

EXPLOITATION AND GENDER:
INCREASING THE VISIBILITY OF
CISMALE, TRANSGENDER, AND GENDER
NONCONFORMING YOUTH



WESTCOAST CHILDREN'S CLINIC

Exploitation and Gender: Increasing the Visibility of Cismale, Transgender, and Gender Nonconforming Youth

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WestCoast Children's Clinic, located in Oakland, California, is a non-profit community mental health clinic that has provided services to Bay Area children since 1979. Our mission is to provide mental health services to youth and families; to train the next generation of mental health professionals and caregivers; and to improve services to children and families by conducting research on the impact of clinical services and utilizing findings to advocate on behalf of the children we serve.

WestCoast Children's Clinic addresses child sex trafficking by providing specialized mental health services to over 100 sexually exploited youth each year, and bolstering the protections and support system for all victims of sexual exploitation through policy, advocacy, community education, research, and training.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments 2

Executive Summary 4

Key Terms and Concepts 5

Introduction 6

Reviewing Existing Research on the Intersection of Exploitation and Gender Identity. 7

Study Methods 10

Findings 11

Implications for CSEC Identification, Training, and Screening Protocols. 15

Participant Recommendations 16

Conclusion 18

References 19

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One of the most prevalent assumptions about the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is that the youth who are exploited are primarily cisgender girls and young women. Though the data are limited, we know that cisgender boys as well as transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) youth are also exploited, yet many remain unseen by providers.

To improve the identification of cisgender boys and TGNC youth who experience exploitation, WestCoast Children's Clinic (WestCoast) conducted a study to examine the barriers to identification of these youth. By increasing the visibility of exploited boys and TGNC youth, we aim to get them the support they need and deserve.

Three broad questions guided this research:

1. What are the observable indicators of commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) for cisgender boys and TGNC youth, and are they different from the indicators for cisgender girls?
2. For indicators shared across all genders, what other barriers contribute to the underidentification of boys and TGNC youth?
3. Based on the findings, what are the implications for identification, training, and screening protocols to improve identification of all youth experiencing exploitation?

METHODOLOGY

In February and March 2022, we conducted eight focus groups and interviews with 34 providers and survivors of commercial sexual exploitation. Participants included individuals from many gender identities, from all over the U.S. and parts of the U.K., and from a wide range of professions, including children's mental health, homeless direct service and advocacy, justice system, and social work.

KEY FINDINGS

Consistent themes emerged from our focus groups. All participants agreed that exploited boys and TGNC youth face an array of barriers that prevent them from being seen as survivors of trafficking and hinder their access to support. Participants believed:

1. The observable signs of trafficking in youth do not differ by gender identity.
2. Signs of trafficking that our participants believed are more common among boys and TGNC youth are often misunderstood or ignored by providers.
3. Exploited boys and TGNC youth face a number of cultural and systemic barriers to care.

CONCLUSION

Providers need to be made aware that boys and TGNC youth experience exploitation, and they need to be educated about how to identify and support these youth. In particular, they need CSEC training that counteracts common stereotypes about exploitation, such as that boys cannot be trafficked, that TGNC youth choose to be exploited, and that survival sex is not CSE. We strongly recommend agencies adopt universal screening in order to circumvent bias and identify a wider range of youth experiencing exploitation.

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Throughout this report we use various terms to describe the experiences of youth who are sexually exploited. We wish to clarify our usage of age-related, identity-related, and exploitation-related terminology below:

AGE-RELATED TERMS

- **Youth:** For the purposes of this report, youth are individuals under 24 years of age.
- **Children:** Children are individuals who are not more than 18 years of age (42 U.S.C. § 3030s(a)(1)).⁸

IDENTITY-RELATED TERMS

Although transgender and gender nonconforming individuals may have different experiences, the acronym TGNC (for “transgender and gender nonconforming”) is used throughout the paper to identify the overlap of experiences between these two populations.

- **Gender identity/Gender:** Individuals’ internal view of their gender; one’s innermost sense of being male, female, or non-binary. Gender identity is well established around age 3 to 4, often influencing name and pronoun preference.⁵⁰ Gender identity does not depend on the gender or sex a person is assigned at birth.²³
- **Cisgender:** When a person’s gender identity aligns with their sex assigned at birth.⁴¹
- **Cisgender boys/boys/cismales:** We often use the term “boys” in this paper to refer to cisgender male/cismale children and youth.
- **Gender nonconforming (GNC):** When a person’s gender identity does not align with the standard “girl” or “boy” categories.²³ Not all GNC individuals identify as transgender and not all transgender individuals identify as GNC.²³
- **Transgender/Trans:** When a person’s gender expression, gender identity, and/or sex does not align with what they were assigned at birth.²³
- **Non-binary:** When a person’s gender identity does not conform to traditional binary beliefs about gender, which indicate that all individuals are exclusively either male or female. A non-binary person may identify as both a man and a woman,

somewhere in between, or as falling completely outside these categories.⁵¹

- **Gender-affirming care:** Treatment supporting transgender and non-binary individuals in their gender transition. This could include both medical and non-medical care such as hormone therapy, gender affirmation surgery, having access to services that align with one’s gender identity, and being called the correct pronouns.²³

EXPLOITATION-RELATED TERMS

For the purposes of this paper, we use “exploitation” and “trafficking” interchangeably.

