an exploratory study

"AND MINNESOTA BOYS, TOO"

Exploring service gaps and opportunities for supporting boys and young men affected by sexual exploitation in Minnesota

Colophon:

"And Minnesota Boys, Too…"

Exploring service gaps and opportunities for supporting boys and young men affected by sexual exploitation in Minnesota

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Glossary of Terms Used

This report primarily uses the term "Boys" to refer to the group of young individuals discussed herein. The term is chosen to reflect the research focus on unique obstacles faced by cisgender boys when seeking and receiving help, and the lack of information about this group's experiences and vulnerabilities. These obstacles are rooted in restrictive male stereotypes, norms, assumptions, and systems that currently overlook, dismiss, or penalize male vulnerability.

- **Age:** While age is often used to define different life stages and can be a relevant factor in discussions of vulnerability and resilience, it's important to acknowledge that these age categories are not fixed and can vary based on cultural, legal, or social contexts. While age definitions can vary across cultures and contexts, here are some general understandings:

    - **Young men:** for the purposes of this study, refers to male individuals in the transitional phase between childhood and adulthood. In Minnesota, service providers typically consider "youth" or "young people" to be individuals under 24 years of age

    - **Children:** generally refers to individuals under the age of 18 who have not yet reached legal adulthood.

    - **Adults:** refers to individuals who have reached legal adulthood, typically at age 18 or above.

- **Cisgender**: A term that refers to individuals whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth. For example, someone who identifies as a woman and was assigned female at birth is a cisgender woman. This is in contrast to transgender individuals, whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. The term cisgender acknowledges that one's gender identity and expression may differ from norms associated with the sex assigned at birth.

- **LGBTQ+:** An acronym that refers to individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, or any other self-identified categories that fall under the broader umbrella of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. The '+' in LGBTQ+ represents the inclusivity of the community and acknowledges that there are many different ways in which individuals may identify and express their gender identity and sexuality.

- **Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (CSEA):** Any form of sexual abuse or exploitation of a child, in which an offender manipulates, coerces, or exploits the child for their own sexual gratification or stimulation. CSEA can take many forms, including grooming, sexual solicitation, production of child sexual abuse material, and trafficking for sexual purposes.

- **Human Trafficking:** A serious crime that involves the exploitation of individuals for profit or personal gain through means such as force, fraud, deception, or coercion. This crime can take many forms, including sex trafficking, labor trafficking, and trafficking of children for the purpose of exploitation. Human trafficking often involves the use of deception or coercion to recruit and exploit victims, and can have devastating effects on the physical, emotional, and psychological well-being of the individuals involved. It is a violation of fundamental human rights and a serious global issue that requires urgent attention and action to prevent and address.

- **Sexual Exploitation:** A broader term that encompasses a range of abusive or coercive behaviors that involve the use of sexual activity or the perception of sexual activity for the personal or financial gain of the offender. As with CSEA, these behaviors can take many forms, including sexual coercion, sex trafficking, the production of sexual abuse material, and the exploitation of individuals in vulnerable situations or with limited resources.

- **Tribal Communities:** The 574 self-governing Native American tribes that are recognized by the federal government and focus on preserving indigenous culture and heritage. Many of these communities are located on rural reservations that are governed by tribal law and jurisdiction..

- **Safe Harbor Legislation:** Minnesota State legislation, enacted in 2011, which recognizes individuals under the age of 18 who are sexually exploited through trafficking as victims, rather than criminals, and entitles them to specialized services and support. Some provisions of the law also extend to individuals aged 18 to 24, recognizing the ongoing vulnerability of young adults to exploitation. The goal of Safe Harbor legislation is to provide a trauma-informed and victim-centered approach to addressing sexual exploitation, while also providing victims with the resources and support they need to heal and rebuild their lives.

- **No Wrong Door Policy:** A key policy in Minnesota's Safe Harbor anti-sex trafficking law that was created to ensure victims can access the help they need by requiring first responders or service providers to provide appropriate trauma-informed care or connect them to specialized support services. The goal of this policy is to make it easier for victims to access the support they need, regardless of where they turn for assistance.

- **Juvenile Justice System:** A network of courts, rehabilitation centers, and community supervision programs that handle legal cases involving children who have been accused of offenses or crimes. The system is designed to provide legal support and guidance, while also addressing the unique needs of young people and supporting their rehabilitation and growth. The specific procedures and processes of the youth justice system may vary depending on the circumstances of each case and the laws and regulations of the state of Minnesota.

- **Pre-Adolescent Intervention Program for Alleged Sexual Offending (PIP-PASO) Diversion Program:** A pre-charging program in Hennepin County, Minnesota that offers social services and community-based care to adolescents under 18 who have been arrested on prostitution or sex trafficking-related offenses. The goal of the program is to provide a more trauma-informed and supportive alternative to the traditional juvenile justice pathway, and to connect individuals with the services and support they need to heal and rebuild their lives. The program operates as a diversion program, meaning that participants may avoid criminal juvenile charges by completing the program.

Introduction

The sexual exploitation of boys is a deeply concerning yet often overlooked issue that demands urgent attention and action. Global research indicates high rates of sexual abuse perpetrated against boys, yet social narratives continue to minimize male vulnerability. This stark juxtaposition underscores the critical need for greater awareness and responsive support for boys. However, pervasive stigma and a lack of understanding have led to significant gaps in services, preventing many affected boys from accessing care that is tailored to their unique experiences and needs.

This report presents findings from an in-depth mixed-methods study examining services for sexually exploited boys in Minnesota. By applying the social-ecological framework, which analyzes individuals' experiences within interconnected social systems across individual, relational, institutional, and societal levels, this study provides a comprehensive lens for understanding the complex risks and trajectories for boys in the state.

Utilizing mixed methods, this study examines the perspectives of direct service providers ('service providers') in Minnesota working with boys who have experienced sexual abuse or exploitation. It explores the journeys of affected boys, from risk factors and experiences of exploitation to seeking help and accessing services, barriers faced, availability and quality of existing services, and recommendations for adequately addressing needs. Findings reveal a spectrum of interrelated vulnerabilities that boys experience, the pivotal role of early adolescence, the prominence of offenders known to the young person, widespread stigma hindering disclosure, and major gaps in trauma-informed, gender-inclusive services.

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need to move beyond reductive assumptions about masculine invulnerability and deviance. Developing a nuanced understanding of boys' experiences requires investment in marginalized youths' voices, trauma-informed practices, comprehensive services, and multi-sector coordination. While this study is limited by the absence of direct engagement with boys who have experienced exploitations , it highlights the critical importance of including their voices in future research to develop a more comprehensive and authentic understanding of the issue.

A key limitation in this study is the absence of direct engagement with boys who experienced exploitation and attempted to seek help. This study was limited to service providers, with the goal of building upon the findings to safely and ethically include those voices in a subsequent phase. These voices are necessary for future research on this topic, which will yield a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the issue.

This study aimed to explore the following key research questions related to the availability and provision of services and support for boys affected by sexual abuse and exploitation:

- What current cases exist involving boys who have experienced exploitation and abuse (including online) in the greater Minnesota Safe Harbor network
- How are (or aren't) boys in Minnesota accessing services and getting connected to frontline providers?
- What obstacles or gaps exist in providing adequate intervention and support for boys?

To explore these questions, we employed two primary data collection methods. First, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a diverse range of service providers as well as key administrative and academic informants from partner organizations. Second, we distributed an online survey to local partners and referral services. The survey gathered quantitative data through numerical measures, rankings, and prioritizations, as well

as qualitative data via open-ended questions. In the second phase of data collection, we held learning workshops with key community and state-level service providers. These workshops served to confirm our understanding and findings while offering a final opportunity to add perspectives and nuances. This iterative, mixed-methods approach provided greater insight into the perspectives and experiences of service providers working with this population.

This study utilized respondent-driven sampling (RDS) to aid recruitment of participants. RDS is a common sampling strategy for hidden or hard-to-reach populations. In RDS, existing study participants recruit future subjects from among their social networks. In this case, we employed RDS by asking inter view and workshop participants to share the online survey with colleagues and contacts in their professional circles working with males who have experienced CSEA. This created a multiplier effect allowing us to reach providers across Minnesota through the networks of these early participants allowing for a broader, and potentially more diverse dissemination of the survey through connections within the target service provider population.

Socio-Ecological Model

05 **Policy Level**
Law, regulations, policies, & political frameworks

04 **Societal Level**
Broad cultural beliefs, social norms, & group dyanamics

03 **Organizational Level**
Formal organizations, institutions, & community systems

02 **Interpersonal Level**
Family, friends, & other close relationship dynamics.

01 **Individual Level**
Personal behaviors, characteristics, & identity
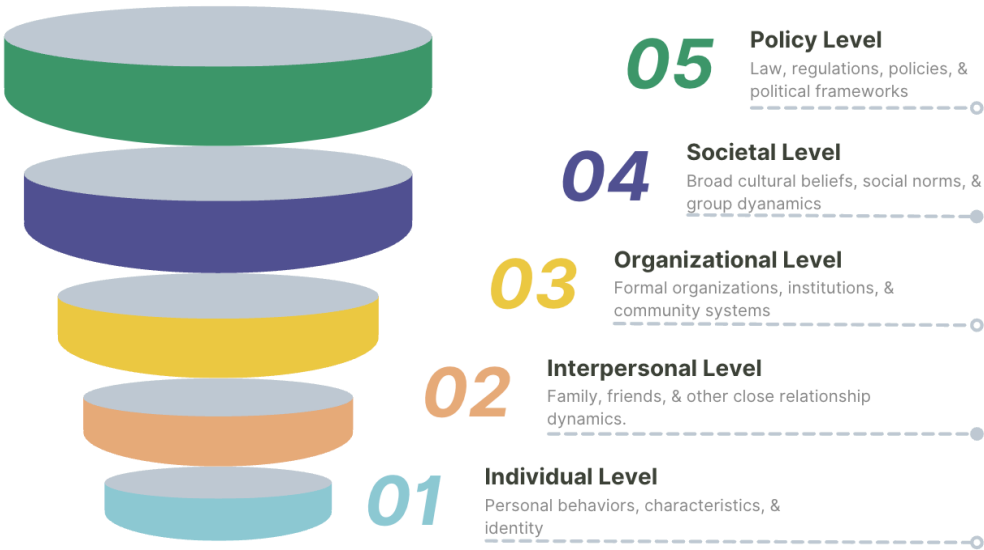
Background

In 2013, PACT (formerly known as "ECPAT-USA") published a groundbreaking paper titled "And Boys Too...", which shed light on the lack of recognition of boys as victims of CSEA. The study drew attention to the experiences of boys, and of significant gaps in child protection programming, research, training, and education that fail to recognize boys' vulnerabilities to CSEA. The title of the paper highlighted that boys are commonly considered an afterthought in the field of child protection. The 2013 study examined the underreported issue of Child Sex Exploitation of Boys (CSEB) in the U.S. and found that up to 50% of all sexually exploited children were boys. Boys

entered the sex trade for similar reasons as girls, but faced unique risks and challenges, and received limited support and services compared to girls.

A decade after the seminal "And Boys Too..." report, commercial sexual exploitation and abuse of boys remains a largely neglected or overlooked issue. This project establishes an initial foundation of data and insights to inform more extensive research and analysis focused on boys. Recognizing this persistent challenge, PACT advocates for a substantial, national effort to advance our knowledge of CSEA among boys. The project's primary objective is to establish a robust foundation of data and resources at the grassroots level. This groundwork will serve as a pilot project for more extensive research in Minnesota and gap analysis focused on boys.

This work only begins to uncover the surface of this complex problem. The lack of progress nationally in 10 years elucidates deeply ingrained cultural biases that deny a reality in which boys can be–and are–victims of sexual exploitation. A more profound exploration of boys' experiences and needs is now imperative through research uplifting marginalized narratives. Only by confronting prevailing social attitudes about masculinity can we catalyze social change. If "And Boys' Too'" was the first step toward raising this critically important issue, this project is a necessary second step on the long road ahead.

Gender & Vulnerability

Existing research highlights the complex interplay between masculinity, vulnerability, and the sexual exploitation of boys and young men. Studies have shown that certain groups of boys face disproportionate risks of sexual exploitation, including youth in foster care (Saewyc et al., 2006), homeless youth (Nadon et al., 1998), and lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) youth (Gangamma et al., 2008). Among youth in foster care, LGB individuals are especially susceptible, comprising 20-40% of the homeless adolescent population (2008). Transgender and gender diverse (TGD) students are also particularly vulnerable, with a higher prevalence of trading sex compared to their cisgender peers (Rider et al, 2022), along with increased rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide attempts (Jackman et al., 2017). Mezzalira et al. (2023) found that rigid societal attitudes around gender roles and expectations exacerbate mental health challenges for TGD youth who experience CSEA.

Re (2011) reported data from a Pacific Midwest Children's Advocacy Center revealing that very few sexually exploited boys were referred for evaluation, reflecting entrenched societal biases about masculinity and vulnerability. These biases contribute to the minimization and lack of recognition of male victimization, hindering the identification and support of sexually exploited boys. The ECPAT Global Boys Initiative (2021) has noted similar findings across diverse countries and cultures, underlining the mental health consequences when exploitation intersects with restrictive masculine norms. Hill (2021) and Nodzenski & Davis (2023) argue that cultural biases impede identification of male victims and access to supportive services, leaving sexually exploited boys and young men hidden, overlooked, and undertreated within a culture that emphasizes male invulnerability. The Minnesota Student Survey found that approximately 5,000 students reported trading sex (Minnesota Student Survey, 2019, 2022), with Martin et al. (2023) revealing that 1.2% of cisgender boys reported engaging in sex trading.

Transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) youth face unique challenges that can increase their vulnerability to sexual exploitation. Research has shown that TGNC youth experience higher rates of homelessness, discrimination, and victimization compared to their cisgender peers (Keuroghlian et al., 2014). Furthermore, TGNC youth may face additional barriers to accessing safe and affirming services, such as harassment and discrimination in shelters and healthcare settings. The long-term psychological impact of CSEA on survivors is significant, as discussed by Offidani et al. (2022). They emphasize that the trauma of CSEA can have lasting effects if left

unaddressed, underscoring the need for early recognition and intervention to support the healing and well-being of survivors.

Societal Attitudes and Stereotypes

Deeply entrenched societal attitudes and stereotypes shape the discourse, research, and response surrounding the sexual exploitation of boys and young men. Several studies have explored how deeply entrenched societal attitudes and stereotypes shape the discourse, research, and response surrounding the sexual exploitation of boys and young men. Moynihan et al. ([2018](#)) posit that male victims are often perceived and treated differently than females due to pervasive gender biases, contributing to disparities in how exploitation is recognized, investigated, and addressed across genders. Gewirtz-Meydan and Finkelhor ([2020](#)) found that male victims of sexual abuse were less likely to be believed and more likely to be blamed for their experiences compared to female victims.

