *et al.*, 2023; Gonzalez *et al.*, 2019). Even within the constraints of confinement, survivors expressed that jail offered respite and an environment to reflect without the constant threat of violence, control, or addiction (Richard & La Pierre, 2024). As one woman shared, *Every time I was incarcerated, it saved me... if I hadn't been arrested, I would have died. It was helpful to get some clarity.*

Significantly, for some, incarceration not only interrupted the cycle of exploitation and substance use but also initiated a new trajectory rooted in spiritual and emotional growth. One survivor reflected, *A lot of inmates are very strong Christians, and they helped me... when I was in jail, I was having psychotic episodes, and the only thing that made the voices go away was when one of my cellmates would read the Bible... I knew something other than mental illness was going on. Since then, I read the Bible every night.* Another concluded, *I can't even go back to my old life. I don't fit in with that anymore.*

These narratives indicate that incarceration sometimes offered space not only for behavioural change but for deep shifts in identity, worldview, and perceived calling. Survivors articulated a movement from resignation and entrapment toward agency and purpose, often intertwined with spiritual awakening. Such testimonies align

with broader research documenting the importance of faith, safety, and supportive relationships in fostering lasting transformation for survivors of commercial sexual exploitation (Meshelmiah *et al.*, 2018; Wiener, Berry *et al.*, 2021; Wiener, Wiener *et al.*, 2024) for compassionate, TI, relationship-based systems that honour each woman's readiness and personal timeline for change (Allert, 2025; Edwards *et al.*, 2023; Gonzalez *et al.*, 2019; Richard & La Pierre, 2024).

Taken together, Themes 1–3 depict incarceration as a complex and ambivalent context. Arrest and confinement disrupted cycles of exploitation, created conditions for sobriety and reflection, and sometimes catalysed spiritual and cognitive reorientation. At the same time, survivors' narratives make clear that these benefits were contingent on the presence of TI, relationally grounded systems of care; without such supports, separation and sobriety risk reinforcing harm rather than fostering sustainable exit. These tensions set the stage for examining recidivism and the structural forces that pull survivors back toward exploitation.

Recidivism: Structural and Relational Pressures Toward Return

Despite the potential of incarceration to serve as a turning point, recidivism remains a significant concern for survivors of sex trafficking. Quantitative findings from the original study (Allert & Wyatt, 2025) revealed that even after periods of confinement, survivors often faced immense systemic and personal pressures to return to exploitation. The most frequently endorsed prompts for returning to “the life” included the perceived lack of financial alternatives (53.7%), feelings of having no other options (51.8%), and a desire to return to drug use (50.0%). Other key motivators included family estrangement (36.6%), romantic ties (33.5%), unresolved criminal charges (20.7%), and feelings of failure in recovery programs (17.7%). These findings reflect a multilayered vulnerability wherein economic precarity, addiction, relational trauma, and systemic disenfranchisement intersect to heighten the risk of recidivism or re-exploitation.

As summarised in Table 2, these findings reflect a multilayered vulnerability in which economic precarity, addiction, relational trauma, and systemic disenfranchisement intersect to heighten the risk of re-exploitation. Survivors described returning to sex work due to survival-based decision-making (*I had no other way of making money / it was 'easy' money*), perceived entrapment (*I felt I had no other options*), and addiction-driven relapse (*I wanted to go back to using drugs*).