- **Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC)** occurs when a child under the age of 18 exchanges sexual activity for money, material goods, or anything of value.¹² Whether through a third-party trafficker or through survival sex, both situations are considered commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act.⁵² In this paper we use the term “CSEC” interchangeably with “trafficking,” “child sex trafficking,” and “exploitation.”
- **Child sex trafficking:** The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person under age 18 for the purpose of a commercial sex act (22 U.S.C. § 7102(12)).⁸ We use the term “child sex trafficking” interchangeably with “trafficking,” “CSEC,” and “exploitation.”
- **Third-party trafficker/Exploiter:** Refers to a person who recruits, grooms, and/or exploits youth for their own commercial gain.²³
- **Trafficker:** A person who buys or sells sex with children and youth.⁵³
- **Victim/Survivor:** A person who has suffered direct physical, emotional, or pecuniary harm as a result of the commission of a crime (34 U.S.C. § 20141(e)(2)).⁸
- **Survival sex:** A form of commercial sexual exploitation; the selling of sex to meet subsistence needs.¹¹ Because survival is at stake, this form of exploitation is not a choice.

INTRODUCTION

Though the issue of commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) has gained more attention in the past two decades in both policy and research, much of the information available to the general public does not accurately reflect the varying experiences of trafficking survivors. One of the most prevalent assumptions about CSEC is that exploited youth are primarily cisgender girls and young women.^{1, 2} Similarly, a dominant archetype of CSEC is a cisgender girl or young woman being directly controlled by a third-party trafficker, the person who profits from the exploitation of the survivor through force, fraud, or coercion.^{1, 3, 4} Though the data are limited, we know this is neither the only nor perhaps most common form of exploitation, and that cisgender boys as well as transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) youth are also exploited.^{5, 6} Preconceived ideas about the victims of trafficking limit the recognition of exploitation of those who do not align with those images.¹ When policymakers, researchers, and service providers assume that exploitation only involves cisgender girls trafficked by another person, many youth remain unseen.

To increase the visibility of cisgender boys and TGNC youth who experience exploitation, WestCoast Children's Clinic (WestCoast) conducted a study examining the barriers to identification of these youth. Our research continues a decade of work to improve services for youth who experience exploitation and provide them the support they need. This work includes a program we created in 2009 to provide community-based intensive mental health and case management services to youth experiencing exploitation, which currently serves approximately 100 youth every year. Based on our experiences with exploited youth, we know that many youth experience exploitation for multiple years before anyone identifies that abuse is occurring or that the young person needs supportive services,⁷ and evidence suggests that youth who are commercially sexually exploited, regardless of gender identity, are likely underidentified.⁸

We developed the Commercial Sexual Exploitation-Identification Tool (CSE-IT, pronounced "See-it") in 2015 to address this gap and improve the ability of service providers to identify when exploitation is occurring, especially when youth cannot disclose it. A validated, trauma-informed screening tool, the CSE-IT is used in

over 300 agencies and organizations across the country to screen young people who are vulnerable to trafficking.

Since implementing the CSE-IT, nearly 3,500 service providers have screened over 175,000 youth for signs of exploitation. Data show that in community-based agencies, such as homeless shelters, youth of all genders have equally high rates of exploitation.⁹ Yet in certain settings, such as child welfare and juvenile justice, rates of known exploitation for boys are extremely low and information about TGNC youth is largely missing.

It is unclear whether the gender disproportionality in risk for exploitation in public systems reflects truly differing rates or whether these agencies struggle with identifying cisgender boys and TGNC youth. Numerous studies demonstrate that rates of exploitation among cisgender males and TGNC youth are comparable to rates of exploitation among cisgender girls and young women.^{2, 5, 10, 11} This suggests that service providers working in public systems are missing signs of trafficking among cisgender boys and TGNC youth.

This study seeks to investigate the barriers to identification of boys and TGNC youth. Our information comes directly from adult cisgender and TGNC survivors as well as providers who work with cisgender boys and TGNC youth. Through their expertise, we were able to explore the barriers to identification of boys and TGNC youth experiencing exploitation, and ways to overcome those barriers.

Our goal is to increase the visibility of all youth who experience exploitation in order to prevent ongoing abuse, better connect them to the services and support they need, and ultimately end the exploitation of young people.

REVIEWING EXISTING RESEARCH ON THE INTERSECTION OF EXPLOITATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

PREVALENCE OF EXPLOITATION BY GENDER IDENTITY

Though it is commonly believed that most if not all exploited youth are girls and young women,^{1,2} research suggests that cis male and TGNC youth experience exploitation at comparable or higher rates.^{2-4, 12-16} Studies examining the prevalence of CSEC using large samples of homeless and runaway youth identify rates of exploitation of cisgender boys as high as or higher than that among cisgender girls.^{5, 11, 17} The few studies that exist based on probability samples also identify approximately even rates of exploitation between cisgender boys and girls²⁰ (see Stemple and Meyer (2014) for a detailed review of prevalence by study sample⁶).