Moreover, the literature highlights how certain populations of boys and men face additional barriers due to intersecting stigmas related to race, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Stereotypes of black male criminality that originated during slavery to justify oppression continue to drive systemic disparities in the modern criminal justice system, obscuring the victimization of African American men and boys ([Vera Institute of Justice, 2018](#)). These stereotypes fuel the disproportionate arrest and incarceration of black men, with 1 in 3 black men born in 2001 expected to be imprisoned in their lifetime compared to 1 in 17 white men ([2018](#)). Historical perceptions stemming from slavery have thus contributed to the marginalization and underrepresentation of African American male victims ([2018](#)).

The literature also points to intersecting social issues that can increase the risk of exploitation for boys, particularly factors such as poverty, homelessness, and substance abuse. Re ([2023](#)) suggests that despite being vulnerable, boys are often seen as less in need of protection than their female counterparts. Several authors emphasize the importance of recognizing and addressing these intersecting social issues for preventing the exploitation of boys and young men and ensuring that all survivors have access to needed support and resources ([Casey et al., 2013](#); [Martin et al., 2017](#)).

Throughout the studies, there is a clear need for a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between masculinity, vulnerability, and intersecting identities to improve identification, support, and prevention for boys and young men experiencing CSEA. The literature points to several key areas for further research and action, including: critically examining restrictive gender norms and societal attitudes; recognizing the unique risks and challenges faced by specific populations; investing in research on the experiences and needs of sexually exploited boys and young men; developing gender-responsive, culturally sensitive, and trauma-informed policies, practices, and services; and addressing intersecting social issues that increase vulnerability to exploitation.

CSEA Impact on Boys and Gender Diverse Youth

Building on the complex interplay of masculinity, vulnerability, and societal attitudes discussed in the previous section, it is crucial to examine the distinct impacts of CSEA on boys and gender diverse youth. Youth of all genders are impacted by sexual exploitation and abuse. However, the distinct needs of male survivors are often overlooked due to cultural stigma and bias. Sexually exploited boys commonly experience adverse mental health effects including depression, PTSD, and substance abuse ([Barnert et al., 2022](#)). A study by Re ([2011](#)) found that half of exploited boys in their sample had attempted suicide in the past year, illustrating the severity of mental health consequences. Physical health problems, social isolation, and career/economic challenges may also result from trauma ([Briere, 1996](#); [2022](#)). While existing literature confirms cisgender boys and cisgender girls experience similar

levels of sexual exploitation, boys remain an invisible, undertreated population within systems of care (Moynihan et al., 2018). For example, a study by the U.S. Department of Justice found that only 15% of sexually exploited boys had received any form of specialized services, compared to 65% of sexually exploited girls (Swaner et al., 2016). The trauma of CSEA can have lasting psychological effects if left unaddressed, underscoring the need for early recognition and intervention (Offidani et al., 2022).

Recent research has explored the concept of stress recalibration during sensitive developmental periods. Howland (2023) hypothesizes that the perinatal period, which includes pregnancy, lactation, and early parenthood, may be an additional window of stress recalibration in adult life. This period is characterized by heightened neural plasticity and marked changes in stress system function, similar to childhood recalibration periods. While complexities and challenges exist in delineating the boundaries of perinatal stress recalibration, this concept may have implications for optimizing interventions and understanding mechanisms of risk and resilience. McLaughlin et al. (2019) reviewed evidence that childhood trauma exposure leads to alterations in neural networks involved in threat processing, emotional regulation, and executive functioning. These changes are associated with increased risk for negative mental health outcomes and maladaptive behaviors in youth.

Transgender and gender-diverse (TGD) youth who experience CSEA face unique challenges compounded by rigid societal attitudes around gender roles (Mezzalira et al., 2023). TGD youth are at a higher risk of experiencing sexual exploitation compared to their cisgender peers (Minnesota Student Survey, 2019), and also face increased rates of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and suicidality (Jackman et al., 2017). However, the specific experiences and needs of TGD survivors remain largely unexamined in the literature, highlighting a critical gap in understanding and support for this population.

Rigid societal attitudes around gender roles compound the challenges faced by transgender and gender-diverse youth experiencing child sexual exploitation and abuse (Mezzalira et al., 2023). Research on how societal notions of masculinity affect male survivors' recovery from abuse remains limited (Forde & Duvvury, 2016). Outmoded assumptions about gender persist among service providers and negatively affect responses to male victims within healthcare, legal, and community systems (Betancourt, 2019). These biases and assumptions can lead to the minimization of male survivors' experiences, as well as barriers to accessing appropriate care and support (Easton et al., 2014).

Across populations, restrictive notions of masculinity and pervasive stigma prevent many male survivors from being identified and accessing necessary care (Easton et al., 2014). The Star Tribune's investigative report on the juvenile justice system in Minnesota explores the complex outcomes of two justice-involved cousins with similar exploitative/abusive experiences, but deeply divergent outcomes. The report found that the male cousin's experiences of sexual exploitation were repeatedly overlooked and minimized by the justice system, leading to a lack of appropriate intervention and support. In contrast, the female cousin's experiences were recognized and addressed more readily, leading to better outcomes. These findings underscore the need for empathetic systems of support and rehabilitation that overcome gender bias (Star Tribune, 2022).

Challenges in Identifying and Supporting Boys

Building on the distinct impacts of CSEA on boys and gender diverse youth discussed previously, it is crucial to examine the multilevel challenges that impede effective identification and support for these populations. At the individual level, practitioners may struggle to recognize warning signs and respond appropriately to disclosures among male survivors due to ingrained cultural biases (Struve & Colrain, 2021). These biases intersect with the strong stigma surrounding victimization that deters male survivors from seeking help in the first place (Easton et al.,

2014). As one survivor told the Star Tribune, "I was never given any options or resources, I just thought it was something I had to deal with on my own" ([Star Tribune, 2022b](#)).

Transgender and gender diverse (TGD) youth face compounded barriers, including a lack of LGBTQ+ inclusivity and competency in services that are rarely tailored to their unique needs ([Seelman, 2022](#); [Nodzenski & Davis, 2023](#)). In the context of sexual exploitation, the absence of gender-affirming and culturally responsive care further marginalizes TGD youth, hindering their ability to disclose abuse, access appropriate support, and heal from trauma.

These individual and community-level barriers are exacerbated by fragmentation in systems tasked with supporting affected youth. In Minnesota, fragmentation in juvenile justice systems and lack of care coordination have created service gaps. As reporting in the Star Tribune revealed, "[the] closing of youth rehabilitation facilities have funneled affected boys into the criminal justice system instead of providing them with trauma-informed care, including community-based and survivor-informed options" ([Star Tribune, 2022b](#)).

Yurteri et al. ([2021](#)) investigated factors affecting the disclosure time of child sexual abuse (CSA) in a sample of 125 sexually abused children and adolescents. They found that delayed disclosers were younger, more likely to be victims of intrafamilial CSA, and less likely to have experienced penetration or made voluntary disclosures. The results highlight the need for age-appropriate education and prevention programs to increase awareness of sexual abuse, particularly intrafamilial abuse, and promote voluntary disclosure in children and adolescents, especially for younger age groups.

Gagnier, Collin-Vézina, and De La Sablonnière-Griffin ([2017](#)) explored the experiences of adult male survivors of child sexual abuse (CSA) in obtaining services. Their study revealed that social norms and stereotypes regarding masculinity and male victimization heavily influenced service use and accessibility. Male survivors faced challenges in finding services tailored to their needs, and they often had to wait a long time to receive support. The authors suggest that policy-level changes are necessary to reflect the reality and needs of male CSA survivors and to increase their social recognition.

These multilevel challenges are not unique to Minnesota. [ECPAT's Global Boys Initiative](#) research across multiple countries ([2023](#)) has identified similar barriers, affirming that individual biases coupled with stigma deter male survivors of exploitation from seeking help and services often fail to meet the specific needs of boys, further marginalizing these already vulnerable groups. The Initiative also found that systemic fragmentation consistently funnels affected boys into criminal justice systems rather than community-based, trauma-informed alternatives better equipped to break cycles of violence.

Scope and Prevalence of CSEA in Minnesota

While limited, research indicates childhood sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) impacts a diversity of youth across the gender spectrum in Minnesota. The Minnesota Student Survey ([2019](#), [2022](#)) found approximately 5,000 students reported trading sex, with even higher rates among marginalized groups like transgender adolescents ([Rider et al., 2022](#))). The survey also captures related adverse experiences that could be relevant risk factors for CSEA, such as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; housing instability and homelessness; parental incarceration; and experiences of discrimination, harassment, and bullying.

A recent study by Martin et al. ([2023](#)) provided new insights into sex trading specifically among adolescent boys in the state. Their analysis of the Minnesota Student Survey ([Palmer, 2022](#)) revealed 1.2% of cisgender boys reported trading sex and further suggests disproportionate risks among some marginalized male groups, particularly

American Indian, Black, and LGBQ male students, across several measures. These localized findings elucidate concerning prevalence and risks, while the population-based sample counters prevailing stereotypes regarding male victims. As experts describe, research centering male survivors remains critical to fully illuminate the scope and transform policies to serve all victims equitably (2022).

Recent data from the Minnesota Youth Interventions report (Working Group on Youth Interventions, 2024) underscores the stark disparities in out-of-home placements across the state, with American Indian youth comprising 12% of placements despite making up only 1% of the state's youth population, and African American youth comprising 18% of placements while accounting for 9% of the population. These disproportionalities mirror the heightened risks of sexual exploitation faced by youth of color, particularly Indigenous youth, as identified by service providers in the current study.

Elucidating the full scope, experiences, and needs across gender and cultural groups remains a critical next step (Palmer, 2022). Such research can inform targeted supports and policy reforms that address the unique needs of Minnesota's male and gender-diverse youth. Particularly, efforts to gain in-depth qualitative insights directly from exploited boys and men are required to inform, develop, and guide appropriate interventions.

While data are scarce, studies suggest Native American, homeless, and queer-identifying boys may face elevated risks of CSEA in Minnesota (Filoteo et al., 2021; Rider et al., 2022). Qualitative accounts from exploited youth in Minnesota reveal the complex circumstances and power dynamics surrounding their experiences, including recruitment by family members and peers (Edinburgh et al., 2015). These firsthand narratives provide critical context about the range of exploitation types, motivations, and resulting trauma. However, more research bringing survivors' voices to the foreground is needed to define from their perspective, fully understand the problem, and inform appropriate interventions.

However, significant research gaps remain regarding at-risk boys in Minnesota. Despite these gaps, emerging research has begun to elucidate the scope and prevalence of childhood sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) within Minnesota across genders. A major 2017 study by Martin, Melander, Karnik, and Nakamura focused specifically on understanding the characteristics and behaviors of sex buyers in Minnesota. Findings revealed a complex local marketplace involving online and street recruitment reflecting gender disparities and diverse buyer demographics, with the overwhelming majority of identified buyers being male (94%). This likely reflects broader gender disparities surrounding commercial sexual exploitation locally (Martin et al., 2017).

Challenges and Barriers in Minnesota

Addressing pervasive gender bias is complex but essential to serve male survivors of childhood sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) in Minnesota. The pervasive societal assumptions and biases that minimize male victimization, as identified by service providers in this study, is similarly echoed in the abovementioned Interventions report (2024), which highlighted how ingrained notions of masculinity and victimhood contribute to the under-identification of sexually exploited boys across child welfare, juvenile justice, and other systems tasked with protecting vulnerable youth. The Department of Justice (DOJ) emphasizes in updated guidance that recognizing and mitigating gender bias at individual and systemic levels is critical when investigating cases of exploitation and abuse (U.S. Department of Justice, 2023). At an individual level, the DOJ states that service providers require comprehensive training to avoid re-traumatization of male victims through judgment, dismissal or victim-blaming attitudes. The guidance provides approaches for implementing trauma-informed, equitable practices that overcome ingrained biases (2023). However, changing individual provider practices is only one piece of a larger puzzle.

In Minnesota, sexually exploited youth often become entangled with the juvenile justice system. Youth diversion programs aim to rehabilitate and reduce recidivism through alternatives to harsh disciplinary actions. However, concerns exist regarding the fairness and efficacy of these interventions, as diversion efforts currently lack uniform standards, practice, and oversight across jurisdictions (Star Tribune, 2022). For example, eligibility varies by county rather than needs of the child. Intensive wraparound services in one county may be a single meeting in another.

Significant investments and reforms are needed to expand evidence-based options, address disparities, improve completion rates, and track long-term impacts on youth outcomes (Minnesota Department of Public Safety, 2021). Research suggests that punitive responses, like extending probation requirements for not meeting program demands, may reinforce negative behavior in youth instead of facilitating rehabilitation (Farrell, Betsinger, & Hammond, 2018).

With the closing of youth detention facilities, Minnesota is also eliminating alternatives for adolescents with high-risk behaviors who may be funneled into the criminal system instead of receiving needed trauma-informed treatment and care (Star Tribune, 2022). This gap points to the urgency of developing effective community-based rehabilitation models.

Community-Based Alternatives

To better serve sexually exploited boys in Minnesota, policy reforms and community-based approaches are needed to transform the juvenile justice and rehabilitation systems. A study by Turner et al. (2019) demonstrates the potential of community-based approaches over institutionalization for high-risk youth. The study compared outcomes between Functional Family Therapy for Child Welfare (FFT-CW), an intensive family therapy model involving home-based sessions, and typical child welfare services among a sample of 3,875 ethnically diverse, maltreated youth in New York City over 16 months.

FFT-CW families completed treatment faster, were more likely to meet all service goals, had fewer subsequent abuse allegations, and lower rates of out-of-home placements. While this study was conducted in New York, its findings illustrate why community-based interventions may achieve greater success in rehabilitating exploited, high-risk adolescents compared to punitive approaches (Turner et al., 2019). However, Minnesota has struggled to provide such tailored programming, especially for diverse groups (Palmer, 2022).

Hambrick et al. (2019) discuss how safe, stable, and nurturing relationships can buffer against the detrimental effects of early life stress. They review evidence that sensitive caregiving promotes adaptive neurobiological regulation and resilience in children exposed to adversity. Racine et al. (2020) found that a trauma-focused intervention fostering positive parenting skills led to reductions in child trauma symptoms and behavioral problems, with enhancing supportive parent-child relationships being a key mechanism for promoting resilience in trauma-exposed youth.

Specific Gaps and Opportunities for Improvement in Minnesota

Interviews with Minnesota frontline workers underscore the critical need for trauma-informed, identity-affirming care that shatters damaging assumptions linking gender and sexual orientation to abuse risks, especially for marginalized groups (Palmer, 2022). Recent research by Martin et al. (2023) provides valuable context, revealing that while boys who identify as gay, bisexual, or queer (GBQ) have higher odds of trading sex compared to heterosexual boys, the majority of boys who reported trading sex in their study identified as heterosexual. This

finding challenges prevailing stereotypes and highlights the importance of avoiding assumptions in clinical and social service approaches.

