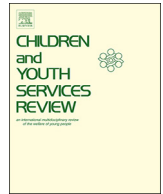




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## Adversity and intervention needs among girls in residential care with experiences of commercial sexual exploitation

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### ABSTRACT

While the body of research on effective interventions for children and young people who experience commercial sexual exploitation is growing, much remains unknown regarding intervention needs, particularly in relation to the role of residential care in meeting those needs. In an effort to fill the gap in this research, this paper will report on a study comparing case files for girls victimized ( $n = 73$ ) and not victimized ( $n = 62$ ) by commercial sexual exploitation who were living in a residential care setting in a large southwestern city in the United States. Findings indicate that sexually exploited girls were more likely to report experiences of child sexual abuse, substance misuse/addiction, dating violence, and gang affiliation; they were also significantly more likely to run away from the group home facility and be identified as having an ‘unsuccessful discharge’. In the second part of the article we will consider the results of this study in the context of a wider discourse on how best to intervene in the lives of CSEC survivors in the United States and throughout the world.

The experiences of children and adults victimized by sexual exploitation and sex trafficking became a renewed policy and practice concern in the United States in 2000, when the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (TVPA) was enacted. The TVPA defines sex trafficking as the “recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act” (22 U.S.C. § 7102). The language of this law aligns with the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons definition of sex trafficking, which has been adopted internationally (Doherty, & Harris, 2015). The legislation also specifies that for those victimized under age 18, no proof of force, fraud, or coercion is required. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the myriad ways in which children and adults are exploited through their labor and for the purpose of sexual exploitation, yet the problem remains difficult to identify and effectively address (Macy & Graham, 2012). Among children and young people, this form of victimization often remains hidden as they may be forced or coerced to engage in sexual activity that is illegal and/or highly stigmatized; they may not recognize themselves as victims of sexual exploitation (Dodsworth, 2015; Hickle & Roe-Sepowitz, 2017), or they may believe the exploitative situation they are in is the best available option to getting their needs met (Hallett, 2015). For these reasons, they often do not fit within an ‘ideal victim’ profile (Hoyle, Bosworth, & Dempsey, 2011), perpetuated by media and evident in the rhetoric adopted by many anti-trafficking and awareness campaigns

(Arocha, 2013). However, media and political interest in this form of child abuse could mean that there is now an appetite for positive change, and that the problem formerly designated as ‘child prostitution’ has now been rebranded internationally to account for the experiences of vulnerable children and young people.

Currently, much remains unknown regarding effective interventions for trafficked and exploited children and young people (Varma, Gillespie, McCracken, & Greenbaum, 2015), especially in the context of current service provision for children and young people identified as particularly vulnerable and/or involved in child protection or juvenile justice systems. Children and young people victimized by commercial sexual exploitation present with complex but not entirely unique experiences of adversity and intervention needs (Klatt, Cavner, & Egan, 2014), making them difficult to distinguish within a larger population of system-involved children and young people (Nadon, Koverola, & Shludermann, 1998). This form of victimization may also be one of many forms of victimization they have experienced throughout their lives. Hence in order to meet their needs, it is necessary to identify whether and how the experience of being sexually exploited may indicate different intervention needs when compared to other highly vulnerable, system-involved children and young people.

To date, very little research has compared the experiences of commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC) to non-exploited children and even fewer studies have explored the experiences of children

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victimized by CSEC residing in residential care, despite the common use of residential care as a means to help or ‘treat’ CSEC (Reichert & Sylwestrzak, 2013). This paper is among the first to consider the experiences of girls aged 11–18 who are residing in a residential care home and explore differences between those who have, and have not, been victimized by CSEC. It will also consider these findings in the context of a wider discourse on protecting and supporting CSEC survivors whose needs may not align with traditional child protection and service delivery systems.

## 1. Background literature

When the TVPA (2000) was enacted, a primary focus was on foreign nationals who were brought into the United States for the purpose of labor and sexual exploitation. Despite concentrated efforts by dedicated professionals across a range of disciplines (including law enforcement, immigration, health and social services), fewer than the expected number of victims materialized (Gozdiak, 2016). More recently an awareness that American citizens, particularly children, could be victimized by commercial sexual exploitation has grown; in the USA and some other parts of the world (e.g. Australia and New Zealand, Indonesia, Cambodia), current efforts are now targeted at addressing the problem defined as ‘commercial sexual exploitation of children’, which is specifically focused on those children under age 18 involved in commercial sex industry work, including those exploited online through child pornography (Cameron, Mendez Sayer, Thomson, & Wilson, 2015; McIntyre, 2014). Some other countries now similarly prioritize the sexual exploitation of children, but conceptualize it in other ways. For example, in the United Kingdom, policy responses to child trafficking (generally foreign-born individuals) and child sexual exploitation (CSE) are slightly different, with CSE defined more inclusively as ‘a form of child sexual abuse...where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power’ that may or may not include a financial transaction (HM Government, 2016). According to Cameron, et al., (2015), countries like Sweden and Canada also take a more inclusive approach to defining the sexual exploitation of children. Despite these differences, effort is being made worldwide to consider how best to support children and young people in ‘recovery and reintegration’ following sexual exploitation (Asquith, & Turner, 2008), including the role of residential children’s homes in delivering that support (Clawson, Dutch, Solomon, & Goldblatt Grace, 2009; La Valle & Graham, 2016; McIntyre, 2014). Hereafter, the term ‘commercial sexual exploitation of children’ (CSEC) will be used as it aligns with how the problem is conceptualized in the United States, where the study took place.