Research on the exploitation of TGNC youth is sparse, and their experiences are often perceived as synonymous with those of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth. The few studies that focus on exploited TGNC youth tend to highlight the links between homelessness and survival sex.^{5, 19-23} TGNC youth become homeless for a range of reasons, including caregiver rejection and running away due to lack of family acceptance of their gender identity.^{16, 19} In addition, their risk of exploitation on the street may be higher than that of cisgender youth, given the anti-trans discrimination they face, which reduces their housing and economic opportunities.^{16, 17} Though TGNC youth make up a smaller percentage of exploited youth due to the size of their population, the rate of exploitation among TGNC youth may be much higher than that of cisgender youth. One study estimated that 11% of all TGNC youth had participated in survival sex.¹⁵

Due to inconsistent data collection, the overall prevalence of CSEC is unknown, including by gender identity.⁸ The assumption that exploitation primarily or exclusively affects girls has not been substantiated. Research examining the similarities and differences in CSEC by gender identity largely suggests more similarities than differences — and the differences that do exist generally

center on how youth of certain gender identities are perceived by service providers.

EXPLOITATION AMONG CISGENDER BOYS

The risk factors that make youth vulnerable to exploitation are largely similar between boys and girls. The biggest gender differences seem to be in how exploited boys and girls are perceived. For example, there is a strong stereotype that boys and young men who trade sex for things of value are choosing to be exploited,¹⁴ whereas girls and young women in the same situation are assumed to be forced or coerced into trafficking.⁵ However, any perception of control or independence on the part of the survivor should not be interpreted by service providers as consent to be exploited, nor should it prevent providers from referring these youth to services.

There are no clear differences in CSEC risk factors for boys and girls. Studies examining CSEC risk factors by gender suggest that they are similar across gender identities.²⁴⁻²⁶ These factors include a history of childhood trauma, family dysfunction, drug or alcohol use, placement in foster care or group homes, running away from home or being abandoned, and homelessness. Many of these CSEC risk factors are interrelated; for instance, a child thrown out of their home is at increased risk for homelessness.

Boys are perceived as choosing to be exploited. While there is overlap in the pathways to exploitation for girls and boys, there are differences in how they are perceived by providers and how they perceive themselves. The most commonly cited difference is in the level of personal agency ascribed to exploited boys. Boys are more likely to be seen as choosing to be trafficked and to be less impacted by the accompanying traumas.^{14, 27, 29} For this reason, service providers are less likely to identify exploitation in boys,^{13, 26} boys are less likely to be referred to specialized services,^{5, 26, 29} and exploitation-related trauma experienced by boys is

more likely to be minimized.^{27, 28} While exploited youth of all genders may be criminalized, either directly or indirectly as a result of being trafficked, exploited boys are criminalized at higher rates.^{3, 5, 29–31}

A gendered perception of trafficking may exist in part because exploited boys are less likely to be under the control of third-party exploiters, instead experiencing exploitation through a “market facilitator,” who is often a peer connecting them with people seeking to buy sex.^{4, 5, 26, 31} However, it may be that market facilitators are simply exploiters by a different name. Moreover, it is important to remember CSEC does not require the presence of a third-party exploiter.

For exploited boys, the perception of control or choice in being trafficked may also be part of their self-concept. For example, boys may frame their exploitation as “a hustle,” “a job,” or “work” to feel a sense of control over their lives.^{4, 12} They may frame it this way due to living in a culture where men are supposed to be independent and in control,² and where homophobic attitudes lead to fear about being labeled gay.^{13, 16, 32} These cultural forces contribute to shame and stigma for trafficked boys, making it more difficult for them to talk about or recognize their exploitation.^{2, 4, 12} Gender expectations may also shape how trauma is expressed. Some studies suggest that boys are more likely to externalize their trauma symptoms by acting aggressive, which providers may interpret as hostility rather than as a sign of trauma.^{3, 33} An exploited youth’s response to trauma combined with the false perception of having control may inform how they present to providers, compounding the problem of provider disbelief in boys’ exploitation.

EXPLOITATION AMONG TRANS AND GENDER NONCONFORMING YOUTH

Though some of the least studied populations in relation to CSEC, TGNC youth are among the most vulnerable to exploitation.^{5, 12, 16, 34} TGNC youth often face high levels of discrimination, stigmatization, transphobia, familial rejection, bullying, violence, and abuse for how they identify or present. These experiences contribute to their vulnerability and cause TGNC youth to be targeted by exploiters.^{16, 23, 35}

It is important to note that not all transgender individuals identify as gender nonconforming and not all gender nonconforming individuals identify as

transgender.²³ Little, if any, research focuses specifically on the experiences of gender nonconforming youth. Both groups, however, are at increased risk for sex trafficking.²³ Both groups also face similar cultural and systemic challenges when trying to access supportive services. Though we combine trans and gender nonconforming youth for the purposes of this study, we acknowledge that their experiences as survivors should not be considered identical, and further research is required to delve into the unique experiences of gender nonconforming youth.

Discrimination, homelessness, and survival sex are linked and place TGNC youth at higher risk for exploitation.

Homelessness is a critical risk factor for CSEC as youth of all gender identities are at increased risk once they are on the street.^{31, 36–38} However, TGNC youth are much more likely than other youth to become homeless.^{12, 16, 20, 21} TGNC youth who are shut out of the job market due to stigma, discrimination, and transphobic policies may see exploitation as their only means of accessing housing and other basic needs.^{16, 23, 39–41} Moreover, TGNC youth may be unable to safely access shelters or may be placed in unwelcome or unsafe foster care placements because of their gender identity, which leaves the street economy as their only means of survival.^{19, 20} One study on survival sex among homeless youth found that TGNC youth were 5.6 times more likely to engage in survival sex compared to their cisgender peers.³⁸

Exploited TGNC youth have higher self-perceived agency.