Table 2: Prompts for Returning to Exploitation and Their Interpretive Context

<i>Statement</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>	<i>Interpretation (SDA Frame)</i>
I had no other way of making money / it was “easy” money.	88	53.7%	Reflects economic coercion and survival-based decision-making.
I felt I had no other options.	85	51.8%	Indicates perceived entrapment and limited structural alternatives.
I wanted to go back to using drugs.	82	50.0%	Highlights addiction-driven relapse tied to withdrawal, craving, and coping deficits.
I couldn’t/didn’t feel I could return to my family.	60	36.6%	Demonstrates relational ruptures and trauma-linked disconnection.
I wanted to reunite with a romantic relationship.	55	33.5%	Suggests trauma bonds or attachment-based pull toward exploiters.
I had criminal charges I was avoiding.	34	20.7%	Reflects systemic pressures and justice-related avoidance behaviour.
I felt like a failure in the program.	29	17.7%	Represents shame-based cognitive appraisal impacting persistence in services.
The exploitation was within my family.	21	12.8%	Reveals familial trafficking dynamics limiting perceived exit pathways.
I got kicked out of a program.	10	6.1%	Illustrates service-disruption vulnerability and increased return risk.

Note: $N = 164\text{--}168$, depending on item. Survivors could select multiple reasons. The interpretive column provides contextual meaning consistent with SDA.

Relational ruptures and trauma-linked disconnection were apparent in statements coded as *I couldn’t/didn’t feel I could return to my family*, while trauma bonds and attachment-based pull toward exploiters surfaced in endorsements such as *I wanted to reunite with a romantic relationship*. System-level pressures, including criminal justice involvement and programmatic failures, were captured in endorsements such as *I had criminal charges I was avoiding*, and *I felt like a failure in the program*.

These quantitative patterns, read alongside survivor narratives, underscore the reality that incarceration alone cannot secure a lasting exit. Without coordinated access to housing, economic stability, TI treatment, and relational support, survivors remain vulnerable to the same structural forces that initially entrapped them. The following section builds on these findings to explore implications for justice reform, TI recovery, and survivor-centred service delivery, with particular attention to how systems can transform incarceration from a cycle-reinforcing mechanism into a catalyst for sustained freedom.

Recent research highlights the importance of TI diversion initiatives for sex trafficking survivors in the criminal justice system. Diversion programs can be effective in increasing participants' readiness for change, though trafficked individuals may require more tailored interventions (Haviv & Roe-Sepowitz, 2025). Challenges in implementing such programs include identifying veterans and navigating complex partnerships (Christy *et al.*, 2012). Survivor-centred, TI approaches are crucial for promoting resilience and recovery (Edwards *et al.*, 2023; Knight *et al.*, 2023). However, the rise of sex trafficking courts has been met with criticism, as they may perpetuate the criminalisation of victims while attempting to provide services (Gruber *et al.*, 2016; Kulig & Butler, 2019). A critical intersectional and TI approach is necessary to address the complex needs of trafficking survivors (Hand, 2024). These statements specifically illustrate how physical and relational separation, even in the form of arrest or detainment, allowed survivors to interrupt the cycle of exploitation, gain clarity, and consider alternative life paths, thus possibly contributing to reduced recidivism.

- *Yes. It sobered me up and made me think straight, and I just needed a change, or I was going to die.*
- *Every time I was incarcerated, it saved me. Each time, I was so far gone that if I hadn't been arrested, I would have died. It was helpful to get some clarity.*
- *It gave me time away where I was safe. I had a clear mind to make the decision.*
- *Very helpful—I was safe and could think about what I wanted to do with my life when I got out of jail.*
- *Yes, it gave me a chance to get out and mandated me to a program I had to complete.*
- *Serving time makes you reach out for help after being in there for a few months. The first day ain't gonna do it.*
- *I was finally clean and away from trafficking and knew this was the opportunity to change my life.*
- *When I was in jail, I was having one of those psychotic episodes, and the only thing that made the voices go away was when one of my cellmates would read the Bible... Since then, I read the Bible every night, and it has equipped me to live a life worthy of my calling.*

- *Yes. It sobered me up and made me think straight, and I just needed a change, or I was going to die.*
- *They offered me 15 years in prison, or I could go to a program and change my life.*
- *The initial contacts I was offered through the courts were very helpful in getting the ball rolling.*
- *I think all County jails should have a human trafficking advocate.*
- *Go to the jails. Meet women where they are at.*