Furthermore, Martin et al. ([2023](#)) found that boys who reported a somewhat-to-mostly feminine gender expression, as well as those who experienced sexual harassment and harassment based on gender expression and sexual orientation, were more likely to report trading sex. These experiences of harassment, which can be understood as minority stressors, contribute to internalized negativity and mental health challenges. The significantly higher rates of long-term mental health treatment among boys who traded sex underscore the urgent need for trauma-informed, affirming care.

To effectively support sexually exploited boys and young men, Minnesota must enact policies that prioritize rehabilitation over criminalization, integrate diversion programs with comprehensive community-based services, and provide unconditional support - proven strategies to reduce recidivism and enhance long-term outcomes ([Farrell, Betsinger, & Hammond, 2018](#)). Cultivating strategic global partnerships could also accelerate progress and innovation in Minnesota. However, it is equally essential to address the persistent gaps in Minnesota-focused research on the specific risks, challenges, and support needs of sexually exploited boys and men [(Palmer, 2022)](#). Investing in localized studies that amplify the voices and experiences of male survivors, like the work of Martin et al. ([2023](#)), is crucial to build a more robust, nuanced understanding of this underserved population.

Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives and experiences of service providers working with boys and young men affected by sexual exploitation in Minnesota. By combining different research methods, we aimed to gather rich, nuanced data that could paint a more complete picture of the challenges, gaps, and opportunities in serving this population.

Our study design included three main components: an online survey, semi-structured interviews, and group learning workshops. Each method was carefully chosen to serve a specific purpose and to complement the others. The online survey provided a low-barrier entry point for participants to share their insights and allowed us to gather a broad range of quantitative data. The semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, gave us the opportunity to dive deeper into individual experiences and to explore themes that emerged from the survey in more detail. Finally, the group learning workshops created a collaborative space for participants to reflect on the findings, share their expertise, and generate actionable recommendations.

A key feature of our study design was its iterative nature. Rather than adhering to a rigid, predetermined plan, we intentionally built in flexibility to adapt our approach based on the insights and feedback we received from participants along the way. This meant that we continuously refined our questions, prompts, and activities to ensure that we were capturing the most relevant and meaningful data possible. By embracing an iterative design, we were able to stay responsive to the needs and priorities of our participants and to generate findings that were grounded in their lived experiences.

Sampling and Recruitment

To recruit participants for our study, we used a combination of purposive and respondent-driven sampling strategies. First, we identified potential participants through our existing networks and partnerships, including Safe Harbor providers, youth advocacy organizations, and other relevant communities of practice. We sent out email

invitations to these individuals, explaining the purpose and scope of the study and inviting them to participate in the online survey and/or semi-structured interviews.

From there, we used respondent-driven sampling (RDS) to expand our pool of participants. RDS is a recruitment method that involves asking initial participants to refer other eligible individuals from their professional networks to the study. This "snowball" approach allowed us to tap into a wider range of perspectives and experiences, beyond our immediate contacts.

Importantly, we did not provide any compensation or incentives for participation in the study. We wanted to ensure that all participants were motivated by a genuine desire to contribute to the research and to share their insights and expertise, rather than by any external rewards.

Research Activities

Online Survey

The online survey served as an accessible, low-barrier entry point for service providers to share their perspectives and experiences related to working with boys and young men affected by sexual exploitation in Minnesota. The survey was designed to gather primarily quantitative data, with a focus on generating descriptive statistics that could provide a high-level overview of key issues and trends.

To be eligible to participate in the survey, individuals needed to be at least 18 years old, currently employed as a service provider in Minnesota, and working directly with male survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse in their role. We intentionally kept the eligibility criteria broad to ensure that we could capture a wide range of perspectives from across the state.

The survey itself was relatively brief, taking around 25 minutes to complete, and consisted of a mix of multiple-choice questions and 4-point Likert scale items. The questions were carefully crafted to cover a range of key topics, including:

- Respondent demographics (e.g., age, gender identity, race/ethnicity, geographic service area)
- Professional background (e.g., years in role, primary position, service contexts)
- Caseload details (e.g., number of clients, demographics served)
- Experiences with male clients (e.g., key needs, strengths, challenges)
- Perceptions of local service quality and availability in their region

In total, we received responses from 40 participants across Minnesota. The sample was diverse in terms of gender identity, geographic service area, and professional background, which allowed us to capture a range of perspectives and experiences. By analyzing the survey data using descriptive statistics, we were able to identify key patterns and trends related to the needs, challenges, and opportunities in serving boys and young men affected by sexual exploitation in Minnesota.

Semi-Structured Interviews

To gain a more in-depth understanding of service providers' firsthand experiences working with male survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews. These interviews were designed to complement the online survey by allowing participants to share their stories, insights, and perspectives in a more open-ended, conversational format.

Recruitment for the interviews took place over a six-month period, alongside the online survey. We reached out to potential participants via email, inviting them to take part in a 60-90 minute interview via phone or video conference. To be eligible, participants needed to be at least 18 years old, currently employed as a direct service provider, administrator, researcher, or advocate in Minnesota, and have experience delivering services to male survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse.

The semi-structured interview guide was carefully crafted to explore a range of topics related to serving this population, including:

- Definitions of sexual exploitation
- Processes from disclosure to service access
- Trauma-informed practices
- Service gaps and challenges
- Societal perspectives and stigma
- Vision for ideal services and support

In total, we conducted interviews with 25 participants, representing a diverse range of roles and perspectives, including direct service providers, administrators, supervisors, researchers, and community advocates.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai, a secure transcription software. We then analyzed the interview data using thematic analysis, a rigorous qualitative research method that involves identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across the dataset. To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of our findings, we developed an iterative codebook through a collaborative process of reading, discussing, and refining themes as a research team.

Through the semi-structured interviews, we gained rich, nuanced insights into the unique challenges and opportunities in serving male survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse. Participants shared powerful stories and examples that highlighted the need for more gender-responsive, culturally-affirming, and trauma-informed services tailored to the specific needs of this population. The interview data also shed light on systemic gaps and barriers that prevent many male survivors from accessing the support they need to

Learning Workshops

To further deepen our understanding of the issues facing service providers and to generate actionable recommendations for improving services, we conducted a series of interactive learning workshops with key stakeholders. These workshops were designed to create a collaborative, participatory space for participants to reflect on the findings from the online survey and interviews, share their own expertise and experiences, and co-create solutions to the challenges identified.

We held three 90-minute workshops, each with a slightly different focus and participant group:

1. A general workshop with 20 participants from a range of organizations, including Safe Harbor, advocacy groups, and youth shelters.
2. A focused workshop with 15 child welfare managers and supervisors from across Minnesota.
3. A specialized workshop with 4 child protection investigators from a large, urban county in Minnesota.

To be eligible to participate in the workshops, individuals needed to have direct experience serving male survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse in Minnesota.

The workshops were structured around a series of guided discussions, case studies, and prioritization activities designed to elicit participants' insights and expertise. We began each workshop by presenting key findings from the online survey and interviews, and then invited participants to reflect on how these findings resonated with their own experiences. We then delved deeper into specific topics and challenges through a series of interactive activities, such as analyzing case studies, brainstorming solutions, and prioritizing recommendations.

Throughout the workshops, we took detailed notes and made audio recordings to capture participants' insights and ideas. We then analyzed this data using qualitative methods, looking for patterns, themes, and areas of consensus and divergence across the three workshops.

The learning workshops were an invaluable component of our study design, as they allowed us to validate and extend our findings from the survey and interviews, while also generating concrete, actionable recommendations grounded in the expertise of frontline service providers and stakeholders. Through the collaborative, participatory nature of the workshops, we were able to build a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities in serving male survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse, and to identify promising strategies for improving services and support for this underserved population.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive and potentially traumatic nature of the topics addressed in this study, we were committed to upholding the highest ethical standards throughout the research process. Our study adhered to standard ethical protocols for human subjects research, including obtaining informed consent from all participants and ensuring their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Because all of our participants were service providers and administrators, rather than direct survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse, we were able to engage them in a more informal, interactive way throughout the research process. We conducted interviews and workshops in a conversational, collaborative style that emphasized mutual learning and respect. We also made sure to provide participants with our contact information and encourage them to reach out to us with any questions, concerns, or feedback they had along the way.

Given that our sample consisted entirely of professionals working in the field, we were not required to obtain formal ethical approval from an institutional review board or ethics committee. However, we still made sure to adhere to best practices for ethical research, including protecting participants' confidentiality, securely storing and managing data, and being transparent about the goals and methods of the study.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data we collected through the online survey, semi-structured interviews, and group learning workshops, we used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.

For the survey data, we conducted descriptive statistical analyses using Google Sheets to examine frequencies and organize qualitative inputs from open-ended questions. We also used cross-tabulation to explore relationships

between variables, such as how perceptions of service quality and availability varied by geographic region or professional role.

For the interview and workshop data, we used thematic analysis, a rigorous qualitative research method that involves identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across a dataset. We began by transcribing all audio recordings verbatim and then carefully reading through the transcripts to familiarize ourselves with the data. From there, we engaged in an iterative process of coding, where we assigned labels to meaningful segments of text and then organized these codes into broader themes and categories. Throughout the coding process, we met regularly as a research team to discuss and refine our emerging interpretations, ensuring that our findings were grounded in the data and reflected the diverse perspectives of our participants.

By combining quantitative and qualitative analyses, we were able to gain a more comprehensive, nuanced understanding of the experiences and perspectives of service providers working with male survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse in Minnesota. The survey data provided a high-level overview of key issues and trends, while the interview and workshop data allowed us to explore these issues in greater depth and to identify concrete examples, stories, and recommendations for improving services and support.

Findings

The findings of this mixed-methods study are presented using the socio-ecological framework, which examines the complex interplay of factors influencing the sexual exploitation of boys and young men at multiple levels: individual, interpersonal, institutional, societal, and policy. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the experiences, challenges, and needs of male survivors, as well as the systemic barriers and opportunities for improving support and prevention efforts.

Organizing the findings within the socio-ecological framework enables us to systematically examine the multilayered factors contributing to the sexual exploitation of boys and young men, as well as the potential points of intervention and support at each level. This structure also facilitates the integration of quantitative data, which provides a broad overview of trends and patterns, with qualitative insights that offer a more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences and perspectives of male survivors and the service providers who work with them.

Individual Level

At the individual level of the socioecological model, we examine what is known by the service providers, about the personal histories, experiences, attitudes, behaviors, and identities of boys that influence their vulnerability and responses to sexual exploitation.

Key elements to analyze at this level include the demographics and life experiences of exploited boys, characteristics of offenders who perpetrate abuse, individual impacts of violence and exploitation, and factors that may increase personal vulnerability.

The individual level allows us to understand how exploited boys' backgrounds, identities, relationships with offenders, and personal experiences of trauma and exploitation shape their risks and needs. This level of analysis attempts to build insights into the lived experiences of survivors.

Demographics of Youth Served

Age ranges

In the online survey, service providers were asked about their experiences and observations in working with their male-identified clients. Participants indicate working primarily with young people between the ages of 15-18 (45%) and 18-24 (37.5%). A small percentage of providers indicated working with clients aged 11-15 (12.5%), while none reported serving clients under 11 years old.

These quantitative findings align with perspectives shared in semi-structured interviews, where service providers described assisting youth in their mid to late teens and some clients in their early 20s. However, they rarely mentioned working directly with children younger than 15 years old.

The online survey also inquired about the age range at which initial exploitation occurred among the youth served by these providers. The majority of respondents (62.16%) identified ages 11-15 as the most common age of first exploitation, followed by ages 6-10 (46%). Approximately 19% indicated that initial exploitation experiences most often occurred between ages 0-5, while 11% believed exploitation typically took place between ages 16-17 or after age 18.

Ages & First Experiences

Among those in your caseload...
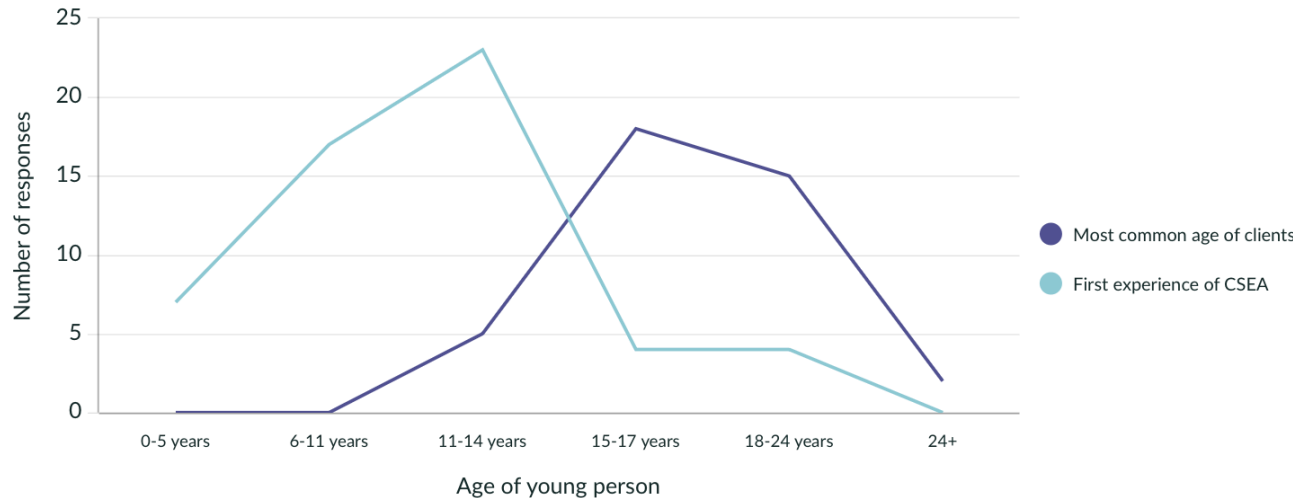
In contrast to the survey data on age of onset, semi-structured interview participants reported regularly working with male-identified youth over 18 years old. This disparity suggests a gap between the reported age of initial exploitation and the age at which youth tend to be identified and access services. While first exploitation may begin in early adolescence, current clients seeking support appear to predominantly be older teens and young adults

according to the qualitative data. This has important implications for both early intervention as well as improving identification and outreach to older exploited male youth who remain underserved.

Gender diversity

Service providers reported working with youth across the gender spectrum, including transgender and gender non-conforming individuals. However, they noted that these youth often face additional challenges and barriers to accessing services. For example, transgender youth may experience harassment and discrimination in shelters or other service settings that are not equipped to provide gender-affirming care (DSP005, A/DSP014).