### 1.1. Antecedents and consequences associated with CSEC

CSEC survivors often experience significant adversity prior to being victimized by sexual exploitation, and many have a history of child protective services involvement (Varma et al., 2015). Adversities include childhood sexual, physical, and emotional abuse (Dalla, 2000; Davis, 2000; Gibbs, Hardison Walters, Lutnick, Miller, & Kluckman, 2015), exposure to substance misuse (Nadon et al., 1998), and domestic violence at home (Dalla, 2003). Poverty (Clawson et al., 2009) and discrimination associated with race and gender (Monroe, 2005) have also been commonly identified among CSEC survivors. CSEC victimization is often preceded by running away from home (Clawson et al., 2009; Klatt et al., 2014) and/or feeling compelled to sell or trade sex in order to meet a basic subsistence need such as food or shelter (Greene, Ennett, & Ringwalt, 1999; Firmin et al., 2016). Children and young people victimized by CSEC may experience isolation from positive social support and are at risk of being coerced and exploited by perpetrators who provide help, befriend, or act as romantic partners (Reid, 2014; Williamson & Cluse-Tolar, 2002).

Turning to consequences, CSEC victimization can impact survivors’ physical, emotional, and relational health. They may have experienced

physical violence inflicted by perpetrators (Raphael, Reichart, & Powers, 2010) or commercial sex customers (Church, Henderson, Barnard, & Hart, 2001; Dalla, 2003; Raphael & Shapiro, 2004) that requires medical attention. They may also have other physical health concerns related to the exploitative experience. In a study of 107 trafficked women and girls in the USA, Lederer and Wetzel (2014) found all but one participant reported at least one physical health problem (e.g. dental, gastrointestinal, and reproductive health problems). The mental health consequences of being exploited or trafficked are well documented, and can include posttraumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety (Farley, & Kelly, 2000; Hossain, Zimmerman, Abas, Light, & Watts, 2010; Lederer & Wetzel, 2014), and dissociative disorders (Roe-Sepowitz, Hickle, & Cimeno, 2012). Experiences of coercion, violence, (Reid, 2014) deception, fear, and isolation in relationships make building trust, reconnecting with positive social support, and forming new healthy relationships difficult (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2015).

### 1.2. Meeting the needs of children and young people victimized by CSEC

A growing body of research has begun to identify emerging best practice in providing support and intervention services for adult and child survivors of commercial sexual exploitation (Orme & Ross-Sheriff, 2015). Hardy, Compton & McPhatter (2013) described specialized treatment facilities for victims of trafficking and CSEC as best practice, and using residential programs to deliver specialized treatment has been considered essential for many years (Clawson & Goldblatt Grace, 2007; Rafferty, 2017). However, very little information is available regarding the experiences and needs of CSEC survivors referred to live in residential programs. In 2016, La Valle and Graham were commissioned by the UK Department for Education to undertake a rapid review of evidence on providing support for sexually exploited children in residential settings, and were able to identify only 9 studies internationally that referenced support provided in residential care. Several of these studies were actually about other services; for example, Saewyc and Edinburgh (2010) study on a home visiting program.

There is currently no information available regarding the number of children who have experienced CSEC in residential care, however there are a range of residential programmes that claim to specialize in CSEC. In 2013, Reichert & Sylwestrzak identified 33 residential programmes across 16 states in the USA for individuals victimized by commercial sexual exploitation/trafficking, with 75% of the available beds specifically reserved for young people under age 18. The Children’s Bureau (2015) reported that there has been growing trend to avoid the use of congregate care (i.e. group home and institutional settings) among children and young people throughout the country, and this may be the case for children victimized by CSEC. However, the same report indicated that about half of children who enter into care will reside in a congregate care setting at some point, and the numbers of children in care appear to be slowly but steadily increasing (Children’s Bureau, 2017). Problems with identifying CSEC victimization, and the differential availability of resources for these children and young people across states makes it difficult to know how often residential care is used to meet the needs of CSEC survivors.

The few studies that do explore how CSEC survivors are supported in residential settings have looked primarily at programs developed especially for CSEC survivors, and focus on successful post-discharge outcomes. Successful outcomes are typically defined as 1) a reduction in the number of young people who run away and 2) a reduction in re-offending. For example, Twill, Green, and Traylor (2010) were among the first to write specifically about supporting sexually exploited children and young people in residential settings; their research sought to identify post treatment outcomes of 22 girls living in a residential treatment program specifically ‘treating’ CSEC, and focused on delinquency outcomes. In 2011, Thompson, Hirshberg, Corbett, Valila, and Howley explored program retention rates and successful discharges in a group home program called ‘ACT’ (Acknowledge, Commit,

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