The current findings could suggest that recidivism is less a failure of survivor will and more a failure of coordinated care. Several survivors also highlighted the overwhelming economic desperation that shaped their return to high-risk environments. One participant shared, *After completing a program, the second time I was given my own apartment for me and my baby, where I didn't have to return to any toxic people, toxic environments, traffickers, or be homeless and resort to trafficking for a way to support myself. I was able to get a regular job paying a minimum wage, but I still survive.* Another noted, *A safe place to live... No one knew the depths of my story, but they knew it was a bad situation.* These comments echo the pattern of economic vulnerability identified in prior literature (Ferrari, 2021; Gonzalez *et al.*, 2019). The lack of viable job opportunities and poverty-level conditions propel individuals back into exploitative systems.

While survivors' psychological and physical needs are often addressed during the early stages of recovery, long-term support must include financial stability to interrupt the cycle of reentry. As one survivor emphasised the transformative impact of accessible transportation and housing, *A roof over my head, being safe and able to shower, get transportation and NA and AA helped me with gas money to keep driving as far away from home as possible, until I could get accepted somewhere.* These voices confirm that financial empowerment, coupled with relational stability, can serve as both a preventative and restorative mechanism. As Bouché *et al.* (2023) concluded, secure employment, transportation, and housing are not optional add-ons to trauma recovery, but foundational pillars of sustainable reintegration. Programs that fail to prioritise economic interventions risk reinforcing the very conditions that made the initial exploitation possible (Benoit *et al.*, 2019; Casassa *et al.*, 2023). Economic fragility is not merely a background variable in the recidivism trajectory; it may be a driving force behind it.

For many survivors, the conditions of incarceration do not interrupt economic marginalisation; they often intensify it. The reality for many survivors is that a survivor walks into jail with nothing and walks out with nothing (Bouché *et al.*, 2025). When a survivor exits incarceration without identification, income, housing, access to transportation, or relational supports, the structural conditions have already set the stage for reentry into exploitation. As one survivor emphasised, *there needs to be more awareness of the shelters, programs, and services you provide. Women need to know that there is hope and help out there.* Without comprehensive wraparound support before and after release, recidivism could be seen not as a failure but as an inevitability. A sustainable exit requires more than trauma care; it also necessitates economic structural repair, which involves addressing the chronic absence of economic safety nets, integrating post-release care into pre-release planning, and building bridges to employment, childcare, legal aid, and transportation. As Casassa *et al.* (2023) and Bouché *et al.* (2023) have argued, long-term reintegration is not feasible without scaffolding survivors out of economic precarity. To reduce recidivism, incarceration programs must be undergirded with economic vulnerability interventions.

Corrections Professionals Trained in Sex Trafficking Victims' Identification

Research indicates that human trafficking victims often intersect with the criminal justice system, but correctional staff are generally unprepared to identify and respond to trafficking (Rizo *et al.*, 2022). Training programs for law enforcement and healthcare providers have shown some positive effects in improving awareness and identification of trafficking victims (Erwin *et al.*, 2020; Isaac *et al.*, 2011; Renzetti *et al.*, 2015). However, challenges remain in victim identification and service provision due to limited resources and coverage gaps (Doran *et al.*, 2014; Schwarz *et al.*, 2016). Further, research suggests that comprehensive training programs focusing on TI approaches could enhance corrections professionals' skills in recognising sex trafficking victims. Studies indicate that many professionals, including those in healthcare, education, and corrections, lack adequate knowledge to identify trafficking victims (Baker *et al.*, 2024; Rizo *et al.*, 2022; Winks *et al.*, 2023). Training programs have shown promise in improving professionals' self-efficacy in identifying and treating trafficking victims (Cavey *et al.*, 2023). Practical approaches include multidisciplinary approaches, TI services (Edwards *et al.*, 2023; Prasath *et al.*, 2025), and socioecological frameworks that address secondary trauma among professionals (Sprang *et al.*, 2023). Community partnerships and specialised

training for various professionals, such as salon workers, can also aid in victim identification (Hughes-Wegner *et al.*, 2024). Overall, the research emphasises the need for comprehensive TI training to enhance professionals' ability to recognise and respond to sex trafficking victims across various settings.

