

Harm Reduction with Children and Youth Who Have Experienced Commercial Sexual Exploitation

A PRESENTATION BY: CIARA PHILLIPS
AND MAE ACKERMAN-BRIMBERG



“When ‘relapse’ refers to a low-level illness, it is thought of as unfortunate. When it describes a child leaving a place of safety, reconnecting with an exploiter, and placing himself or herself in what may be grave physical as well as psychological danger, it offends every instinct of a responsible adult – whether professional, caregiver, or parent. And with that sense of offense is the real danger that since we cannot ensure the protection of the victimized child, we may decline to engage them because of the risk to our own reputations.

But our response cannot be ‘if we can’t control you, we can’t help you.’”

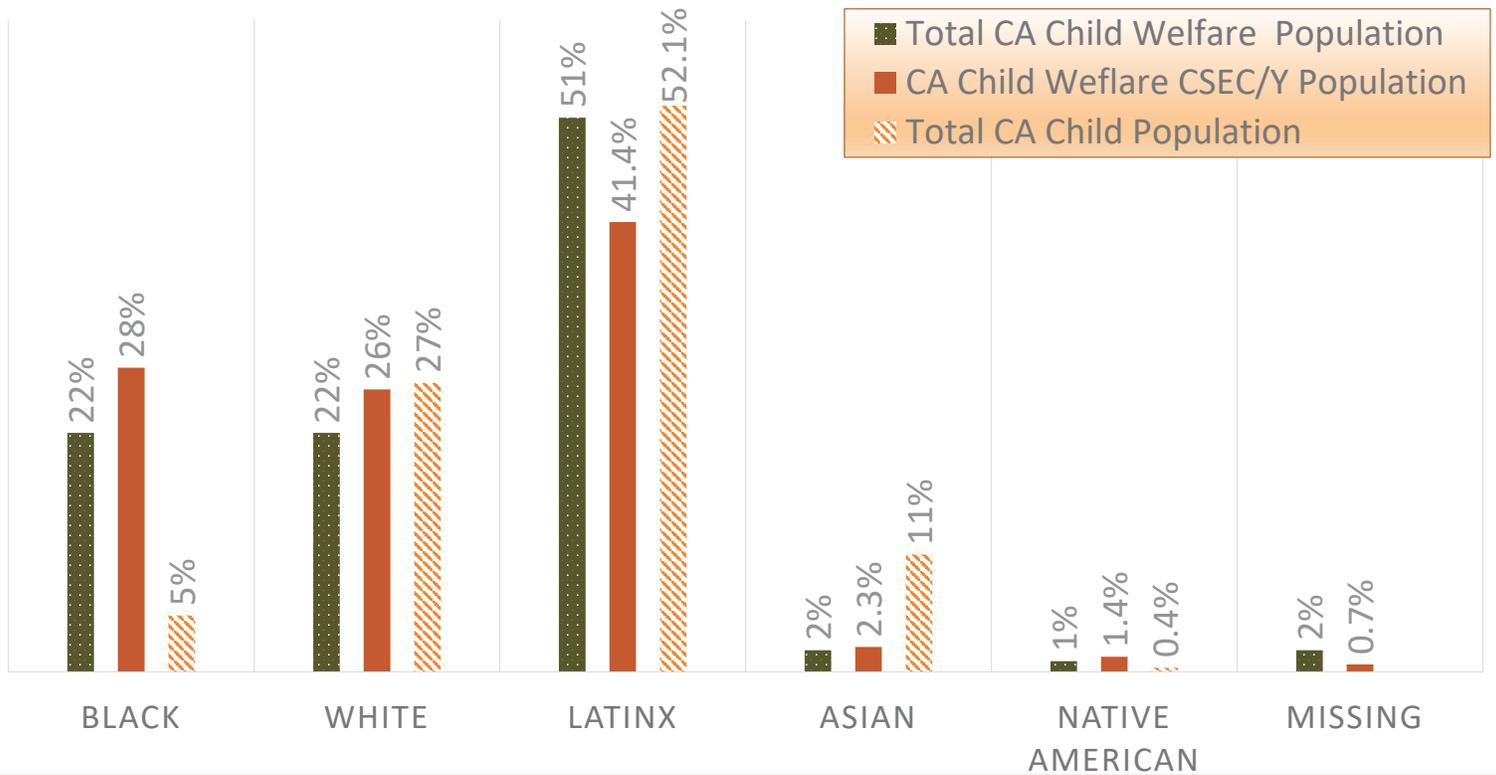
Will Lightbourne, Former CDSS Director

Roadmap

- California's Child Welfare Prevalence
- Dynamics of Commercial Sexual Exploitation
- Reframing Language & Common Terms
- Harm Reduction Background
- Harm Reduction and Commercially Sexually Exploited Youth
- CDSS Harm Reduction Guidance Series
- Harm Reduction in Practice
- Helpful Tips
- Takeaways
- Questions

California Child Welfare & Probation Prevalence

- Over 5,000 youth identified as having experienced, or at risk for, commercial sexual exploitation since 2015
- Average age of entry into the life is 12 years old
- Already marginalized youth – including LGBTQ+ youth, youth with prior child welfare and juvenile justice system involvement, youth experiencing homelessness, and native youth – are at increased risk
- Exploitation of male, trans, and gender non-conforming youth is under-reported and under-identified



Common Terms

- Pimp/Trafficker/Exploiter
- Daddy/Boyfriend
- John/Trick/Buyer/Purchaser
- Date
- Bottom
- Stable
- The Life/The Game
- The track/stroll/blade
- Branded

Reframing Common Terms

- A CSEC → Child/Youth, or Child/Youth who has experienced CSE
- Pimp → Trafficker/Exploiter
- John/Trick → Buyer/Purchaser
- Placement → Home
- Bed / Case → Child/Youth
- AWOL/Runaway → Leaving home/care