Like cisgender boys, TGNC youth may be more likely than cisgender girls to experience exploitation through survival sex rather than being trafficked by a third-party exploiter.⁴¹ They may also frame their exploitation in ways that create the illusion of agency and choice, largely as a response to a culture hostile to their identity. In interviews, many exploited TGNC youth express that they are not able or do not want to leave their trafficking situation; it provides them with a sense of independence and a source of income, two factors that are often denied to them.^{21–23} Additionally, TGNC youth experiencing exploitation face increased odds of encountering discrimination from providers, further preventing access to much needed services and leaving them stranded in their trafficking situation.¹⁹

TGNC youth have unique health care needs. For TGNC youth, gender-affirming medical care is an

essential medical need that allows them to embody their true identities and offers them an increased ability to pass as the gender they embody, thereby avoiding transphobic-driven violence.^{20, 23} One exploitation risk factor unique to TGNC youth is a link between medical needs (e.g. hormones or surgery) and survival sex.¹⁶ It is important to note that receiving gender-affirming care in and of itself is not a CSEC risk factor and should not be equated with CSEC. However, not having the financial means to access that care increases the risk for exploitation. One study found that hormone use within the past year and gender-affirmation surgery were both predictors of exchanging sex for money or other goods among adults.⁴⁰ In another study, TGNC youth were four times more likely to participate in survival sex if they had purchased hormones illegally.⁴²

IMPROVING EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF ALL EXPLOITED YOUTH

While the extant research suggests that there are few gender identity-related differences in CSEC risk factors, there is evidence that the victimization of exploited boys and TGNC youth is less visible than that of exploited girls. Most of this research centers around risk factors associated with exploitation, but we found no studies examining gender-based differences in trafficking-related indicators. Knowing whether the signs of exploitation differ could help service providers better identify when exploitation is occurring for these populations. This study aims to examine the factors that prevent providers from seeing the signs of exploitation in boys and TGNC youth, and the system barriers that turn youth away and cause them to remain invisible.

STUDY METHODS

Our study focused on determining the key elements required for identifying exploited cisgender boys and TGNC youth in order to help child-serving professionals better recognize signs of trafficking. Three broad questions guided this research:

1. What are the observable indicators of commercial sexual exploitation for cisgender boys and TGNC youth, and are they different from the indicators for cisgender girls?
2. For indicators that are shared across all genders, what other barriers contribute to the underidentification of boys and TGNC youth?
3. Based on the findings, what are the implications for identification, training, and screening protocols to improve identification of youth experiencing exploitation?

To gather stakeholder input, we conducted focus groups and interviews with adult survivors of CSE and professionals who work with trafficked children and youth. Some study participants identified as both a survivor and a provider.

Since no sample frame exists for adult survivors or providers working with trafficked youth, we recruited participants through a snowball sample method. We reached out to child-serving organizations across the United States. Some of these contacts were within WestCoast's existing professional network, some were identified through web searches, and others were reached by asking anti-trafficking listservs and collaboratives to forward the study invitation. These organizations included child welfare and juvenile justice agencies, children's mental health organizations, anti-trafficking advocacy groups, and CSE survivor networks. We sought to connect with individuals who could speak from lived experience as survivors or direct service providers about how the service system response to youth experiencing exploitation diverges for youth of different gender identities.

In February and March 2022, we conducted eight focus groups, supplemented with one-on-one interviews, with 34 individual providers and survivors of CSE. Participants included individuals from many gender identities, throughout the United States and parts of the U.K., and from a wide range of professions including children's

mental health, homeless direct service and advocacy, justice system, and social work.

Each respondent was informed of their rights as a research participant and each provided their consent prior to participation. Consent procedures were reviewed and approved by an institutional review board. Participants were also informed that the focus group would be audio-recorded, and provided their consent to the recording. Audio recordings were transcribed by a professional transcription service. In appreciation for their time, participants received a \$50 Visa gift card.

Reflecting a limitation of focus groups, the participants who chose to speak with us were a self-selected sample of individuals whose views are not necessarily representative of other survivors and providers. There are a number of reasons why survivors or providers might not have wanted to participate in our focus groups. Some individuals who do not identify with the terminology we use or who are wary of intervention by social service providers or feel uneasy discussing their experiences (particularly in light of recent anti-trans laws and policies that directly target children in Texas,⁴³ Florida,⁴⁴ and Arkansas,⁴⁵ and other states) may have chosen not to participate for one or more of those reasons, and may have views that diverge from those represented here.

Despite the limitations, it was important to use a methodology that allowed participants to describe their experiences and beliefs in depth and in their own words. Group discussions allowed participants to hear from others and to consider perspectives they may not have previously considered, thus leading to new insights. The questions asked by the moderator were merely a starting point for the ideas that participants brought to the conversation.

FINDINGS

Though participants shared a range of experiences and opinions, all agreed that exploited boys and TGNC youth face an array of barriers that prevent them from being seen as survivors of trafficking and hinder their access to support.

We asked participants about common indicators of exploitation for boys and TGNC youth, whether these indicators were different than those for girls, and whether there were any gender-specific barriers to identification. As we describe below, participants believed that indicators of trafficking are more similar than different across gender identities; providers' perceptions of the indicators may be gendered, leading them to disregard the signs among boys and TGNC youth; and cultural, systemic, and legal barriers prevent exploited boys and TGNC youth from receiving care.

Participants agreed that indicators of trafficking are more similar than different across gender identities.