While gender-diverse youth were noted as an increasing part of caseloads, few participating service providers explicitly mentioned working directly with cisgender male youth. Only five direct service providers reported regularly assisting boys and young men as part of their caseloads and programs, offering services such as therapy, case management, outreach, shelter, and housing tailored to the unique needs and experiences of male-identified youth. However, even for these providers, boys and young men typically represent a minority of their overall clients, often around 20-30% of the youth they serve.

Other providers supervise staff who work directly with male youth or serve a small number of male-identifying youth, primarily transgender or gender non-conforming individuals. Nevertheless, the majority of clients they oversee or work with directly are girls and young women.

Overall, findings suggest some skew with substantially higher cisgender female representation observed across cases, while transgender and non-binary youth comprise an emerging subset of clients served. Very few cisgender boys and young men specifically were reported as a key demographic. Focused research exclusively on this subgroup would be valuable to fully illuminate male exploitation experiences in Minnesota.

Racial/ethnic diversity

Interviews with service providers demonstrate that they assist exploited youth from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Black, Indigenous, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, White, and multiracial young individuals. Qualitative insights reveal heightened risks among youth of color, particularly Indigenous populations, which is supported by additional data sources.

One interviewee reported serving a caseload comprising 75% Native American youth (DSP008). A 2019 statewide student survey also found increased rates of trading sex reported by American Indian/Alaska Native adolescents compared to peers of other races (Minnesota Student Survey, 2019).

Both qualitative and quantitative data from this project echo these concerns - 73% of participating providers reported higher observed exploitation rates among Native American youth they serve, compared to other racial groups (Online survey data). Additionally, 64% of survey respondents indicated increased victimization risks for Black/African American youth in their caseloads (Online survey data).

As one administrator involved in many cases explained, "We definitely see a disproportionate number of Native youth impacted, which points to some troubling systemic factors." (A006). The findings suggest that while service providers engage with diverse clients across racial lines, there are heightened vulnerabilities among youth of color, particularly Indigenous populations.

Further research is crucial to fully understand exploitation risks at the intersection of race, place, gender, and other dimensions. Data focused on the experiences and insights of male youth themselves would be valuable to inform solutions. Culturally-grounded prevention initiatives designed and implemented by Indigenous and Black communities may help address the evident racial disparities observed in these findings.

Types of cases

The research indicates that among youth who have accessed social services in Minnesota, providers encounter a wide range of exploitation types, with sex trading and being solicited for sex being most widely reported across contexts (Online Survey, SSI). It is important to contextualize that this quantitative data represents only those exploited youth who have accessed services. Qualitative insights indicate there are many additional cases where youth are observed to be exploited but do not receive interventions or show up in caseloads. This discrepancy suggests a need for more outreach, education, and support to connect vulnerable youth to appropriate services. Nonetheless, the data provides valuable information about the relative prevalence of different exploitation types among the service-connected population.

Types of Exploitation in Caseloads

Sex trading
Being solicited for sex
Grooming
Trafficking for sex
Shared explicit images of self
Explicit images shared without consent
Exploited through 'camming'

32%
40%
47%
52%
65%
70%
70%
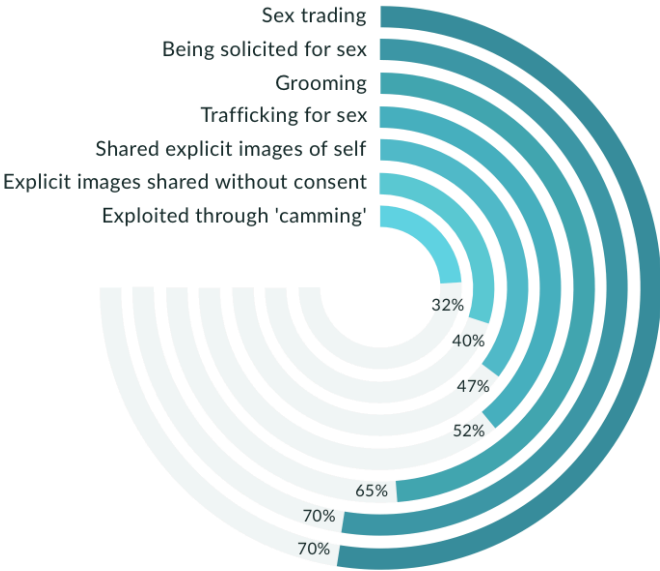
Service providers in Minnesota encounter a wide range of exploitation types among boys in their caseloads, with sexual forms being most widely reported across contexts (Online Survey, SSI). The quantitative data reveals the most commonly reported types of cases are sex trading (70%) and solicitation (70%), followed by grooming (65%), sex trafficking (52%), sharing sexual images of themselves (47%), having sexually explicit images shared without the young person's consent (40%), and exploitation through 'camming' or live-streaming (32%). Note that these are not musically exclusive with many cases involving a variety of exploitive experiences.

Though less prevalent than sexual exploitation, labor trafficking and criminal exploitation like selling drugs were still reported. Providers also encountered exploitation within contexts of survival sex, substance use, and

homelessness, highlighting important intersections, which will be further explored in the next section (interpersonal level).

Further research could illuminate variations in exploitation types across demographics and regions. Additionally, studies exploring links between specific risk factors and forms of exploitation could inform targeted prevention and intervention efforts.

Offender Demographics

The qualitative data indicates that while adult men are most frequently reported as offenders overall, exploiters also encompass diverse backgrounds across age, gender, race, and relationship to the victim (CA001, A/DSP002, A/DSP014). As one respondent observed, "We've seen women and girls perpetrate exploitation too - offenders come from all demographics." (A/DSP014). Problematic assumptions that only adult men perpetrate exploitation should be avoided, as this may tend to bias accurate victim identification.

The data shows most exploitation is perpetrated by someone trusted or known to the victim, not strangers (CA001). Family members like uncles, siblings and cousins are often identified as exploiters by providers, indicating risk within family systems. As one interviewee explained, "Boys we work with have commonly experienced sexual harm by relatives." (DSP008). Peer-to-peer exploitation is also described as widespread but underrecognized across cases.

Beyond family and peers, respondents report trusted adults in positions of authority like teachers, mentors, and caregivers frequently groom and exploit boys over extended time periods (A/DSP014). While patterns differ across cases, the unifying factor enabling exploitation is offenders' choice to manipulate children's vulnerabilities rather than any singular profile. Further research is required to fully capture diverse exploitation types and tailor prevention efforts accordingly.

Grooming Tactics

The data highlights commonly employed grooming tactics, where offenders systematically build emotional dependency by identifying and filling voids in a child's life over an extended period (8/2 Learning Workshop). According to one support worker, calculated grooming tactics involve providing gifts, sharing secrets, and becoming the primary source of affection and support the youth may be lacking (8/2 Learning Workshop).

Once a bond is deliberately established through these manipulative approaches, offenders exploit the child's emotional vulnerability through coercion and threats to deter resistance or disclosure, as observed in many cases (DSP008). Recognizing inappropriate behaviors disguised as friendship early on presents a key opportunity for prevention.

Contexts and Risk Factors

Housing Instability and Homelessness

Homeless and housing-unstable boys face severely elevated risks of exploitation, often exchanging sex to meet basic needs for shelter, food, money, and other survival necessities, as evidenced by research and service providers' insights (Online survey, A/DSP002). Runaway, thrownaway, and homeless boys lack safety nets and legal means to sustain their basic needs, leaving them extremely vulnerable to predators who manipulate this

desperation by offering food, shelter, drugs, or affection in exchange for sex, as emphasized by an urban administrator (A/DSP002).

Multiple respondents highlighted that homeless and housing-unstable boys encounter heightened exploitation dangers, frequently resorting to exchanging sex to meet basic needs like food, shelter, and money when lacking alternatives (DSP001, A/DSP002). One administrator poignantly stated, "Homeless boys lack resources to meet their needs safely, leaving them extremely vulnerable to predators who exploit that desperation" (A/DSP002).

Housing instability severely exacerbates exploitation risks, with homelessness leaving boys desperately vulnerable when caregiver protection falters, according to insights from service providers (A/DSP002, DSP001). As one participant described, "Transient boys staying temporarily with friends without oversight are very vulnerable" (7/25 Learning workshop). Locations such as bus stops and shelters are prime recruitment sites for offenders targeting unstable boys (DSP001).

A substantial shortage of shelter beds and frequent overcapacity perpetuate this insecurity, according to administrators. One participant shared, "Oftentimes beds are completely full, and we have waiting lists, which leaves kids out there without a safe place" (A/DSP014). Service providers emphasized the urgent need for expanded transitional housing options to provide refuge for displaced boys (DSP005). As DSP005 explained, "When you don't have a safe place to go, your choices become very limited," enabling victimization.

> " THERE ARE NO HOMELESS YOUTH PROGRAMS IN MY ENTIRE REGION. SO IF THEY HAVE NOWHERE TO GO, THEN WHICH I MEAN, LIKE THEY HAVE NOWHERE TO GO HONESTLY. "
>
> DSP008

> " WE'RE SEEING A LOT MORE BOYS WHO ARE ON THE STREETS, AND HIGHLY MOBILE. AND SO I THINK... THAT IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST RISKS FOR HAVING TO ENGAGE IN SURVIVAL SEX. "
>
> DSP005

Securing safe, stable housing emerged as an essential prevention and intervention strategy, according to several providers (A/DSP002, DSP001, DSP005). Multiple sources explained that the desperation resulting from homelessness often leads exploited boys to exchange sex for basic needs (DSP001, DSP005). However, housing interventions must incorporate wraparound services like mental healthcare, education, and job training to fully address the complex needs of this population (A/DSP002, DSP017). For example, one administrator stated, "Housing stability helps keep boys safe, but ongoing counseling, medical care, and schooling are also critical protective factors" (A/DSP002). Ultimately, safe shelter provides a crucial foundation for healing and resilience in exploited boys – especially when paired with individualized, trauma-informed supports tailored to address their unique needs.

Exposure to Violence and Abuse at Home

Several respondents noted that boys who grow up with adversity, instability, and dysfunction at home tend to be more vulnerable to exploitation later on (CA001, A/DSP002, A/DSP014). For example, one administrator explained that chronic neglect and lack of supervision in the home environment can severely undermine a child's sense of safety and emotional regulation (A/DSP014). Domestic violence that goes unaddressed can also impair healthy development in ways that put children at greater risk for grooming by predators who seek to exploit their need for belonging and connection (CA001).

The data indicates that those facing early adversity at home, including neglect, violence, or lack of supervision, often show higher rates of exploitation, mental health struggles, and substance abuse later in life compared to peers without these experiences according to accounts (DSP017; 8/2 and 7/25 Learning Workshops). As DSP017 described, adverse childhood environments undermining safety and emotional development can severely compromise healthy boundaries and coping abilities. Workshop participants expanded that early trauma creates voids predators leverage through false promises of affection and belonging.

The trauma and unmet needs resulting from dysfunctional home environments appear to drive unhealthy behaviors as exploited youth attempt to escape or fill voids missing from their upbringing. However, the relationships they form with exploiters ultimately lead to more harm, even though the initial allure may seem to fulfill unmet emotional or physical needs (A/DSP002). In view of this, participants note that early intervention through trauma-informed counseling and caregiver strengthening programs can mitigate exploitation risks before youth reach the desperate straits that traffickers exploit according to providers (DSP005, DSP017).

Native American Male Youth Trafficked into Gang (DSP008)

A therapist at a youth services organization described her experience working with a Native American cisgender male youth who had been trafficked into a gang. The exploitation he endured manifested in intense self-hatred and involvement in criminal activities.

This young man struggled to reconcile the abuse he suffered with cultural expectations around masculinity and strength. He expressed feelings like "If I was a real man, this wouldn't have happened to me." The shame and trauma led to self-destructive and illegal behaviors as well as substance abuse issues.

Building trust and rapport took significant time - it was years before he began to open up about his experiences. Key to engaging him was honoring his need to feel safe and respecting his privacy. The therapist used a strengths-based approach, reframing his experiences to emphasize how he had tried to protect and provide for his family. This was an important part of the healing process.

The therapist noted that cultural norms and expectations around masculinity were a major barrier to this youth seeking help and disclosing his exploitation. She observed that the Native American boys and young men she worked with often took much longer to open up compared to girls and young women.

This youth also faced challenges navigating both the criminal justice and social services systems. His crimes were directly related to his exploitation, but this was not always recognized or taken into account. The therapist advocated for a trauma-informed response and connected him to appropriate services.

This case highlights the need for male-specific and culturally responsive services, long-term consistent support, and assistance for youths' families and communities. The therapist emphasized the importance of helping male victims of trafficking overcome internalized shame and rediscover a positive masculine identity.

Disengagement from school

The data indicates that disengagement from school is a common theme seen in cases of trafficking/exploitation. Trouble in the home environment frequently manifests in school through chronic absenteeism, low achievement, disciplinary issues, and ultimate dropout (A/DSP002). Without the daily structure and supervision school provides, service providers indicate these youth spend many unsupervised hours in the community, where traffickers actively recruit vulnerable boys.

As noted by multiple providers, locations like bus stops, parties, malls, and other areas where marginalized youth gather, especially during school hours, are prime targets for recruiters (A/DSP002, DSP001, DSP013). For example, one support worker explained that "Youth not in school are much more vulnerable" to approaches by traffickers in public areas (DSP001). Additionally, disengagement from school through suspensions, expulsions, and dropping out severs critical connections to support systems for boys already lacking stability at home (A/DSP002, DSP011). Without the daily structure and supervision school provides, boys spend many unsupervised hours in the community where dangers may await.

Schools hold the potential to identify and support at-risk youth by offering mentoring, counseling, healthcare referrals, and other essential services. However, stringent disciplinary policies and inadequate inclusivity can weaken the "safety net" that engaged schooling could otherwise provide (A/DSP002). Such policies may disproportionately affect boys who have experienced exploitation, as respondents suggest that boys might face harsher responses within delinquency processes (A/DSP015). Factors including unrecognized trauma responses, gender norms discouraging help-seeking, biases portraying boys as offenders instead of victims (DSP001, DSP011), and labeling trauma behaviors as conduct disorders (DSP010), could render boys more susceptible to discipline rather than receiving the support they need after exploitation. Without this support system, unsupervised boys may end up in high-risk recruitment areas during weekdays, and those who have experienced exploitation may become ensnared in a cycle of trauma and punishment.

The data reveals disengagement from school as a major risk factor, removing vital structure and support. As one direct service provider especially highlighted the importance of truancy intervention and outreach to chronically absent youth (A/DSP002). Keeping vulnerable boys engaged, supervised, and supported through graduation is a critical prevention opportunity where schools can make a real difference. School communities have the power to identify at-risk youth early and connect them to resources before problems escalate. But they must be adequately funded and supported in this role. Enhancing schools' capacity for early identification and intervention is essential if education systems hope to play a key part in protecting boys from exploitation.