Survivor narratives support the need for training correctional professionals in the identification and appropriate response to individuals experiencing sex trafficking. Numerous participants described incarceration as a potential intervention point, but emphasised that its effectiveness depends on the presence of informed and trauma-aware staff. One survivor stated, *I think all County jails should have a human trafficking advocate*, suggesting that specialised personnel are essential for proper victim identification and support. Others highlighted how incarceration is often the only interruption in the trafficking cycle, yet victims remain unrecognised. *The prison is full of women who are victims of short-term sentences and end up going right back to their traffickers afterwards. The call to find victims who are currently locked up for prostitution or anything to do with it... and reach out to them while they are in jail*, reflects a consensus that timely outreach is most effective while survivors are detained. Moreover, participants noted the need for informed interactions that do not lead to further criminalisation. *When being arrested, I would have talked to someone if I hadn't been prosecuted for it*. The request to *look into people who are in jail for drugs* underscores the reality that many survivors are incarcerated for substance use directly linked to their exploitation. These responses make clear that jails and prisons are not only sites of confinement, but also critical venues for intervention, provided that correctional personnel are equipped to recognise signs of trafficking and respond with TI, victim-centred care.

Calls to Action

Research indicates that criminalisation and incarceration of sex trafficking victims can be counterproductive to their recovery and reintegration (Connell *et al.*, 2015; Heiges, 2009; Roe-Sepowitz *et al.*, 2014). Arrest and detention often compound trauma and increase vulnerability to re-trafficking (Hill & Mullins, 2022; Hossain *et al.*, 2010). Alternative approaches, such as diversion programs and victim-centred services, may be more effective in addressing the needs of trafficking survivors (McCracken, 2010; Roe-Sepowitz *et al.*, 2014). However, some initiatives, like Human Trafficking Intervention Courts, have been criticised for perpetuating the criminalisation of victims under the guise of providing social services (Gruber

et al., 2016). Experts emphasise the importance of understanding the complex nature of sex trafficking, including its historical context and the vulnerabilities of victims (Hom & Woods, 2013), particularly children and adolescents (Gluck & Mathur, 2014; Litam, 2017). Addressing the health impacts of criminalisation and providing adequate recovery time and support (Juraschek *et al.*, 2024) are crucial for the rehabilitation of sex trafficking survivors (Hill & Mullins, 2022; Hossain *et al.*, 2010) and preventing recidivism.

Future Research

Emerging findings from this analysis underscore the paradoxical role that incarceration may play as a catalyst for survivor recovery when paired with TI intervention. Future research should examine jails and prisons not solely as punitive or containment-oriented environments, but as provisional spaces of separation, detoxification, and cognitive realignment that may, under certain conditions, support exit from exploitation (Hossain *et al.*, 2010; Roe-Sepowitz *et al.*, 2014). Longitudinal studies are needed to assess how survivor-informed programming implemented during incarceration influences long-term outcomes such as sobriety maintenance, recidivism reduction, and avoidance of reentry into exploitative systems.

Further inquiry should also evaluate the effectiveness of embedding trained trafficking advocates, peer navigators, and spiritual care providers within carceral settings to initiate pathways to recovery (Hill & Mullins, 2022; Rizo *et al.*, 2022). Mixed-methods designs are uniquely positioned to capture both statistical trends and survivor testimony, providing a deeper understanding of the *curious pathway to freedom* incarceration can represent when recovery capital is mobilised. Additional attention should be directed to post-release continuity of care, housing access, and family reunification, as each is essential for preventing re-victimisation and sustaining long-term transformation (Cavey *et al.*, 2023; Edwards *et al.*, 2023). By reframing incarceration as a potential intervention point rather than a punitive endpoint, future research may contribute to policy shifts that promote redemptive, rather than reactive, approaches to survivor care.

