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## A systematic review of the state of the literature on sexually exploited boys internationally

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## ABSTRACT

This systematic review assessed the current state of the literature on sexually exploited boys internationally. We aimed to describe what is known about sexual exploitation of boys, identify gaps in the literature, provide implications for practice, and make recommendations for future research. Multiple database searches were conducted using a combination of controlled vocabulary and keywords to capture child and adolescent sexual exploitation. Our search identified 11,099 unique references and excluded studies that did not include male participants less than 18 years old or disaggregate results by relevant age groups and/or by sex. This review identified 42 studies from 23 countries, providing evidence that sexual exploitation of boys is an issue in both high- and low-income countries. Seventeen articles had sexual exploitation as their primary variable of interest, the majority of which sampled boys who accessed services (i.e., shelters, health care, social, and justice services). Boys' experiences of sexual exploitation varied in terms of venue, exploiters, and compensation. Compared to their non-sexually exploited peers, sexually exploited boys more commonly reported experiences of child abuse, substance use, conduct problems, and mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and self-harm. Despite increasing evidence that boys are sexually exploited around the world, the current literature provides limited data about the antecedents, sequelae, and the specific features of sexual exploitation experiences among boys. Further research is needed to inform, policy, social services and health care delivery specific to the needs of sexually exploited boys.

## 1. Introduction

Sexual exploitation is a pressing yet largely under-recognized source of physical, mental, and social harm amongst children and adolescents (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2013). Male victims of this type of abuse have increased rates of sexually transmitted infections (Edwards, Iritani, & Hallfors, 2006), poorer overall mental health (Svensson, Fredlund, Svedin, Priebe, & Wadsby, 2013), and higher rates of consuming alcohol (Svedin & Priebe, 2007) as compared to boys who have not been sexually exploited. Despite such negative consequences, this topic has received relatively little attention in research, health care, or social justice initiatives across the world. Attention most often focuses on girls alone, even though similar rates of sexual exploitation have been reported among boys and girls (Homma, Nicholson, & Saewyc, 2012; Pedersen & Hegna, 2003; Saewyc, MacKay, Anderson, & Drozda, 2008; Svedin & Priebe, 2007).

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The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989, explicitly protects children under the age of 18 from sexual exploitation (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989). The CRC includes three optional protocols, with one focused *On the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography*, which specifically prohibits “the use of a child in sexual activities for remuneration or any other form of consideration” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2000, Article 2). Since its introduction in 2000, the optional protocol has been adopted by 173 state parties, and is binding in these states (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2016).

We conducted a systematic review to better understand and identify gaps in knowledge related to sexually exploited boys. For the purposes of this review, child and adolescent sexual exploitation was defined as any person under the age of 18 who engaged in trading or exchanging sex or sexual activities (i.e., stripping, exotic dancing, pornographic video-recording), for drugs, food, shelter, protection, other basics of life, and/or for money. Although this definition excludes older adolescents, we acknowledge that sexual exploitation may also affect youth who are over 18 and living in vulnerable and exploitative circumstances.

This systematic review sought to answer the question, “What is the state of the research on sexually exploited boys internationally?” We asked three additional focused questions: 1) What are the antecedents and predictors of child and adolescent sexual exploitation for boys? 2) What are the specific features of the male exploitation experience (i.e., the characteristics of youth and exploiters, settings in which exploitation occurs, nature of the exploitive relationships)? 3) What are the physical health, mental health, and social outcomes, as well as the related health and social service needs of sexually exploited boys?

## 2. Methods

A detailed description of the original search methods has previously been published (Mitchell et al., 2017); in this paper we provide a brief summary of the methods. In consultation with a health sciences and reference librarian, we conducted comprehensive searches of five medical and social science electronic databases – Medline, PsychInfo, Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health (CINAHL), Sociological Abstracts, and Centre for Agriculture and Bioscience Direct (CAB Abstracts and Global Health). Search strategies were developed for each database, using controlled vocabulary and keywords to capture child and adolescent sexual exploitation (Table 1). Boolean operators “AND” and “OR” were used to combine sexual exploitation, age, and sex search terms. Databases were searched twice. The original search was conducted on April 13 and 14, 2015 and limited to English language results published since January 1, 1990, as this date follows the 1989 signing of the CRC. An updated search of the same databases was conducted using the same search strategies, from January 1, 2015 through July 2017, on July 26 and 27, 2017. Supplementary searches using the phrase “sexually exploited youth” in two online resources, Google Scholar and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), were only performed during the original search, on April 13, 2015, but during the updated review, a further hand search of the literature was conducted.

For inclusion in this review, studies had to: (a) provide information about child and adolescent sexual exploitation as defined by

**Table 1**  
MeSH headings and keyword search terms used in Medline (OVID) database search.

Category	Sexual Exploitation	Age	Gender
MeSH terms	Child abuse, sexual Prostitution Human trafficking Sex Worker	Child, preschool Child Adolescent Minors Young Adult	Male
Keyword terms	Sex* exploit* Sex* adj10 exploit* Sexual exploitation of children Sex traffic* Human traffic * Commercial sexual exploitation of children Commercial sexual exploitation Trading sex Prostitution Sex work* Selling sex Survival sex Child pornograph* Transactional sex Domestic minor sex work Sex industry	Child* Adolesc* Young adult Young person Youth* Teen*	Boy* Male*

*Note:* Controlled vocabulary varied slightly among databases and consequently minor adjustments were made to optimize search strategies; “adj10” is controlled vocabulary that searches for these two words within ten words of each other.

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