When asked whether indicators of exploitation differ by gender identity, participants agreed they do not. The observable signs of trafficking such as frequent running away, homelessness, unexplained cash or goods, multiple sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and signs of current trauma do not apply exclusively to youth of one gender identity or another. While some of these signs may be more prevalent among exploited girls, boys, or TGNC youth, they are present among all youth populations and should be looked for regardless of gender identity.

"[T]he project that I worked on in [my city] was affiliated with a girls' project as well. And so I had the boys' project and [my colleague] had the girls' project and in our work together, we were sort of amazed at how the indicators for trafficking CSEC... were much more similar for boys and girls than not... [A] lot of the commonalities were runaway behavior, homelessness, poor academic performance, high conflict with parents. The foster care system really contributed a great deal to exploitation. And we had a lot of foster kids being exploited within the foster care system."

"As far as red flags and indicators go, I think there's far more similarity regardless of gender than there are differences..."

Participants observed that access to gender-affirming care without resources may be a sign of exploitation.

A number of participants mentioned that when youth lack obvious resources or support to pay for gender-affirming care, access to care, because it is expensive, should be considered a potential indicator of trafficking. This care is as essential to these youth as any basic need, like food or shelter. Participants noted that lacking other financial opportunities, TGNC youth may feel that survival sex is their only option to access care that aligns their bodies with their identities.

"[W]e've noticed a lot that with our youth that are working through a hormonal transition, if they have a loss of access to that, [there is] a big increase in survival sex in order to pay for gender-affirming care."

"Somebody had mentioned hormone therapy. And that was one of the reasons as well that we are seeing some of our youth making money. They call it a hustle, right. Hustling so they can get their meds."

"Specific to our trans youth is: if they're in transition, how? Asking specifically, how are you getting that need met? What specifically is the process by which you're getting your hormones or you're affording your hormones? Because that is not cheap. Understanding how they're able to do that. Especially if some of these other indicators are present, like homelessness, right? It's like, OK, then how are you affording that?"

These observations suggest that when youth obtain valuable goods or services, the source of which neither the youth nor the caregiver can explain, the provider should be curious about where those resources are coming from. It is important not to confuse the presence of gender-affirming care, which in and of itself can be a protective factor, with risk for trafficking; the concern lies in where the youth is obtaining the money to pay for it.

INDICATORS OF TRAFFICKING THAT ARE PERCEIVED TO BE MORE COMMON AMONG BOYS AND TGNC YOUTH ARE OFTEN OVERLOOKED BY PROVIDERS

Though participants agreed that the signs of exploitation are the same across gender identities, they also believed that some signs are more prevalent among boys and TGNC youth compared to girls, such as survival sex or aggressive behavior in response to trauma. Whether or not there are gender differences in the prevalence of these behaviors, if providers are ignoring or explaining away indicators among boys and TGNC youth, these youth are less likely to be identified and receive support.

Providers do not consider survival sex to be exploitation. Our focus group participants widely believed that boys and TGNC youth, more than female youth, experience survival sex. At the same time, participants shared that many providers do not consider survival sex to be exploitation. They commented that many providers still see exploitation mainly as involving a third-party exploiter.

"What I've noticed, especially from some county social workers and [probation officers] is that they see CSEC as just a pimp exploiting the youth. And I think that, from my experience at least, that's a less common situation, especially for boys. I think I've worked with seven or eight and I think six of them did not have pimps... and were engaging in survival sex. So I think there's just a lack of, like I said, understanding that that is exploitation and those are CSEC youth."

"And it still exists in this moment among my own colleagues, that they absolutely think that this whole experience is just strictly pimp trafficking."

Providers discount signs of trauma that are more common in boys. Participants discussed providers' tendency to overlook signs of exploitation that are related to boys' exploitation-related trauma.

"Oftentimes we'll misdiagnose boys with ADHD or with all of these other factors and in reality, it's a response to trauma."

Providers working with sexually exploited young people must work from a complex trauma informed framework, meaning they must understand how the youth's functioning, relating, and behavior are an adaptation to

threat. As we have noted elsewhere,⁴⁶ it is important to avoid misdiagnosing high levels of dysregulation merely as disorders to treat (e.g., bipolar disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, among others). While youth may need help addressing challenges related to these disorders, not seeing the whole person and how their needs stem from traumatic experiences leads to poorly targeted interventions. Furthermore, the youth's experience remains invisible, compounding the trauma of exploitation.

Focus group participants believed boys commonly express their reaction to trauma externally as aggression, anger, and hostility.

"With boys, I think some of them go into bullying. They go into bullying, just to mask the fact that they're being oppressed. So they tend to bully people. They tend to be aggressive. They tend not to listen to whatever people are telling them. Some, it's their own way of calling attention to themselves."

"It would be easier and safer to present as if you have an explosive anger, or that you overreact to things, than to try and reduce them or to appear vulnerable or to appear soft. That's just extremely dangerous..."

Participants said that providers tend to perceive outward aggression as a sign of delinquency and rarely consider it a sign of victimization. As a result, exploited boys are funneled into the juvenile justice system, thereby criminalizing them for their own trauma.

"When we think about our cis boys in particular, [we're] seeing a lot of mislabeling of aggressive behavior, which is a trauma response, on a really regular basis, and so seeing those young boys in particular being shifted to the juvenile court systems as opposed to behavioral health spaces..."