Social Isolation and Lack of Community

Social isolation and disconnection from community are significant risk factors for the trafficking and exploitation of youth of all genders. Respondents emphasized that marginalized youth without strong support systems are especially vulnerable to traffickers' manipulation tactics, with one advocate (CA001) noting that "Traffickers are very skilled at finding youth who are isolated from family and community."

Studies have found that traditional masculine norms and socialization can contribute to social and emotional isolation among boys. For instance, the pressure for boys to appear strong, stoic and independent can make them reluctant to seek help or express vulnerability (Way, 2011). Research has also suggested that boys tend to have fewer close friendships compared to girls, and that their social networks become even more limited as they enter adolescence (Way, 2013).

These gendered patterns of social disconnection align with what several respondents observed in their work with trafficked boys and young men. One service provider (DSP017) noted, "Most of the boys I work with have no hobbies, no groups they belong to, no one checking in on them." This profound lack of social support and connection creates fertile ground for traffickers to manipulate boys by offering a false sense of belonging.

Respondents emphasized that marginalized LGBTQ+ youth face heightened isolation that increases their vulnerability. One youth advocate (CA001) noted that "family conflict and rejection is very common among LGBTQ youth." Many are "kicked out of their homes with nowhere to go." Having been rejected by family and community, traffickers easily manipulate them since "their need to be accepted is preyed upon," becoming that seemingly safe and accepting place where they feel some sense of stability.

To prevent the isolation that enables exploitation, respondents underscored the importance of building community connections and family strengthening programs (A003, A004, DSP005, DSP017). However, substantial barriers exist in establishing these protective factors for marginalized boys, including high levels of trauma and transiency (A003, A004). Despite the challenges, providers aim to help youth forge positive relationships, recognizing that "feeling valued and accepted by others prevents the emotional manipulation tactics of offenders from working" (DSP005).

> **"THEY DON'T HAVE FAMILY OR STABILITY... UNTIL SOMEONE... A SOCIAL WORKER OR SOMEONE THE LEGAL SYSTEM GETS AHOLD OF THEM AND HAS THEM IN THEIR SPACE TO ASK QUESTIONS."**
>
> Direct Service Provider

> **"IT WAS FAMILY THAT HE WAS LOOKING FOR. [AND] I ABSOLUTELY UNDERSTAND [THE] NEED FOR COMMUNITY AND PROTECTION... HE FOUND THAT THROUGH HIS GANG"**
>
> Direct Service Provider

Interpersonal Level

At the interpersonal level of the socioecological model, we examine the close relationships and interactions that exploited boys have with peers, family members, partners, friends, and other individuals in their lives. These relationships can significantly impact their likelihood of exploitation as well as their access to services and support following victimization.

Key interpersonal relationships to explore include family dynamics, peer norms and behaviors, interactions with intimate partners, and the level of support or lack thereof from community advocates and allies. At this level, we aim to understand how close personal relationships and interactions may contribute to vulnerability, facilitate access to help, or pose barriers to identification, disclosure, and recovery.

Key Relationships and Interactions

The close relationships and daily social interactions of boys shape their risks and access to support when it comes to sexual exploitation according to respondents (DSP010, CA002). Several key interpersonal relationships stand out as impacting these dynamics, for better or worse.

Family environments and relationships with caregivers play an immense role in exploitation vulnerability based on the data (A019, DSP017). Dysfunctional, unstable families increase risks for boys by failing to provide adequate support, monitoring, and nurturance (A019). However, supportive families who maintain strong attachments with their children even amidst outside challenges can provide protection against exploitation by meeting their needs for guidance and belonging (A019, A/DSP002).

Peer influences and social expectations also greatly impact behaviors and vulnerability during adolescence according to providers (CA001). The normalization of risky activities among school friends or teammates can sway boys towards dangerous behaviors without fully weighing consequences (CA001). However, caring peers who model healthy choices can have a positive influence (Learning workshops). Past or current interactions with romantic and sexual partners may facilitate increased dependency and abuse (DSP005). However, caring partners who respect boundaries can provide positive support (Learning workshops).

Additionally, the degree of support boys receive from community advocates, mentors, and service providers profoundly influences their help-seeking actions and recovery pathways based on accounts (A019; 8/15 Learning Workshop). Trusted mentors may provide encouragement necessary for vulnerable sharing of painful exploitation experiences, fostering pathways toward resilience according to providers. However, judgmental, non-affirming responses from formal or informal support can exacerbate shame and deter openness (8/15 Learning Workshop;). One respondent notes, "When boys do disclose, they fear judgment that they are 'not man enough' or blame for what happened" (DSP005) The complex impacts of these core interpersonal relationships on raising or reducing risks will be explored in greater detail throughout this section.

Family Environment

Dysfunctional family environments emerge as a major risk factor for the sexual exploitation of boys according to the data (A/DSP002, CA001, A/DSP014). As one administrator explained, "Chronic neglect and lack of caregiver supervision severely undermines kids' safety and healthy development" (A/DSP014), profoundly increasing their vulnerability to predator manipulation (A/DSP002). Unstable and unsupportive families were found to damage boys' self-worth and ability to maintain boundaries, creating emotional voids that offenders exploit (CA001). For example, one case worker described encountering "parental figures who routinely degrade and criticize boys to the point their self-esteem is completely shattered," leading them to become desperate for any outside approval or sense of belonging (DSP005).

While family dysfunction elevates risk, supportive family connections are vital protective factors. Multiple respondents emphasized the central role family resilience can play in recovery. One navigator explained, "If we can help repair and restore relationships with family members who truly care, it often makes all the difference in their healing and stability" (DSP013). Attachment-focused parenting and trauma-informed care within families are especially key to insulating boys from harm, according to providers and research. As one administrator noted, "Consistent positive parenting provides the secure relational base kids need to thrive. It's their number one protection against predators who exploit any desperation or insecurity" (A019).

Providers play an essential role in assessing family dynamics and fostering protective factors. Reconnecting youth to salvageable family ties, when safe and appropriate, can significantly reduce risk. For instance, one advocate described a 17-year-old boy who began to turn his life around after repairing relationships with supportive relatives (CA001). However, providers must also be attuned to complex family traumas that can increase vulnerability. In one case, a 14-year-old boy spiraled into depression and substance use after his father, with whom he was very close, was incarcerated (DSP011). This illustrates how the traumatic loss of a close parental figure can contribute to increased vulnerability.

It is important to note that the relationship between family dysfunction and exploitation risk is often cyclical. While dysfunction increases vulnerability, exploitation experiences can also further strain and fracture family relationships. This dynamic can create a vicious cycle of trauma and disconnection that compounds risk over time. Providers must be sensitive to these complex realities and avoid assuming all family involvement is inherently beneficial. Careful assessment of the safety and supportiveness of family members is crucial before facilitating reconnection.

Structural and socioeconomic stressors

Structural and socioeconomic stressors can profoundly impact the vulnerability of boys and male-identifying youth to exploitation. These systemic factors, including housing instability, family poverty, caregiver mental illness and substance abuse, intergenerational trauma, and family member incarceration, create conditions that traffickers and abusers deliberately seek to exploit. Understanding how these stressors particularly affect male-identifying youth is critical for developing targeted prevention and intervention strategies.

Housing instability and homelessness emerge as the most prevalent risk factors for exploitation among boys and young men. As one advocate explained, "When kids don't have a safe, stable place to sleep or keep their belongings, they become desperate. Predators zero in on that desperation" (CA002). This lack of consistent shelter and adult protection leaves male youth highly vulnerable, with traffickers exploiting their dire circumstances (DSP001, A/DSP002). Providers also emphasized that homeless boys staying temporarily with friends are at particular risk, as they lack regular caregiver supervision (7/25 Learning Workshop).

The online survey data reveals a complex interplay of social and economic factors that service providers identify as significantly increasing the vulnerability of boys and young men to sexual exploitation. The most prominent factors, rated as either "Very Significant" or "Somewhat Significant" by a high percentage of respondents, include:

1. Previous experience of sexual abuse (94.7% of respondents)
2. Peer involvement in sexual exploitation (92.1%)
3. Identifying as gay, pansexual, or bisexual (86.8%)
4. Identifying as gender-diverse (86.8%)
5. Social isolation, lacking trusting relationships with protective adults and/or peers (84.2%)
6. Alcohol or substance use by the young person (84.2%)

These findings highlight the complex interplay of individual experiences, interpersonal relationships, identity factors, and socioeconomic conditions in shaping the vulnerability of boys and young men to sexual exploitation. Prior trauma, peer influences, LGBTQ+ identity, and social isolation emerge as particularly significant risk factors, underscoring the need for trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and identity-affirming approaches to prevention and intervention.

Moreover, the data emphasizes the intersection of interpersonal trauma, housing instability, and economic marginalization in creating conditions that enable the exploitation of boys and young men. The complex interplay of these social and economic factors highlights the need for comprehensive, multi-level approaches that address the diverse and intersecting vulnerabilities faced by this population.

Closely intertwined with housing instability is the stressor of family poverty. Chronic financial hardship often leads to youth's basic needs for food, clothing, and healthcare going unmet, creating profound desperation (A/DSP014). As parents work long hours for low wages, boys are often left unsupervised and undersupported, making them targets for exploiters who manipulate their unmet needs. The gendered assumption that male youth are more capable of fending for themselves may lead to less recognition of their vulnerability and need for support when facing poverty.

Untreated caregiver mental illness and substance abuse also profoundly jeopardize boys' safety. In one case, a single father's untreated bipolar disorder led to highly erratic parenting, with manic episodes causing him to disappear for days and leave his teenage son alone without basic provisions. Ultimately, a neighborhood pimp exploited the boy's desperation, luring him with offers of food and shelter in exchange for sex acts (DSP017). This tragic example illustrates how boys often fall through the cracks when caregivers cannot provide consistent care and protection due to untreated mental health and substance use disorders. The expectation of male self-sufficiency may mask their support needs in these volatile home environments.

These family stressors are often rooted in intergenerational cycles of trauma and dysfunction, stemming from the enduring impacts of historical oppression. For instance, the forced assimilation of Native American youth through boarding schools deeply fractured cultural and familial ties, transmitting complex trauma to future generations (DSP008). This legacy manifests today in disproportionate rates of poverty, mental health crises, addiction, and family breakdown in many Native communities - all drivers of exploitation risk. Providers underscore the importance of understanding this historical context when working with Native boys who may carry both personal and collective traumas that traffickers seek to exploit.

Family member incarceration is another destabilizing stressor that can increase male youths' vulnerability to abuse and exploitation. One mentor recounted the story of a 15-year-old boy whose mother was sentenced to prison, leaving him to navigate overwhelming loss and instability as he bounced between temporary caregivers

(A/DSP014). Without consistent adult support to process his grief, the boy turned to substance use and spent long hours unsupervised, increasing his risk of exploitation. The expectation that boys should just "tough it out" in the face of trauma can lead to their support needs being dangerously overlooked.

The Impacts of historical oppression

Boys and male-identifying youth from marginalized communities, including Native American, Black/African American, and Latino populations, often face heightened risks for exploitation rooted in the enduring impacts of historical oppression. While each group has its own unique history of cultural erasure, family separation, and systemic discrimination, there are striking parallels in how these legacies of trauma continue to shape the vulnerabilities of male-identifying youth today.

For Native American boys, forced relocation, boarding schools, and cultural suppression led to multigenerational complex trauma. As one advocate explained, "Children were taken from parents, had hair cut, clothes removed, and were beaten for speaking native languages" (A006). The resulting cycles of poverty, mental illness, substance use disorders, and family instability on reservations heighten exploitation risks for Native boys in remote, underserved areas lacking support systems (DSP008). The Minnesota Youth Interventions report (2024) further highlights the stark disparities in out-of-home placements across the state, with American Indian youth comprising 12% of placements despite making up only 1% of the state's youth population.

However, amidst these challenges, Native communities also hold profound cultural strengths and practices that can support boys' resilience. As one provider noted, "Connecting youth to tribal elders, ceremonies, and cultural practices grounds them in something bigger than themselves" (DSP010). Rebuilding these cultural bonds and sense of belonging can be a powerful protective factor for Native boys.

Black/African American and Latino communities face similar cycles of intergenerational trauma stemming from their own histories of oppression. The legacy of slavery, segregation, racism, and disproportionate incarceration has caused multigenerational harm within many Black communities. As one advocate observed, "The impacts of historical trauma are definitely not unique to just Native communities. We see similar cycles of poverty, substance use disorders, family instability, and lack of opportunity in many Black communities linked to oppressive policies" (CA002).

For Latino populations, the enduring effects of colonization, forced assimilation, and ongoing discrimination also contribute to heightened risks for boys. A provider working with Latino families noted, "Many Hispanic families I work with are dealing with intergenerational PTSD from colonialism and cultural erasure that gets passed down" (DSP014).

Across all these communities, the separation of families and suppression of cultural identity have led to a profound sense of disconnection and trauma that can be passed down through generations. As a psychologist explained, "You see high rates of childhood trauma, caregiver substance abuse, and lack of social support today directly tied to the historical separation of families centuries ago" (DSP010). These ongoing disparities and challenges create environments where boys are more susceptible to exploitation.

It's important to recognize that these risks are not inherent to any particular racial or ethnic group, but rather are the products of systemic oppression and cultural erasure. Efforts to support boys and male-identifying youth in these communities must address the root causes of their vulnerability by promoting cultural connection, family stability, and equitable access to resources and opportunities.

Respondents emphasized the need for culturally-responsive, community-driven solutions that build on the unique strengths and resilience of each group. Initiatives should be designed in partnership with affected populations to ensure they are grounded in the specific cultural contexts and needs of each community. By centering the voices and experiences of marginalized youth, we can develop interventions that not only mitigate risk factors, but also nurture the protective power of positive cultural identity and community belonging.

Supporting boys and male-identifying youth from Native American, Black, and Latino communities requires a holistic approach that addresses the intergenerational impacts of historical oppression while amplifying cultural resilience. Only by confronting these systemic injustices and investing in culturally-grounded, community-led solutions can we create environments where all boys can heal, thrive, and reach their full potential.

Peer Influences and Social Norms

Youths' desperate need for belonging and connection amidst isolation can lead them to make risky decisions that increase exploitation vulnerability, which was highlighted in the online survey with 80% of support workers seeing peer pressure as moderate-significant risk. Marginalized LGBTQ+ youth in particular may turn to peers for community, making them more susceptible to coercion. One advocate described a case where a gay male teen, bullied and isolated at school, went along with older boys who pressure him to exchange sexual acts with adult men for money and drugs - despite his discomfort. His need for friendship led him to rationalize the troubling signs. As the advocate explained, "When youth are outcast, that longing to belong allows them to be manipulated." (CA001)

Peers also often introduce and provide access to substances, which respondents noted can lower inhibitions and open the door to exploitation. As a social worker explained, "Traffickers know that getting youth addicted to substances gives them control." (DSP005) Predators leverage this human need for connection and belonging. A survivor described the gradual process of a coach exploiting his longing for family by posing as a father figure before eventually trafficking him. (DSP010) The coach used the boy's vulnerability to gradually isolate and manipulate him.