Services Available for Survivors to Freedom

Future research should examine the types, timing, and accessibility of services available to survivors of sex trafficking, particularly within carceral settings. While

participants in the present study identified incarceration as a period marked by cognitive clarity, forced sobriety, and temporary separation from exploitation, the lack of consistent TI services during this critical window diminishes its transformative potential (Edwards *et al.*, 2023; Zielinski *et al.*, 2020). Further investigation is necessary to determine which services (García-Vázquez & Meneses-Falcón, 2024), such as legal advocacy, mental health care, spiritual mentorship, housing placement, peer support, and addiction treatment, are most effective in reducing recidivism and promoting sustained freedom (Prasath *et al.*, 2025; Sprang *et al.*, 2023).

Comparative analyses across correctional institutions offering varying levels of survivor-centred services may illuminate best practices and ongoing gaps in care. Future research should also evaluate how service engagement initiated during incarceration translates into post-release trajectories (Hossain *et al.*, 2010), particularly for survivors navigating cycles of addiction, violence, and criminalisation. Qualitative inquiry is essential for capturing survivor perspectives on which services feel most authentic, trustworthy, and transformative. Centring survivor-defined metrics of success will allow future research to inform recovery ecosystems that transform moments of incarceration into springboards for healing and freedom.

Relationships with Shelters as Pathways to Freedom

Future research should explore how relationships with shelters serve as pivotal pathways to freedom for survivors, particularly when initiated during or immediately following incarceration. While this study highlighted separation and sobriety within correctional settings as potential catalysts for change, the findings also underscored the necessity of timely shelter-based engagement to sustain exits (Allert & Wyatt, 2025). Longitudinal studies are needed to assess how early connections with faith-based or TI shelters influence survivor outcomes, including housing stability, relapse prevention, and reintegration success. Research should also examine how shelters collaborate with correctional institutions to establish referral pipelines, provide pre-release programming, and ensure continuity of care.

Effective collaboration requires TI approaches, survivor-informed program design, and multidisciplinary coordination. Danis *et al.* (2018) identified a technology-enabled referral system that accelerates survivor access to emergency shelter and supportive services, demonstrating how automation can bridge critical gaps. Udezi *et al.* (2023) emphasised the value of primary care referral networks

in addressing social determinants of health during transitions from institutional to community contexts. Within correctional environments, Zielinski *et al.* (2020) documented the success of a trauma-responsive group therapy program that prepares women for reentry through targeted psychoeducation and peer support. Ravi *et al.* (2017) similarly highlighted the importance of nonjudgmental, survivor-centred care that incorporates survivor input in case management and discharge planning.

Collectively, these studies affirm that collaborative programming initiated before release and continued through reintegration enhances survivors' stability and reduces the likelihood of recidivism. Key elements include streamlined referral mechanisms, early TI interventions (Zielinski *et al.*, 2020), and continuity of care through coordinated partnerships. Programs integrating these components are better positioned to mitigate re-exploitation risks and support survivors in rebuilding autonomy, including economic stability (Danis *et al.*, 2018; Udezi *et al.*, 2023). Future research should investigate how these models can be adapted for diverse jurisdictions and scaled for broader implementation.

Given the wide variation across correctional systems, jurisdictional diversity encompasses differences not only in geography but also in legal structures, administrative policies, institutional cultures, and available resources. Variations across federal, state, and local systems, as well as among urban, rural, and underserved regions, significantly affect the feasibility and implementation of survivor-centred programming. Sociocultural dynamics, population characteristics, and institutional openness to TI approaches further shape program adaptability (Ravi *et al.*, 2017). Thus, future inquiry should examine how integrated models can be adapted for these varying environments without compromising core trauma-responsive principles.