"I think of one youth [who] assaulted... someone in juvenile hall... and so they put them on probation.... And they were being trafficked and addicted to, I want to say it was meth, and then they got clean. Anyway, had we done a better job assessing instead of like, 'Oh, you did something wrong. Let's put you on probation,' Hey, could this counselor actually look like one of their traffickers? And can we have a different mindset and be more trauma-informed? Not that assault is

OK – however, there's a little bit more context for why that happened."

PARTICIPANTS DESCRIBED CULTURAL AND SYSTEMIC BARRIERS TO CARE

Participants also highlighted the cultural and systemic barriers that prevent youth from accessing the care they need, increasing their vulnerability. These themes revolve around how bias at various levels inhibits providers' ability to recognize exploitation. These biases exist at societal (gender roles, gender stereotyping, transphobia), system (screening and support focused primarily on exploited girls), and provider (stereotyping, prejudice, and misinformation) levels. Though the specific biases and circumstances may differ for each gender identity, the result is the same: Exploited kids remain unseen and thus unsupported.

Participants described a misconception that boys cannot be victims of CSEC. There is a widespread belief that men and boys cannot be victims, especially when it comes to sex crimes such as CSEC.³¹ This misconception may be held both by providers and the survivors themselves.⁶ Participants described this belief as a cultural blind spot causing exploited boys to remain largely invisible to child-serving systems.

"[I]f we're relying on our social workers to pick up on red flags, but they have this narrow definition, they're only looking for a girl in fishnet stockings and high heels out on the track, and if it doesn't fit that definition, it just goes right over their head, and I really worry about the boy in a hoodie and the backpack who doesn't fit that at all, but it's absolutely happening."

"I think that organizations find it easier to say, 'Well, we're going to rescue girls,' and how much better that feels to them than to acknowledge that there are boys, or any other gender identity or non-gender identity for that matter— I think they struggle with that... I think also there's ignorance, just straight up ignorance, on who are the victims of trafficking."

Several participants in our focus groups noted that boys are only seen as potential exploiters who need to be stopped, while girls are seen as potential survivors in need of assistance. These perceptions fit neatly within a gendered cultural narrative, but ignore the reality that

many trafficking victims are boys. These oversimplifications also fail to acknowledge how victimization and perpetration are often linked for exploited youth of any gender identity.

"[I]n the work that I've done, when I first tried to start this project in [my city], I did get a lot of pushback... around 'this is not really an issue for men and boys.' And I think the male narrative was more around that men are the perpetrators and women are the victims across all lines, whether domestic violence, rape, and everything else."

"One thing that I recognized is that the male youths that are involved have been identified as the groomers and potential perpetrators and the females identified are all victims. I thought that was interesting in the sense that it was very clear in the way that the investigation opened that the males are seen as the perpetrators and the females are seen as the victims."

Participants noted how the stigma faced by victims of a sexual crime makes it more difficult for male survivors to disclose their trafficking situation. Participants believed that this cultural pressure is a byproduct of homophobia and toxic masculinity, or the idea that boys cannot openly express emotion or vulnerability without others seeing them as feminine and therefore weak.⁴⁷

"It just galls me because our own inability to identify seems to embolden us to say that this isn't happening to boys... When you think about it, the cultural factors at play, the homophobia, the toxic masculinity, the transphobia, and then our inability to even view these kids as possible victims, of course we don't identify it."

"And when they've come forward to [law enforcement] to share their experience of sexual assault, literally, [law enforcement] being like, 'Nah, man, that ain't it. You're a gay man,' and not even recording the assault. And so I mean, even if we just look at the FBI's definition of rape, right, they didn't adjust that until 2016 to include cismales experiencing rape... But it's missing because there's very much that toxic masculinity and that belief that men can't be victims."

TGNC youth face prejudice and discrimination, even within child-serving systems. While support for exploited boys is hindered by gender-based stereotyping, the barriers to care for exploited trans and non-binary

youth are even higher. They face high levels of prejudice and outright discrimination. Participants discussed how TGNC youth endure rejection by caregivers, violence and neglect at home, prejudice and judgment from child-serving providers, and state policies that are actively hostile to them.

"I think that... trans youth who have... been denied access to medical care, transitional care, any kind of care and have had negative law enforcement experiences are going to be far less likely to come forward and seek help from anybody in general."

"Anybody who's non-binary trans is coming in with a pretty long history of trying to seek out services for any number of reasons and being discriminated against by their own parents. And so, nobody really feels safe. Nobody is safe."

Participants mentioned that because TGNC youth often face discrimination and active hostility from the very systems and people that are supposed to protect them, they may find sex buyers more supportive of their gender identities than providers or their own families. Transphobia drives some youth to experience their exploitative situation as more beneficial to them than engaging with child-serving systems.

"It can be comforting when people are giving you attention that you didn't receive growing up. Just being mindful about that and sex buyers... typically were doing a good job about giving me attention and giving me money... The sex buyer might be nicer than their own mom. That's just the reality."

In the face of bigotry and intolerance, youth of all genders learn not to trust people or systems purportedly there to help them, which leaves them unlikely to disclose their exploitation to providers or seek help from responsible adults. Emotional needs that are unmet for youth at home, with peers, or within child-serving systems may instead be met by exploitative relationships with traffickers or buyers. This experience seems to be even more common for TGNC youth.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CSEC IDENTIFICATION, TRAINING, AND SCREENING PROTOCOLS

Our findings have implications for CSEC screening tools, how providers are trained to identify exploitation among youth, and how screening is conducted in child-serving settings.

