

Commercial Sexual Exploitation: The Intersection with Child Welfare



Prevalence

An alarming number of children who are commercially sexually exploited have prior histories of abuse and neglect. A recent study of Bay Area commercially sexually exploited youth found more than 75% of the 113 youth studied had experienced child abuse or neglect, and nearly seventy percent had a history of trauma. Researchers have found that child sexual abuse increases the risk of exploitation and is the most common characteristic of commercially sexually exploited girls.

*“Being in foster care was the *perfect training* for commercial sexual exploitation. I was used to being moved without warning, without any say, not knowing where I was going or whether I was allowed to pack my clothes. After years in foster care, I didn’t think anyone would want to take care of me unless they were paid. So, when my pimp expected me to make money to support ‘the family’, it made sense to me.”¹*

Additionally, these youth have a history of frequent family disruptions during their childhood—exposure to alcohol and substance abuse, witnessing domestic and community violence, and/or the loss of a parent. These factors often result in child welfare involvement and placement in foster homes, group homes or residential treatment settings. Out-of-home placement may trigger patterns of running away, which increases youths’ vulnerability to exploiters who target this population. “Exploiters know where foster care group homes are and they directly recruit girls from these settings—they prey on the kids they know are the most vulnerable. Exploiters also use coercion and threats to force these young girls to recruit other youth living in the group home.”²

Youth who identify as Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender or Questioning (LGBTQ) are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system. They find themselves in the foster care system for two primary reasons—they are kicked out of their homes or experience violence or child abuse because of their sexual orientation or gender non-conformity. Once in the custody of the child welfare system, LGBTQ youth often experience further exclusion and ridicule, resulting in a large number of LGBTQ youth becoming homeless. While on the run or homeless, these vulnerable youths are targeted by exploiters. More than one in four homeless LGBTQ children, and close to half of gay or bisexual boys, have been victims of trafficking.



Child Welfare Interventions

Connecticut Department of Children and Families (CDCF)

- CDCF screens every child who enters its system for human trafficking and provides a coordinated response to address victims' needs.
- Each region has an appointed Human Trafficking Liaison to oversee human trafficking cases, ensure data is being collected and reported, and address communication issues.³
- CDCF's child abuse hotline accepts reports of human trafficking, whether or not the parent or guardian is the perpetrator, and tracks this population in its data system.
- A Trafficking Clinical Team administers a battery of mental and physical health assessments to all CSEC youth within 72 hours.
- CDCF provides support services to CSEC youth and their families, including community services, safety planning, and personal development.
- CDCF trains foster parents, congregate care facility staff, and caseworkers on how to work with CSEC.

Florida Department of Children and Families (FDCF)

FDCF has enacted similar policies and practices within its child welfare system, and became the first state to include human trafficking as a form of maltreatment under the child abuse reporting guidelines. FDCF created a Human Trafficking Working Group that has trained abuse hotline staff to screen for potential human trafficking cases and initiate investigations based on allegations of trafficking.

Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS)

Like Connecticut and Florida, IDCFS has amended its child abuse reporting policies to include allegations of human trafficking. The human trafficking policy instructs investigators and intake personnel on how to identify victims of human trafficking, the evidence necessary to support an allegation, and procedures to follow in an investigation. IDCFS also collects data on reports of human trafficking, and tracks indicators of human trafficking based on seven different databases.

“Without specialized placements and other essential protective services and resources our hands are tied – we are learning to identify victims but have nowhere to turn when they ask for help. It is a crisis.”⁴

Challenges for Child Welfare Systems

- Lack of systematic approach for screening and identifying CSEC and those at-risk, especially LGBTQ youth and boys.
- Inadequate data systems and mechanisms for tracking CSEC.
- Lack of safe and specialized placements
- Lack of training for agency staff who interact with CSEC, including schools, health care, hospital emergency rooms, mental health, courts, community partners, faith-based organizations, law enforcement, child welfare, probation, placement providers, youth and families.
- Inconsistency in language used across child-serving systems with respect to CSEC.
- Lack of specialized placements that include stabilization, support, trauma-informed care, transition planning, and after-care.
- Insufficient cross system collaboration including information sharing for youth who are multi-system involved.
- Inadequate funds and funding strategies to leverage existing resources, e.g., funding to maintain placements while youth are missing, or “AWOL.”
- Lack of evidence based prevention and intervention strategies.

1 E-mail from Catherine Pratt, Comm’r, Los Angeles County Superior Court, to author (Jan. 11, 2013, 13:51 PST) (on file with author).

2 E-mail from Susan Drager, Program Director, Transition Age Youth Services, WestCoast Children’s Clinic, to author (Jan. 29th, 2013 11:17 PST)(on file with author).

3 Jacqueline A. Harris, Human Trafficking Practice Guidelines (Draft) (on file with author).

4 Email from Leslie S. Heimov, Executive Director, Children’s Law Center of California, to author (Jan. 16, 2013 10:41 PST) (on file with author).

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