Exploiters often hold positions of authority and influence within communities that allow them to intimidate, shame, and deter disclosure by victims according to firsthand experts (DSP011, Learning workshops). Sources emphasized that trauma stemming from painful betrayal by respected figures necessitates extensive trust-building before boys feel safe opening up with full details (A019, Learning workshops). However lack of relatable mentors leaves many male victims suffering silently without support according to multiple accounts (Learning workshops).

Providers identified rigid societal norms dictating male strength and invulnerability as factors contributing to isolation and hindering disclosure according to accounts (CA002; 8/15 & 7/25 Learning Workshops). The pervasive expectation for males to constantly appear stoic and controlled leaves sexually exploited boys feeling intensely ashamed and afraid of judgment for exhibiting vulnerability according to insights (CA002; DSP005). Seeking support contradicts masculine ideals, deterring help-seeking. As one participant described, "Social norms shame struggling boys as weak, silencing many victims" (8/15 Learning Workshop). Transforming restrictive attitudes is imperative so males can safely access assistance without stigma based on recurrent testimonies (DSP005; 7/25 & 8/15 Learning Workshops).

Service providers highlighted the advantages of exploring the mechanisms of social isolation, obedience to authority, homophobia, and toxic masculinity. They emphasized that such exploration could help disrupt the vulnerabilities that traffickers exploit.

Service Provider Challenges in Building Rapport with boys

Boys and young men who have experienced sexual exploitation face unique challenges in accessing support services, often related to societal expectations of masculinity and the limitations of current systems.

It takes time: Service providers report that building the necessary trust and rapport with male survivors is a time- and resource-intensive process that requires great sensitivity and patience.

As one administrator explained, "For cis and trans boys, it typically takes 6 months to a year of consistent relationship-building before they'll talk openly. Avoiding assumptions is key" (A019). Trauma-informed practice necessitates letting young people guide interactions at their own pace, without judgment or pressure. However, high caseloads and limited resources often constrain providers' ability to invest the extensive time needed to establish safety for vulnerable sharing (Participants in 8/2 learning workshop).

Few cis-male service providers: The shortage of relatable male advocates and mentors is another significant barrier to supporting exploited boys and young men. Some male youth, particularly those from cultural backgrounds that discourage sharing private matters with women, may only feel comfortable discussing their experiences with providers who share their gender identity (DSP005). As one social worker noted, "Some immigrant boys I work with only want to talk to other men. However, due to the shortage of male staff, they choose to bottle up their feelings instead of seeking help" (DSP005). Increasing the diversity of service providers could help address this gap and facilitate better rapport-building with male survivors.

Additional considerations: These challenges are compounded by the interpersonal risk factors that can make boys and young men more vulnerable to exploitation in the first place. Early sexual experiences, especially those involving coercion or pressure, can condition youth to participate in unwanted acts in the future. As one advocate put it, "Boys learning that their personal boundaries and refusal don't matter are being groomed for further abuse" (CA001).

Similarly, dating violence can foster unhealthy trauma bonds that traffickers ruthlessly exploit, as in the case of a teen boy who experienced physical intimidation and emotional manipulation by an older controlling girlfriend. This abuse warped his perceptions of healthy relationships, leaving him desperate for affection and vulnerable to a trafficker posing as a caring partner (DSP005).

It's important to recognize that these risk factors do not exist in isolation, but rather intersect with larger systemic issues like poverty, racism, and homophobia that shape boys' vulnerability. While individual experiences of trauma and unhealthy relationships can increase risk, it is the broader social, economic, and cultural context that enables exploitation to occur. Service providers emphasize the need to address these root causes through prevention efforts that promote healthy relationships, challenge toxic masculinity norms, and provide education and economic opportunities for vulnerable youth.

At the same time, it is critical to acknowledge the agency and resilience of male survivors, even amidst coercion and trauma. Boys and young men are not passive victims, but rather active agents navigating complex circumstances with the resources available to them. Supporting their healing and empowerment requires a strengths-based approach that recognizes their capacity for growth and change.

Ultimately, better serving male survivors of sexual exploitation will require a holistic, trauma-informed approach that addresses both individual risk factors and systemic barriers. This means investing in more diverse,

gender-responsive services that prioritize relationship-building and cultural competency. It also means advocating for policies and programs that address the root causes of vulnerability, such as poverty and discrimination.

By centering the unique experiences and needs of male-identifying survivors, and working to dismantle the societal norms and structural inequities that enable their exploitation, we can create a safer, more just world for all youth to thrive. This will require a sustained commitment from service providers, policymakers, and communities alike to challenge assumptions, invest in prevention, and prioritize the healing and empowerment of those most marginalized.

Institutional Level

At the organizational and institutional level, we assess the structures, policies, and resources within systems and institutions that impact boys who have experienced sexual exploitation and abuse. This analysis helps us understand how entities responsible for serving male victims may unintentionally create barriers to identification, reporting, disclosure, service access, and recovery due to their current capacities, limitations, and approaches.

Key elements to examine at this level include the presence of trauma-informed services, dynamics within systems such as the criminal justice and child welfare systems, organizational policies and practices, availability of trained staff and gender-inclusive resources, and access to information and care.

This section will highlight significant gaps that obstruct a comprehensive response to the sexual exploitation of boys, as identified through multiple interviews and group discussions with service providers. We will explore deficiencies in areas such as service availability, justice systems, and child welfare practices that hinder victim identification and support. By recognizing weaknesses at an organizational level, targeted improvements can be implemented to better address the needs of the young male population.

Social Service Providers

Lack of Identification and Reporting of Male Victims

A significant theme that emerged from the data was the lack of identification and reporting of male victims of trafficking and exploitation compared to female victims. This disparity was evident across multiple data sources, suggesting that male victims often remain invisible and underserved.

One service provider highlighted the notable difference in the number of male and female victims served by the Safe Harbor program, stating, "90% of the clients we served across Safe Harbor were identified as female and 7% identified as male" (DSP008). This gap is particularly noteworthy when contrasted with anonymous student survey data, which indicates that "male youth are self-disclosing almost equal rates as female youth experiencing sexual exploitation" (DSP008).

The discrepancy between self-reported exploitation among males and the identification of male victims by the system suggests barriers to disclosure and recognition. Several respondents pointed to societal attitudes and gender stereotypes that can minimize the perception of male victimization as a contributing factor (DSP005, DSP008, DSP011). One interviewee noted, "People have to uphold and maintain toxic masculinity because then

they have to look at their own vulnerabilities," highlighting the challenge of getting boys to acknowledge their own exploitation (DSP008).

The data also indicated that even when male victims are identified, it often occurs after extended system involvement and at a point of crisis, such as a placement breakdown. As one provider shared, "They've had this youth on their caseload for two plus years...and now they want to connect them to supportive resources" (DSP008). This suggests a lack of proactive identification and early intervention for male victims.

Furthermore, some respondents mentioned institutional mistrust and a lack of coordination between child welfare and community-based advocacy services as potential barriers to identifying and referring male victims (DSP008). A former child protection worker recalled, "We generally did not refer our clients to advocacy services, because that was an additional step...it was essentially like, I want to have control over the situation" (DSP008), illustrating systemic challenges that may prevent exploited boys from accessing supportive services.

The findings suggest that male victims of trafficking and exploitation may be underidentified and underreported due to a combination of societal biases, institutional barriers, and a lack of proactive outreach and screening. Addressing this issue may require efforts to challenge gender stereotypes, improve identification protocols, and foster collaboration between child welfare and community-based support services to better identify and serve male victims.

Housing Shortages Creating Dangers for boys

The interview data shows a severe shortage of housing resources specifically designed to meet the needs of male victims of trafficking and exploitation. The research revealed that there are only **six** beds available for boys in the entire state of Minnesota, all of them located in the Twin Cities ([2024](#)). This gap in services leads to boys being placed in unsafe environments and subjected to repeated exploitation, as reported by service providers.

Interviews with service providers revealed a critical gap in emergency and transitional housing specifically designed for male trafficking victims. Many respondents noted long waitlists and a constant shortage of available beds, making it challenging for boys to access safe housing when they need it most (A/DSP014, DSP005, DSP017). As one administrator explained, "Often beds are completely full, and we have waiting lists, which leaves exploited boys without a safe place when they seek help" (A/DSP014).

Several providers also pointed out that existing housing options often prioritize and cater to the needs of female victims, leaving male victims underserved (DSP005, DSP017, 8/15 Learning Workshop). This scarcity of male-specific housing forces boys into inadequate placements, such as adult homeless shelters or the streets, which can significantly increase their vulnerability to repeated exploitation (DSP005, DSP017).

Moreover, the data indicated a shortage of long-term transitional and permanent housing options designed to support the unique needs of trafficked boys and young men. Providers reported challenges in finding appropriate transitional housing for male victims in their areas, as many programs primarily focus on women and girls (A/DSP007). As a result, boys may end up in unstable or unsafe living situations during the critical period of transition after initially accessing services.

The lack of suitable housing options can trap male victims in a cycle of instability and revictimization, as illustrated by a case shared by one provider (A/DSP007). In this instance, a boy who had been removed from multiple foster homes ended up effectively homeless, staying in high-risk environments where he experienced repeated exploitation.

Due to these systemic housing gaps, service providers reported that male trafficking victims often end up in unsafe or inappropriate placements, such as adult homeless shelters, jails, or residential treatment facilities that are not equipped to address their specific needs as victims of exploitation (DSP001, 7/25 learning workshop). This gap in safe, trauma-informed housing tailored to the needs of male victims was a recurring theme across the data (DSP001, 7/25 learning workshop, 8/2 learning workshop). The severe shortage of safe, appropriate housing options for sexually exploited boys and LGBTQ+ youth identified in this study parallels the findings of the recent Minnesota Youth Interventions report (2024). These housing gaps and shortages are consistent with national and international findings. A report by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 2017 highlighted the nationwide shortage of housing resources for youth experiencing homelessness, a significant risk factor for sexual exploitation, disproportionately affecting LGBTQ+ youth (HUD, 2017). Similarly, the Global Boys Initiative by ECPAT International also identified significant gaps in safe housing and support services for sexually exploited boys in several countries, including Thailand, the Philippines, and South Africa (ECPAT International, 2021). This dearth of inclusive placements and services leaves many vulnerable youth without access to the specialized support they critically need both in Minnesota and globally, underscoring the urgent need for gender-inclusive, trauma-informed housing and support services that address the unique needs of male survivors.

Gaps in Gender-Specific, Trauma-Informed Services

The data revealed significant gaps in access to support services designed to meet the specific needs of male victims of trafficking and exploitation. Across interviews and surveys, respondents consistently highlighted the lack of gender-specific, trauma-informed services for boys and young men.

One prominent gap identified was the shortage of emergency shelter beds for male victims. Service providers reported that waiting lists for male-specific beds could be weeks long, and any available beds were constantly at capacity (DSP001, A/DSP007). This scarcity of emergency housing options tailored to the needs of male victims often leaves them without a safe place to turn when they seek help.

In addition to emergency housing, the data indicated a lack of longer-term transitional living programs designed specifically for male survivors (A/DSP007). These programs are crucial for providing a stable environment that supports the healing and rehabilitation of trafficked boys and young men.

Respondents also noted a dearth of trauma-focused counseling and mentorship programs that address the unique psychological needs of male survivors (DSP010, 8/15 learning workshop). One provider emphasized the significance of this gap, stating, "There is such shame around male victimization that most boys will not seek out mental health treatment, even if it's available, which in itself is rare" (DSP010). This highlights the importance of providing gender-specific, trauma-informed mental health services to help male victims overcome the psychological impact of exploitation.

The online survey of providers further corroborated these findings, with statistics indicating significantly higher caseloads of female victims compared to males. This disparity may be partially attributed to the under-identification of male victims, which could be influenced by the lack of services tailored to their specific needs and the barriers they face in seeking help (Online survey).

Several respondents emphasized that the majority of existing social services, housing programs, and therapeutic interventions are primarily designed to serve cisgender female victims. However, the data underscored that boys who have experienced exploitation have a wide range of unique needs, vulnerabilities, and challenges that require specialized support (DSP005, DSP011, 8/15 learning workshop).

Without access to gender-specific, trauma-informed services, male victims of trafficking and exploitation may struggle with unaddressed trauma, remain in unstable living situations, and fall through the cracks of systems that are not equipped to meet their distinct needs. The findings highlight the urgent need for increased investment in developing and expanding trauma-informed, male-centered services to fill these critical gaps and ensure that boys and young men who have experienced exploitation receive the specialized support they need to heal and thrive.

Gaps in Training and Protocols

The data highlighted significant gaps in training content and organizational protocols when it comes to addressing the specific needs of male victims of trafficking and exploitation. Numerous experts emphasized that existing training materials and procedures often overlook the experiences and challenges faced by boys and young men, hindering service providers' ability to effectively support male survivors (A/DSP014, A006, Participants from 8/15 learning workshop).

One common issue identified was the use of language and examples in training content that primarily focus on female victims. For instance, intake forms and protocols often default to female pronouns, terminology that emphasizes risks for girls, and discussions of stigma centered on femininity (A006, 7/25 learning workshop). An administrator noted, "The training examples primarily show adult men exploiting teenage girls through typical grooming narratives. Risks facing boys seem minimized by comparison" (A006). This lack of gender-inclusive language and male-specific examples can perpetuate the myth that trafficking and exploitation primarily affect girls and women.

Moreover, respondents pointed out that even training on trauma-informed care often relies on female-centric scenarios, such as unhealthy relationship dynamics and manipulation tactics more commonly associated with female victims (8/15 learning workshop). This gap in training leaves service providers less prepared to recognize and respond to the unique manifestations of trauma in male survivors.

Several participants emphasized the need for updated, gender-inclusive policies, safety guidelines, staff training content, and outreach materials to establish a foundation for providing informed, effective care to male survivors (A/DSP014, A006, multiple learning workshops). Without these critical changes, organizations may unintentionally contribute to the marginalization and re-traumatization of boys and young men who have experienced exploitation.

The findings underscore the importance of integrating male-specific content into training curricula, organizational policies, and outreach efforts. By providing service providers with the knowledge, skills, and tools to recognize and respond to the unique needs of male victims, organizations can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all survivors, regardless of their gender.