HIGHLIGHT THE EXPLOITATIVE NATURE OF SURVIVAL SEX

The connection between survival sex and exploitation, especially when it comes to boys and TGNC youth, may not be obvious. CSEC training needs to be explicit that survival sex and exploitation are the same thing and that no pimp, market facilitator, or any third party needs to be involved in order for the exchange of sex to be exploitative.

TEACH PROVIDERS TO RECOGNIZE SIGNS OF TRAUMA

Providers must understand the myriad ways that trauma symptoms are expressed. Teaching providers how to identify the different signs of trauma, how to use validated CSEC screening tools, and how to work with youth using a trauma-informed lens can improve their ability to identify and help all exploited youth, regardless of gender identity. This approach may also help counteract stereotypes about youth, such as that aggression in boys, or any youth, is a problem with their character that requires a disciplinary response.

INCLUDE ACCESS TO GENDER-AFFIRMING MEDICAL CARE AS AN EXAMPLE OF UNEXPLAINED MONEY OR GOODS THAT MAY INDICATE TRAFFICKING

A common sign of trafficking is when a youth possesses a significant amount of money or goods that cannot be explained. Access to gender-affirming medical care ought to be explicitly mentioned as an example of this indicator during training. While there are many things of value that a youth may acquire through exploitation, this indicator is frequently overlooked. It is also important for providers to understand that accessing gender-affirming care is not a problem per se, and for many youth this is a normal part of their gender-identity exploration. It

is only concerning if it is a resource beyond the youth's means and the provider is unable to explain how they got access to it.

ADOPT UNIVERSAL SCREENING TO SUPPORT IDENTIFICATION OF ALL VULNERABLE YOUTH

As participants noted, if a provider holds fundamental misconceptions about trafficking, many exploited youth are likely to be missed.

"I recognized that case managers at first were only giving me referrals for female youth. And then after we had a discussion, [I explained that] across the board assessments need to be done...so that I could screen out who needs those services."

"It's also really up to that individual social worker to do the screenings, and to make sure that they're happening....And when that happens, oftentimes it falls into the social worker's bias, sometimes not intentionally, but they're going to prioritize screening the minor female clients, that maybe have a history of sexual assault, that are continually runaway and that we're seeing these high risk factors for. But they're not necessarily doing the screening on males or on transgender youth. And so there's a big population of youth that are being missed..."

While agencies may not be able to control the root of providers' misconceptions about CSEC, they can implement processes to help circumvent provider bias. Universal screening using a validated screening tool is one of the most effective processes that agencies can put into place for identifying a wider range of trafficked youth. Universal screening means systematically screening all youth who meet predetermined criteria—without regard to presentation. Our recommendation is to screen all youth over the age of 10 at intake and again every six months. This way, even if a provider has doubts about exploitation among boys or TGNC youth, those youth will get screened. WestCoast recently published a research brief about why universal screening is so important.⁵⁰

PARTICIPANT RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to their feedback about indicators of exploitation and barriers to care, participants conveyed recommendations for working with exploited youth. These include building relationships with young people who may be experiencing exploitation, creating safe environments for youth of all gender identities, providing non-judgmental support in order to develop trust, and educating providers to combat stereotypes about exploited youth. It is important to remember that screening is only the first step in helping exploited youth as exploitation does not end at identification and youth may need long-term support to help them live lives free of exploitation. The overarching goals of these recommendations are for child-serving systems to help all exploited kids feel safe, meet their basic needs, and heal from their traumatic experiences.

IMPROVING RAPPORT WITH BOYS AND TGNC CLIENTS

While spending time building relationships with youth may be common practice for mental health and social service providers, it is especially important in working with boys and TGNC youth at high risk of trafficking. Regardless of gender identity, youth who have been trafficked often do not have adults in their lives they can trust. Moreover, boys and TGNC youth face prejudice and stigma when trying to access care, which teaches them that they also cannot count on systems or service providers to help them.

As we have noted elsewhere, an exploiter may be the only adult providing a young person dependability, even if that dependability is predicated on abuse.⁴⁶ Emotional vulnerability may feel dangerous, and youth may expect every relationship to be transactional, including relationships with service providers. For this reason, it may be beneficial for providers to focus first on helping youth meet their basic needs while supporting their positive self-concept—all without challenging their choices or expecting to fix their trafficking situation. In addition, whether a result of traumatic experiences or a function of their age and development, youth may challenge boundaries or alternate between accepting support and rejecting it. Building rapport requires understanding these patterns and not taking rejection

personally or rejecting the youth in turn and concluding that they cannot benefit from services. Understanding the ebbs and flows of relationships with young people experiencing exploitation, being authentic, and accepting their identity are important steps in developing trust.

Participants also mentioned how these relationships can be improved with the help of peer supports; youth may be more willing to open up when working with people who have similar backgrounds and experiences. Organizations should make an effort to hire staff with lived experience to support effective relationship building with youth experiencing CSE.

"You need help, but because of the torture and the trauma you've gone through it's very, very difficult... to trust someone because emotionally, you've been drained, so that wall is there. It needs a real professional or somebody with lived experience that has years and years of experience to identify that."

"It is very crucial to focus mainly on slowly building a relationship before you start trying to jam a bunch of questions in there. And everything that should be general is, 'Hey, we need to run blood tests cause we want to make sure you're healthy,' not, 'We need to run blood tests because we think you might have an STD or STI.'"