Dynamics of Commercial Exploitation

Exploitation comes in many, sometimes overlapping, forms

- Third party exploiter/trafficker
- Survival sex
- Familial

Exploiters are adept at using physical, psychological, and economic coercion to control youth:

- Break youth down and then rebuild them in the exploiter's image
- Often physically violent
- Force use of substances and/or participation in illegal activities
- Threaten the wellbeing of loved ones
- Manage to make youth participate in their own victimization

“But it’s like I have abandonment issues with my family in general, so it was just him telling me he loved me was just a big thing, so every time I talked to him, ‘Oh, I love you. Just come back please. I’ll never do this again,’ this, and this, and that. So, it was just like, - he does care about me. At lease he’s calling me. My family’s not. He is. He’s trying. So, that was the thing.”

-Jasmine

Harm Reduction

- What led us here: Best Practice vs. Emerging/Promising Practice
- Concept: Reducing negative impact of behaviors over time
 - *“Safer versus safest. “*
- Historical application: Concept used to treat substance use disorders and with adults in the sex trade
 - Needle Exchange
 - Distribution of contraceptives or HIV Prep

Harm Reduction and Commercially Sexually Exploited Youth

- Application
 - Applied to behaviors that occur as a **result** of exploitation, not exploitation itself
- Limitations and Tensions
 - Acknowledges that youth are still engaging in harmful activities even while accessing services
- Macro and Micro
 - Must be applied both in policy *and* practice

Harm Reduction Guidance Series

Child Trafficking Response Unit (CTRU) of CDSS convened focus groups with representatives from varying disciplines, the CA CSEC Action Team and Survivor Advisory Board. Developing guidance for the following practitioners:

- Introduction to Harm Reduction: ACIN I-59-18
 - Advocates/Mentors
 - Courts
- Social Workers: ACIN I-28-19
- Probation Officers: ACIN I-50-19
- Caregivers
- Law Enforcement
- Healthcare
- Education

Harm Reduction Practice: Courtroom

TRADITIONAL APPROACH

- Reference youth's "CSEC status" in open court
- Treat youth's victimization as a punitive behavior
- Adversarial

HARM REDUCTION APPROACH

- Allow time for explaining to the youth what is happening
- Identify ways to create choice for the youth throughout the court process
- Craft realistic/attainable orders
- Collaborative and service-based

Harm Reduction in Practice: Reluctance to Leave the Life

TRADITIONAL APPROACH

- Discourage youth's actions and explain how/why they are wrong
- Plead with the youth to immediately discontinue from engaging with multiple sexual partners
- Vilify exploiters

HARM REDUCTION APPROACH

- Acknowledge connectedness to exploiter or other reasons for continued participation in the life
- Explore what aspects of the life/relationships are meeting the youth's needs & identify other ways of meeting those needs
- Offer sexual and reproductive health services regardless of youth's willingness/ability to reduce risky sexual behavior
- Make a plan for how to remain safe with buyers

Harm Reduction Practice: Leaving Care

TRADITIONAL APPROACH

- Look at “AWOL” as a behavior with punitive consequences
- Only intervene when a youth is leaving

HARM REDUCTION APPROACH

- Not *if* a youth leaves care, but *when*
- Create a plan for safety prior to an absence from care
- Provide basic needs even while missing

“I always say when kids are running away, they’re not running too something, they’re running from something.” -Oree

Harm Reduction in Practice: Caregiving/Housing

TRADITIONAL APPROACH

- Not allow youth to participate in outings, such as going to the mall, alone or in groups.

HARM REDUCTION APPROACH

- Allows for developmentally appropriate activities and normalcy
- Safety plans around these activities if needed

“It will sometimes break our hearts. But the most important thing is to assure our caregivers that they are right, and we have their backs when they say, ‘As much as we wish you would not go back out there, we want you to know you can still come back here. This is your home.’” -Will Lightbourne

Harm Reduction in Practice: Education

TRADITIONAL APPROACH

- Punish non-attendance
- Not open to discussing modifications as needed

HARM REDUCTION APPROACH

- Trauma informed
- Modify schedule
- Allow time and opportunity for space when needed
- Identify alternatives for youth as opposed to just leaving campus when they feel they have to

Harm Reduction in Policy and Program Development

- Training across all levels
- Specialized units/workers
- Specialized/collaborative courts
- Extended bed holds
- Integrated protocols
- Flexible programming within residential care
- Applying “safer versus safest” lens to every situation
- Flexibility in formality
- Use case conferences which include the judge to allow attorneys to work through issues
- Set incremental expectations, find opportunities to celebrate big and small success
- Consider language used, avoid typical “CSEC terms”

Safety Planning Using Harm Reduction

- Youth led, flexible safety planning
- Safer versus safest
- Balancing different types/domains of safety
- Maintain transparency and communication
- Offer frequent opportunities for choice
- Consider and reconsider housing/placement options

What to Avoid

Do not:

- Place blame or shame on the youth
- Minimize the youth's connection to their exploiter
- Ignore problematic behavior
- Attempt to change the youth's mind
- Use paternalistic or coercive language
- Try to be the hero
- Overpromise

Takeaways

- Harm Reduction is restorative
- Not every strategy will work every time
- Do not give up
- The short-term incremental achievements gained through the use of harm reduction strategies are the building blocks a youth needs to build a life free from exploitation
- Long term, consistent relationships are critical

Questions for us?

Contact Information

California Department of Social Services

Child Trafficking Response Unit

CSECprogram@dss.ca.gov

National Center for Youth Law

Collaborative Responses to Commercial Sexual Exploitation Initiative

mabrimberg@youthlaw.org