> **"THE STANDARD SCREENING TOOLS ARE DESIGNED FOR GIRLS AND FEMALE-PRESENTING VICTIMS. THEY RARELY FLAG BOYS AS BEING AT-RISK"**
>
> Direct support worker

Criminal Justice System

Need for More Trauma-Informed, Youth-Centered Justice System Approaches

The data reveals that standard adversarial practices within the criminal justice system often parallel and exacerbate the trauma experienced by youth who have been exploited. Several providers highlighted how common legal procedures can mirror the dynamics of abuse, further harming victims rather than promoting healing (CA002, A019, 8/15 workshop).

One key issue identified was the use of confrontational questioning tactics by legal professionals. As one advocate explained, these aggressive approaches "strongly replicate manipulative grooming behaviors by traffickers, triggering immense anxiety and powerlessness among survivors" (A019). Participants in a learning workshop echoed this concern, noting how such questioning can cause victims to experience panic attacks or shut down completely (8/15 workshop).

Another problematic practice mentioned was requiring victims to face their alleged abusers in court. Multiple sources emphasized that this experience can directly replicate the trauma of exploitation by stripping away the victim's sense of choice and control (A019, 8/15 workshop). As one participant put it, "Facing their exploiter in court forces them to relive the worst moments of their lives, often without any say in the matter" (8/15 workshop).

The potential consequences of these re-traumatizing experiences within the justice system are severe. Providers reported observing exacerbated PTSD symptoms, increased depression and substance abuse, and significant setbacks in victims' overall recovery (CA002, A019). As one case worker stated, "The system meant to protect them ends up inflicting even more damage" (A019).

In light of these concerning patterns, establishing more trauma-informed and youth-centered approaches within the justice system emerged as an urgent priority across the data (CA002, 8/15 workshop). Participants emphasized the need for legal professionals to receive training on the dynamics of trauma and exploitation, as well as strategies for engaging with victims in a more sensitive and empowering manner (8/15 workshop).

Specific recommendations included allowing youth to have a voice in whether they confront their abusers in court, using trauma-informed questioning techniques that minimize re-traumatization, and providing comprehensive support services to help victims navigate the legal process (8/15 workshop). As one advocate stressed, "We need to create a system that prioritizes the safety, healing, and agency of these youth above all else" (CA002).

While some providers acknowledged modest improvements in trauma awareness among certain law enforcement personnel (A006), the prevailing consensus was that much work remains to transform the justice system's approach to exploited youth. The insights shared underscore the critical importance of collaboration between legal professionals, trauma experts, and youth advocates to develop and implement more victim-centered practices (8/15 workshop).

Ultimately, the data serves as a powerful call to action for the criminal justice system to recognize and address the unique vulnerabilities and needs of youth who have experienced exploitation. As one provider poignantly stated, "We have a responsibility to ensure that seeking justice does not come at the cost of their well-being and future" (CA002).

Tendency Towards Criminalization Over Rehabilitation

Several providers expressed concerns over a tendency to criminalize rather than rehabilitate exploited boys who exhibit delinquent behaviors. Often the underlying trauma and exploitation of boys goes unidentified, with their behaviors and symptoms interpreted as willful criminality rather than trauma responses (A003). As one administrator stated, "The system just labels them as juvenile offenders or addicts. Nobody takes the time to uncover the exploitation underneath." (A003) Other sources noted gender biases can result in certain behaviors in boys being viewed as willful delinquency rather than trauma responses. One advocate stated: "We expect deviance from boys, not vulnerability." (CA002)

Many exploited boys end up criminally charged and incarcerated without receiving meaningful support and rehabilitation for their trauma and victimization. Sources emphasized that males who disclose exploitation or engage in survival behaviors like substance use face punitive consequences rather than help (CA002, A019).

The data revealed a tendency toward punitive consequences over trauma-informed support in response to males disclosing exploitation experiences and related survival behaviors (A019, 7/25 learning workshop). A case worker explained that "boys coming forward are often charged with related crimes instead of assisted as victims," failing rehabilitative intent (A019). Workshop participants shared similar accounts of boys being criminally charged after abuse disclosures rather than connected to help (7/25 learning workshop).

Respondents underscored a critical need to expand access to rehabilitation alternatives over further criminalizing affected boys within the legal system based on observed trends (A019, 7/25 & 8/15 workshops). For example, trauma-sensitive diversion incorporating community support could mitigate harm for marginalized male youth (8/15 learning workshop) while addressing behaviors through a lens recognizing root causes versus willful deviance based on their insights.

As one concluded, **"we must acknowledge biases and conditions placing exploited boys onto punishment pathways"** by pursuing reforms centered on healing (8/15 learning workshop).

Male Youth Abused as Child Later Labeled as Offender (DSP013)

A therapist shared a case involving a cisgender male youth who had been sexually abused as a child by female family members. As a result of this early trauma, he later acted out sexually against others. Despite also being a victim of severe abuse, he was labeled as a sex offender.

This youth struggled with immense shame and confusion around his experiences and behaviors. In therapy, he worked on understanding how the abuse he suffered had impacted his own actions, while still taking accountability. The therapist focused on helping him process his exploitation and develop healthier coping mechanisms and relationship skills.

Collaboration with the justice system was key in this case, to ensure this youth received a therapeutic rather than purely punitive response. The therapist advocated for trauma-informed approaches and connecting him to appropriate services. She worked to help probation officers and others understand the complex dynamics of this youth's experiences.

This case worker noted that male victims of child sexual abuse face particular stigma and lack of understanding. When they go on to exhibit abusive behaviors, even if rooted in their own trauma, they are often viewed solely as perpetrators. This can lead to lack of access to support services and healing.

The service provider in this case emphasized the need for a nuanced understanding of male victimization and its impacts. She stressed the importance of providing trauma recovery services to male youth in the justice system who have exploitation histories. Without addressing the underlying trauma, she believes the risk of recidivism is high.

This case reveals the challenges male victims face when they exhibit abusive behaviors, even if rooted in their own exploitation. It demonstrates the need for services that recognize the impact of victimization while still promoting accountability - a difficult balance. The therapist here advocated for systemic changes to provide more rehabilitation options for youth like this.

Child Welfare Concerns

As discussed in the previous sections, the under-identification and lack of appropriate services for male victims of trafficking and exploitation are pervasive issues that span across social service providers and the criminal justice system. Unfortunately, these patterns of gender bias and inadequate response to the needs of male survivors also extend to the child welfare system.

One critical area where gender biases manifest within child welfare is in the assessment tools used during intake processes. Several respondents highlighted how these tools, such as safety and risk assessments, are often designed based on research with cisgender girls, leading to the overlooking of risk factors specific to boys (DSP015, 8/2 learning workshop). As one participant pointedly stated, "The standard screening tools and safety assessments are designed based on research with cisgender girls. They rarely flag boys as being at-risk" (DSP015). This lack of gender-inclusive indicators results in exploited boys falling through the cracks of a system that is ill-equipped to identify and respond to their unique experiences.

Moreover, the child welfare system's focus on correcting behavioral issues rather than understanding potential trauma origins further compounds the challenges faced by exploited boys (A/DSP002). This mirrors the tendency

towards criminalization over rehabilitation observed in the justice system, where the underlying trauma and exploitation driving certain behaviors are often overlooked. As one administrator aptly noted, "Instead of trauma-informed care, the system focuses on punishing bad behaviors without looking deeper into their root causes" (A/DSP002). By failing to recognize the complex interplay between trauma and behavioral manifestations, the child welfare system inadvertently perpetuates a cycle of unaddressed harm and re-traumatization for male victims.

The consequences of these systemic shortcomings are starkly evident in the alarming under-identification of sexually exploited boys within child welfare screening practices (DSP017, A019, 8/2 learning workshop). Despite self-reported data indicating that boys experience sexual exploitation at rates comparable to girls (DSP008), the child welfare system consistently fails to identify and serve male victims. This discrepancy underscores the urgent need for more gender-inclusive identification procedures, training, and public awareness messaging (A019, multiple learning workshops). Until these biases are addressed, countless exploited boys will continue to suffer in silence, deprived of the support and resources they so desperately need.

It is crucial to recognize that the child welfare system's inadequate response to exploited boys is not an isolated issue, but rather a reflection of the pervasive gender biases and lack of male-specific services that plague multiple institutions tasked with protecting and supporting victims. From social service providers to the criminal justice system to child welfare, the experiences of male survivors are consistently minimized, misunderstood, and marginalized. Addressing these systemic failures requires a coordinated, multi-system approach that prioritizes gender-responsive training, protocols, and services across all contexts.

Societal Level

At the societal level of the socioecological framework, we examine the cultural attitudes, social norms, behaviors, and belief systems that influence the vulnerability of boys to sexual exploitation. This section explores how restrictive notions of masculinity, acceptance of violence against males, and structural inequalities in communities contribute to risks and discourage victims from speaking out.

Important factors to consider at this level include gender norms and stereotypes, cultural attitudes towards masculinity and stigma, social perspectives on victimhood, community knowledge and discourse on these issues, and societal structures that either increase risk or provide protection.

This analysis highlights the necessary changes in social narratives and systemic structures to create communities where males can thrive without experiencing sexual victimization. The following sections will incorporate insights from providers to identify key societal factors that need to be addressed in order to support vulnerable boys.

Cultural Norms About Masculinity

Societal attitudes, assumptions and cultural norms related to masculinity emerged as major risk factors that heighten male vulnerability to exploitation, while also deterring identification and help-seeking by victims. Providers consistently highlighted detrimental societal beliefs that males should be inherently strong, dominant, stoic, sexually experienced, and immune to victimization as increasing danger for boys across multiple data sources.

They observed that these restrictive norms isolate and endanger males who contradict ideals of invulnerability and control by expressing emotion, acknowledging abuse, or seeking assistance after exploitation.

Harmful Attitudes About Masculinity

The data revealed detrimental societal attitudes propagated through media, family socialization and institutions, foster rigid norms dictating males must be inherently strong, stoic and invulnerable according to numerous accounts (DSP001, DSP008, 7/25 & 8/2 learning workshops). For example, DSP008 explained "society tells boys they must handle problems alone," silencing male victims. Workshop participants echoed similar norms causing judgment towards boys expressing emotion or seeking help after abuse for appearing "weak" (7/25 learning workshop). These restrictive notions directly feed biases dismissing male sexual victimization possibility counter to outdated assumptions males are solely aggressors (DSP001).

One provided case illustrated that of a 16-year-old boy sexually abused by a babysitter, who felt intense shame and self-blame rather than support due to norms males should enjoy any sexual experience based on gender stereotypes (CA001). This example demonstrates deep psychological scars left when social attitudes normalize male abuse rather than supply protection.

These restrictive attitudes feed directly into biases dismissing the possibility of male sexual victimization. As a support worker explained, "we are still attached to archaic gender stereotypes when it comes to sexual victimization" (DSP001). Outdated assumptions fostered through social narratives paint males solely as inherent aggressors rather than vulnerable potential victims. Training for professionals across disciplines are needed to transform these cultural mindsets limiting recognition of boys as exploitation survivors.

Biases Against Male Victimhood

Deeply embedded biases presuming males are inherently strong aggressors rather than potential victims permeate media narratives, policies, institutional practices according to numerous accounts (A/DSP014, 8/15 learning workshop). For example, workshop participants expressed frustration around society's inability to accept male victimization, assuming exploitation means labor not sexual forms (8/15 learning workshop). A/DSP014 also observed similar assumptions that "men cannot be victims" root problems in recognizing/responding to abused boys.

These systemic biases pose grave barriers to identification, disclosure and help-seeking by male victims according to experts (A/DSP014, multiple learning workshops). For example, accounts exist of obvious signs being dismissed in male youths because professionals expect only female victims, preventing response (8/15 learning workshop).

Transforming biased cultural mindsets propagated through media, policies and training is urgently needed so professionals can recognize male survivors according to recurring insights (A/DSP014, multiple learning workshops). Only by evolving outdated assumptions that males solely perpetrate abuse can progress occur.

These findings indicate such biases pose substantial barriers to identification, disclosure, and help-seeking by male victims. Transforming biased narratives propagated in media, policies, and training is needed so professionals can recognize male survivors. As providers asserted, cultural mindsets painting males solely as aggressors must be challenged through public education campaigns, training, and reshaping institutional practices (7/25 & 8/2 learning workshops).

Stigma Around Help-Seeking

Societal norms socialized early that males must handle problems alone deter help-seeking for exploitation trauma due to expectations of self-reliance according to recurring accounts (DSP007, DSP008, multiple learning workshops). DSP007 encapsulated barriers noting "society tells boys they must handle problems alone," silencing male victims. Such notions breed judgment for acknowledging struggle.

The online survey data further corroborates these qualitative insights, revealing significant barriers to disclosure rooted in cultural norms and beliefs about masculinity. Key findings include the percentage of respondents who rated each barrier as either "Very Significant" or "Somewhat Significant":

1. Stigma and shame (culture of silence): 84.3% of respondents
2. Beliefs related to masculinity (e.g., seeking help is a sign of 'weakness'): 71.1% of respondents
3. Fears about others' responses to disclosure (e.g., blaming, punishing, not believing, mocking): 78.9% of respondents
4. Reluctance to view themselves as victims (e.g., it only happens to girls): 78.9% of respondents
5. Negative attitudes, fears, or difficulties asking for help and support: 86.9% of respondents

These survey results underscore the profound impact of societal expectations and gender norms on boys' willingness to disclose sexual exploitation and abuse. The findings highlight the urgent need to challenge harmful masculinity stereotypes, reduce stigma, and create supportive environments that encourage boys to seek help without fear of judgment or negative consequences.

Workshop participants recounted assumptions that males can "get over" abuse given inherent resilience notions, however a cited survey shows even professionals recognize these norms minimize help-seeking - with 68% viewing notions of male toughness as deterring support for trauma impacts (Online survey). For example, an account described a 15 year old assaulted on a sports team who felt counseling meant personal weakness, illustrating stigma breeding silence (CA001).

As norms fostering silence stem from early socialization, transforming attitudes through public education is essential so male youth feel empowered to safely access assistance without judgment according to recurring insights (DSP007, Participants from multiple learning workshops).

Biases Against Recognizing Male Sexual Victimization

Homophobia and taboos around male sexual victimization foster dismissal and blaming of boy survivors in the media, communities, and institutions. This fuels silence and deter help-seeking among males exploited by male perpetrators. One advocate described how male same-sex abuse elicits intense shame in certain cultures due to rigid homophobic attitudes and masculinity norms (A004). A case was shared where a Latino boy felt unable to report an abusive uncle due to cultural taboos. He feared being perceived as queer and facing backlash.

Workshop accounts revealed discrimination faced by both LGBTQ+ and heterosexual males seeking help after male perpetrated abuse, including use of slurs (8/15 Learning Workshop). As one participant described, "We've seen judgmental attitudes from providers that further silence abused boys" (8/15 Learning Workshop).