"We've talked about relationship building, how much that's important to do to just be there for kids in a way that they need to be there for them and help them get to a point where in that trust of us, they can begin to disclose."

CREATING SAFE AND INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Participants emphasized the need for agencies and providers to create safe and inclusive environments for youth of all gender identities. One person noted that a majority of CSE-focused organizations are female-centric; for example, they may have traditionally feminine names and photos in their outreach materials. Boys and TGNC youth may be discouraged from seeking services if everything they see is centered around helping cisgender girls. Outreach materials need to explicitly say and show that gender diversity is welcome.

"I think that's one of the biggest issues, and then the clients, they don't feel welcomed at all, right? So they immediately shut down as soon as they arrive."

"Just a small thing like that can be really applicable to any gender, but to be mindful with the trans piece, I think it's around: these young people are coming... from a lot of rejection, a lot of adverse childhood trauma. They are going to be typically more hyper-sensitive to the environment that they're in."

"I think sometimes boys don't come forward to trafficking service providers even when they really need services because they don't think that they will serve boys, even if they will."

Participants noted the importance of respecting a youth's gender identity, which includes using a youth's chosen name and correct gender pronouns, and providing program and placement options that match their gender identity. This is especially important for TGNC youth. Providers can model their comfort with gender identity by stating their own pronouns when introducing themselves. Not doing so suggests that the provider may not be a safe person to confide in.

"It's so frustrating and then it's sad at the same time, how the providers have that lack of knowledge or they refuse to even be educated—as little as just identifying the client with the correct pronoun. And then some people are either against it or they're just not open-minded at all. I have to educate staff on that multiple times."

OFFERING NON-JUDGMENTAL SUPPORT

In conjunction with improving relationships with and creating safe spaces for boys and TGNC youth, participants also highlighted the importance of providing non-judgmental support. They noted that providers should avoid stigmatizing youth for the exploitation they experience ("shame and blame"), focus on meeting the youth's basic needs rather than fixing their exploitation, and let youth know they are in a space where it is safe to talk about their gender identity and sexual orientation. Providers should also be direct with youth so they do not think the provider has a hidden agenda. For youth whose primary experience with adults has been one of rejection and exploitation, it is even more important

that they feel safe in the presence of someone who is concerned about their safety, health, and well-being.

"I think with our youth being transparent has been very, very important—just straight up acknowledging one, the mandated reporting, what that consists of, but also, acknowledging what the purpose of them being here is. And that our main concern is really their safety. We're not here to judge. We understand that you're doing stuff that you need to survive, but we just want to make sure we also have protection and safety plans involved in that process."

"I think the relationship and the trust building is what allows the conversation to happen... In my experience, it's really helpful to just be constantly modeling... sex positive outlooks, and being incredibly non-shaming and... just really not using labels as a way to show that you're not judging or trying to put anybody in a box."

PROVIDING EDUCATION TO COMBAT ASSUMPTIONS AND STEREOTYPES

Participants emphasized the need for CSEC education and training for providers to counteract the stereotypes about exploitation among boys and TGNC youth. CSEC training should point out that trafficking happens to young people of all gender identities and include examples of youth from across the gender identity spectrum. Participants strongly asserted that we need to combat the assumption that trafficking only happens to girls. Other stereotypes that need to be corrected include that survival sex is not a form of trafficking, that aggressive behavior is a sign of delinquency and not an expression of trauma, that TGNC youth choose to be exploited, and that male youth can only be exploiters not survivors of exploitation. These stereotypes prevent exploited youth from truly being seen by providers, and ultimately denies them access to care.

CONCLUSION

Improving screening tools and training—and encouraging agencies to adopt universal screening—will help connect exploited youth of all gender identities to the support or resources they need. However, the effectiveness of such tools and processes will be hobbled by the continued existence of transphobia and toxic masculinity. These biases are culturally ingrained, guiding our beliefs about which gender identities are “appropriate” and how people within the binary gender designations are supposed to behave.¹ The concepts of transphobia and toxic masculinity may seem abstract, but for young people who are facing the trauma of exploitation yet are neither seen nor protected, the consequences are quite real. It is clear why youth mistrust the systems that are supposed to protect them when the signs of exploitation are explained away as behavioral issues or youth are denied their fundamental identities. Until these prejudices are addressed, boys and TGNC youth will continue to experience barriers to care.

While the focus of this project was the invisibility of exploited youth due to their cisgender and TGNC gender identities, we also want to note that this invisibility may be compounded by other demographic factors. Similar to gender identity, stereotypes associated with a youth’s age, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation affect how trafficked youth are treated by child-serving systems and the kinds of support they do or do not receive. In particular, the intersection of gender identity and race deserves further attention in terms of its links to the failure of systems to identify and help child survivors of exploitation.⁴⁹

All kids being exploited for sex are not yet fully visible to child-serving systems. Bias against TGNC youth and the misperception that boys cannot be exploited prevent them from being screened for exploitation along with their peers. When the CSEC screening process is based on suspicion of trafficking, cultural preconceptions about which youth can and cannot be exploited influence who gets seen. Thus, our primary recommendation is for agencies to adopt a universal screening approach as screening all youth regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or other demographic factors helps make exploitation visible not only to providers but also to policy makers and the public at large.

Systematically identifying, documenting, and counting all exploited youth is the first step in addressing the violence against them—and is the only way that all kids who face trafficking will be protected.

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