Within this framework, shelters emerge not simply as post-release destinations but as essential partners in the reentry continuum. By establishing structured referral systems, providing TI stabilisation services, and coordinating long-term care, shelters can become catalysts for sustained recovery and reintegration. Future research should develop survivor-informed tools to assess the quality, accessibility, and therapeutic value of shelter relationships. Identifying conditions under which shelters become sustainable sources of safety and transformation will support the design of coordinated reentry strategies that address economic insecurity, psychological needs, and structural barriers in a cohesive recovery pathway from incarceration to freedom.

Implications

The findings of this SDA highlight critical implications for justice reform, TI recovery, and survivor-centred service delivery. Survivor narratives indicated that incarceration, while not inherently rehabilitative, can function as an unanticipated gateway to recovery when it involves separation from exploitation, enforced sobriety, and time for reflection. Many respondents described jail as the first context in which they experienced safety, mental clarity, and the opportunity to consider a different future. These qualitative insights are consistent with scholarship underscoring the potential of mandated programs and forced detoxification to catalyse change among survivors of sex trafficking (Meshelmiah *et al.*, 2018; Roe-Sepowitz *et al.*, 2014). Together, these findings suggest that carceral environments, when paired with appropriate supports (Gezinski, 2021), may serve as provisional intervention points within the broader continuum of care.

The results also underscore the importance of equipping corrections personnel to recognise trafficking victimisation and respond with TI strategies. Research demonstrates that stereotyped beliefs and moral judgments often shape decision-making at the point of arrest (Wiener, Berry *et al.*, 2021; Wiener, Wiener *et al.*, 2024), while structural barriers such as sobriety requirements and relapse-based eviction policies limit survivors' access to housing and treatment (Allert & Wyatt, 2025; Gerassi, 2017). Addressing these obstacles through training, policy revision, and protocol development could increase opportunities for safe exit and reduce the likelihood of recidivism into exploitation. Such reforms position justice-involved settings as potential points of identification and diversion rather than purely punitive systems.

Furthermore, the findings affirm the centrality of relationships with survivor-informed organisations that provide holistic, long-term support. Programs that integrate trauma therapy, practical resources, and community advocacy have demonstrated promise in stabilising survivors after release (Edwards *et al.*, 2023; Gonzalez *et al.*, 2019). Access to these services, particularly when initiated during incarceration or immediately upon release, was consistently named by survivors as essential to recovery. Participants emphasised that shelters and advocates who met them without judgment and embraced them “as-is” created conditions in which durable transformation became possible, echoing evidence that nonjudgmental, relationally grounded care is foundational to survivor engagement (Judge *et al.*, 2018).

Collectively, these findings highlight the need for cross-sector collaboration to reframe jails and prisons as potential pathways to freedom rather than solely as

instruments of punishment. Policy initiatives that embed TI frameworks, remove punitive barriers to care, and invest in outreach beginning at the point of arrest and extending through aftercare may support survivors in sustaining exit. Justice reform, correctional practice, and community-based services must converge around consistent, compassionate engagement and accessible resources that affirm survivor dignity and support a coherent pathway from incarceration to freedom.

Conclusion

This study critically examined how survivors of sex trafficking interpreted their incarceration as a pivotal turning point, one that, for some, catalysed separation from exploitative systems, initiated sobriety, and fostered cognitive reflection. Through SDA of 129 survivor responses (Allert & Wyatt, 2025), key themes emerged, illuminating both the punitive risks and redemptive potentials of the criminal justice system. Of particular significance was the role of shelter networks as pathways to freedom, serving as bridges between incarceration and stabilisation, offering not just housing but holistic, TI recovery support. The findings underscored the urgent need for expanded partnerships between correctional institutions and survivor-centred shelters, as well as the development of jail-based outreach strategies that identify and support trafficked individuals before re-release. These implications necessitate policy attention, practitioner engagement, and future research to optimise systems of care that break the cycles of recidivism into sex trafficking exploitation.

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