> " **WE ARE STILL ATTACHED TO ARCHAIC GENDER STEREOTYPES WHEN IT COMES TO SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION** "
>
> Direct support worker

> " **NO CHILD SHOULD BE SO VULNERABLE THAT THEIR BASIC NEEDS ARE LEVERAGED AGAINST THEM** "
>
> Direct support worker

These ingrained homophobic stigmas normalize dismissal of abused boys and men by society, communities, and institutions, especially when perpetrators are male. This prevents male survivors from getting the support and justice they deserve. Many survivors stay silent due to fears of being "outed" or blamed for the abuse. Evolving societal attitudes through public education and professional training is vital so male survivors can safely access support, regardless of sexual orientation or perpetrator demographics.

In particular, training must counter myths linking sexual orientation to likelihood of exploitation. LGBTQ+ male youth already face compounded marginalization and stigma in society, increasing dangers. While many service providers commonly believe or portray their services as gender-inclusive, in practice, the default is often cisgender female survivors. Social and cultural norms, as well as lack of deliberate programming, leave male and gender-diverse identities excluded. Truly inclusive and gender-responsive services tailored to identify and serve male survivors require conscious effort and remain scarce yet crucial.

Patterns of bias against recognizing male sexual victimization are reflected in global findings from the Global Boys Initiative (GBI), a multi-country research project conducted by ECPAT International, which explores the sexual exploitation of boys. The GBI study found that rigid gender norms, shame, stigma, and taboos were considerable vulnerability factors and barriers to disclosure for boys who experienced child sexual exploitation and abuse across diverse contexts (Nodzenski & Davis, 2023).

Institutional Acceptance of Harsh Discipline

The data reveals societal and institutional acceptance of harsh discipline against boys enables eventual exploitation by eroding boundaries around harm based on insights from a strong majority of providers (55% view as risk factor per survey; DSP007, Multiple learning workshop participants). As one respondent explained, when violence becomes so embedded in family or community life it feels commonplace, both youth and adults become desensitized to recognizing it as abusive (DSP007).

Specifically, violent behaviors like hazing, manipulation and corporal punishment become so ingrained within certain systemic cultures – from households to athletics programs to residential facilities – they feel commonplace, preventing communities and youth from identifying misconduct as abusive according to experts (DSP010, multiple

learning workshops). One provider noted behaviors constituting abuse of boys are often tolerated in sports contexts under notions that adversity will incorrectly "toughen them up" when research shows these experiences escalate trauma risks instead (DSP010).

Allowing violence against children erodes bodily autonomy everywhere. Transforming attitudes through public education coupled with institutional policy reforms centering accountability and youth-voice emerged as essential to uphold equal protection and dignity for all according to recurring insights (DSP007, Multiple learning workshops). Casey et al. (2013) emphasize the importance of addressing intersecting social issues that increase vulnerability to exploitation, such as poverty, homelessness, and substance abuse. Addressing these underlying factors is crucial for preventing the sexual exploitation of boys and young men and ensuring that all survivors have access to the support and resources they need.

Economic Factors

Poverty and Lack of Opportunity Enable Exploitation

The data widely revealed pervasive inequality factors like poverty, material deprivation, unstable housing, and limited educational/economic opportunities conspicuously enable youth exploitation according to recurring insights from service providers (Online survey: almost all cited poverty/instability as risks; CA002). As CA002 summarized, structural disparities "leave disadvantaged youth willing to do almost anything to meet basic needs."

Offenders knowingly leverage vulnerabilities like homelessness. For example, one case study exemplified how housing instability resulting from family marginalization led a gay teen boy to initially perceive exploitation as opportunity before abuse ensued, illustrating psychological impacts (Case study below).

Providers underscored comprehensive policy reforms addressing root disadvantage are needed so no children are so vulnerable that basic needs become severely compromised (DSP010). Dismantling disparities through improved education, housing, and job access could mitigate risks financial desperation creates according to recurring accounts (Online survey, Participants from multiple learning workshops).

Case Study of "Sam" (DSP014)

"Sam" (a pseudonym) is a transgender male youth originally from a southwestern state. After facing difficulties having his name legally changed from his "dead name", Sam ended up in the Twin Cities area seeking support services.

Lacking stable housing, Sam tried staying at a youth shelter but encountered threatening and transphobic behavior from other residents. Fearing for his safety, Sam called his case worker in the middle of the night saying he needed to get out of the shelter immediately or he would be killed.

The case worker attempted to arrange hotel vouchers for Sam as an alternative to the shelters. However, the hotel funding kept running out, forcing Sam to return to shelters where he continued to face harassment and discrimination. At one point, Sam said he would rather sleep on the streets than go back to a shelter.

Over a period of several months, Sam stayed in a hotel room alone nearly every day while awaiting permanent housing. When a housing unit became ready for Sam, move-in was delayed by bureaucratic issues related to his

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legal name change not being fully processed yet.

Though Sam was receiving some support services and wanted to move forward with his life, the isolation of hotel living and housing instability took a considerable psychological toll. His story illustrates the compounded challenges and unmet needs faced by many transgender youth experiencing homelessness while pursuing gender-affirming documentation. It highlights the need for more welcoming emergency shelter options, swifter permanent housing solutions, and trauma-informed support tailored to the unique needs of survivors of sexual exploitation and trafficking, beyond traditional assumptions of a gender binary.

Material Deprivation Drives Risky Behaviors

The data revealed that beyond financial desperation, narrow media messaging around materialism can exacerbate exploitation risks for economically disadvantaged youth (CA002, 8/15 & 7/25 learning workshops). As children in poverty are exposed to portrayals equating "success" with ownership of status items, material goods can take on outsized psychological importance as symbols of a better life (8/15 learning workshop). While limited in practical utility, certain possessions may provide a temporary sense of respite from the hardships of deprivation.

This profound material deprivation can create complex vulnerabilities that offenders may exploit for coercive control. In one case example shared by a service provider, a male youth continued to endure sexual abuse in order to retain the new clothing and electronics that his abuser had provided (case example #x below). This disturbing account illustrates the psychological impacts of material deprivation, where the temporary reprieve of coveted goods can influence victims to tolerate further trauma.

Respondents emphasized the need for comprehensive interventions that address the root causes of poverty while also providing alternative pathways for marginalized youth to build a sense of self-worth and achievement beyond material consumption (8/15 learning workshop, 7/25 learning workshop). Effective prevention efforts must work to counteract media narratives fueling unrealistic expectations and insecurities, while simultaneously expanding access to education, employment, and supportive services.

Exploitation of Gender Stereotypes and Material Rewards in the Grooming of a Young Male (CA001)

In this case, a young white male under the age of consent was targeted and groomed by a trafficker who exploited his desire to fit in and live up to masculine expectations. The trafficker recruited the boy to run drugs, likely starting with small requests and building up to more significant criminal involvement over time.

As a reward for his participation, the trafficker gave the boy a gaming system - something highly desirable that allowed him to gain status and fit in with his peers at school. For a young boy who may not have much access to the "nice things" that other kids have, this was a powerful lure. The trafficker took advantage of the societal pressure on young men to show up a certain way, have particular material possessions, and prove their masculinity.

The trafficker criminally exploited the boy by having him run drugs, but also psychologically exploited his developmental vulnerabilities and gender identity formation. By the time the exploitation was discovered, the boy was already enmeshed in criminal activities that could impact his future. This case demonstrates how traffickers tailor their tactics based on the unique pressures and desires of young male victims.

Policy Level

At the policy level of analysis, we examine the laws, regulations, protocols, and government initiatives that impact boys who have experienced sexual exploitation and abuse. This section focuses on policy gaps, unintended consequences, implementation challenges, and system coordination issues that may obstruct access to support services, deter help-seeking behaviors, or create barriers to recovery among this population.

Key elements to explore include existing legal protections like Safe Harbor and their limitations, mandated reporting policies and impacts on disclosure, decriminalization efforts and recidivism, funding and resource allocation, and interagency coordination. The policy level analysis elucidates necessary improvements to better serve male survivors through trauma-informed, equitable systems centered on rehabilitation over criminalization.

Legal Framework

Minnesota's Safe Harbor Law passed unanimously in 2011 represented major progress in legal protections for trafficked youth according to health officials . As A/DSP014 described, the legislation signified treating exploited youth "as victims, not criminals."

However, providers identified concerning gaps limiting consistent implementation across the state in practice (DSP001, A/DSP014). While Safe Harbor legally promises "any door is the right door" through a universal "no wrong door" access model, systemically many doors remain wrong for male youth. One service provider notes "actually, every door is the wrong door for boys" due to societal and systemic barriers hindering access to services. For example, the shortage of shelters actually equipped to serve exploited boys creates barriers belying the law's intent for comprehensive protections according to this account (DSP001).

Addressing obstacles around housing, stigma, and other resources remains imperative so Safe Harbor's safety net can achieve its aim to protect Minnesota's youth equally based on insights (A/DSP014). Uneven implementation allowing any group to slip through the cracks warrants continued action.

A/DSP014 gave the stark assessment that "Safe Harbor has no wrong door, but there are wrong doors for males." Progress requires addressing why some doors remain closed. As they remarked, "Despite the fact that we have a safe harbor law, we are not going to put our young people through the juvenile you know, delinquency process. If they are a survivor of trafficking. We still are. We still absolutely are." In practice, some regions are still criminalizing rather than supporting victimized boys.

Additionally, mandated reporting policies under Safe Harbor aim to facilitate early intervention but have unintended consequences. As A006 described, fear of legal or social repercussions prevents victims from disclosing exploitation until they feel ready.

Gaps in implementation of Safe Harbor Law

The uneven implementation of Minnesota's Safe Harbor law criminalizes victimized boys rather than supports them, according to A/DSP014's stark assessment. They noted that "despite Minnesota's safe harbor protections in law, we are still putting exploited young people through the juvenile delinquency system rather than treating them

as victims." In practice, varied regional approaches result in some youth still facing punishment over care (A/DSP014 interview).

Additionally, several providers noted unintended harms around mandatory reporting requirements intended to facilitate early intervention (A006, DSP012). A006 described how for Indigenous youth specifically, fear of removal from family due to reporting deters abuse disclosures until victims feel ready. DSP012 recounted a young man whose report resulted in no follow up action, severing trust without providing actual support. These tensions highlight needs for policy evaluation and training to fully apply Safe Harbor's core principles in practice (A006). Establishing consistent, trauma-informed response protocols, informed by community insights, is essential so exploited youth asking for help receive meaningful care rather than further criminalization across all regions based on recurring accounts (DSP012, A006).

Biases also cause signs to be overlooked in marginalized youth. As DSP007 explained, "minority youth are discouraged from revealing abuse" by discrimination. Misconceptions lead to failure to recognize male victimization: "Law enforcement assumes victims will be female" (DSP001). Similarly, Learning workshop participants observed limitations in utilizing mandated screening tools (8/2 Learning Workshop). As one participant described, "the screening process is rushed...key signs get missed" (8/2 Learning Workshop). Despite having protocols, exploitation often goes undetected.

" EVERY DOOR IS THE WRONG DOOR. THEY'RE EITHER LOCKED OR THEY'RE REALLY SCARY. "

Direct Support worker

These insights underscore needs for urgent policy review coupled with frontline staff training to fulfill Safe Harbor's core mission. Establishing clear victim-centered, culturally-responsive and trauma-informed response protocols is essential so diverse exploited youth disclosing abuse consistently receive meaningful support rather than punishment when seeking help (A006, DSP012).

Challenges with mandated reporting

While intended to trigger intervention for at-risk youth, mandated reporting requirements also risk unintended consequences according to multiple providers (A006, A/DSP014, DSP012). Such policies remove decision-making

power from victims (A006), contradicting trauma-informed principles centering choice and control in one's healing journey (multiple learning workshops). Youth may run towards unsafe but familiar situations if placement feels coercive versus collaborative (A/DSP014).

Additionally, legal obligations to report strain providers' abilities to make trauma sensitive risk/benefit assessments once trust is built (DSP012), while still failing to increase safety. DSP012 described a boy whose hard-won disclosure prompted no actual follow up support, only severing therapeutic trust. Such examples underscore needs to strengthen implementation centered on youth empowerment and true safety.

With diligence, existing reporting policies aiming to protect can ultimately empower exploited youth if centered on trauma-informed, culturally-responsive care principles according to insights (multiple learning workshops). But progress requires addressing unintended consequences through ongoing community feedback and frontline staff training.

Funding and Resources

Providers highlighted substantial barriers making it difficult to access resources for supporting exploited male youth. As DSP007 explained, "Due to the lack of resources, we are unable to assist the vulnerable boys and men we encounter, leaving many without access to services that meet their needs."

These barriers include insufficient data and understanding of males' distinct experiences. As one statewide administrator noted, the "lack of research and data on male victims leads to lack of understanding and ability to respond." This results in inadequate provision of appropriate services. Gender stereotypes also influence funding gaps, as assumptions persist that males need less support or can protect themselves (A004).

Consequently, funding is disproportionately allocated toward female-centric programs. For example, one respondent described the lack of funding for emergency shelters inclusive of, or specifically for, male trafficking victims. Participants advocated for significantly more investments in male-centered services like trauma therapy and shelters where they "feel respected and understood" (A/DSP014). Overcoming underfunding requires improving data collection, cultural competence, services, training, and societal understanding to provide equitable support.

System Coordination

Need for collaborative prevention approaches

Providers underscored collaboratively addressing root drivers through prevention initiatives focused on generational trauma, restrictive gender norms, inequities, and other societal risk factors according to many accounts (CA001; 8/2 & 7/25 learning workshops). For example, CA001 asserted "We must tackle root causes before more lives are devastated." Participants cited comprehensive efforts transforming harmful attitudes, community-centered empowerment programs, and addressing demand through education (8/2 learning workshop). Another participant notes we must "combat risk factors through public education and shifting social norms that normalize exploitation." (DSP007)

Policymakers hold responsibility to fund coordinated prevention stemming exploitative conditions through scientifically-grounded public health approaches grounded in community co-leadership based on recurring insights (DSP007, multiple learning workshops).

Impactful movement requires inclusive collaboration according to participants (Learning workshops 8/2 & 7/25). As DSP007 explained, community-driven reform of societal drivers is essential because "Including community voices brings wisdom to solutions." With joint prioritization upstream before a crisis, coordinated action can disrupt these exploitive patterns.

Importance of community-government partnerships

Participants observed that undoing historical harms like lack of tribal sovereignty, forced assimilation, and disproportionate youth detention requires genuine partnerships with impacted communities like Indigenous and LGBTQ+ groups according to many (DSP008; Participants from 8/15 & 8/2 learning workshops). As DSP008 described, substantial efforts must continue making systems safer for exploited youth they've excluded.

However bureaucratic barriers frequently block grassroots advocacy groups that have vital insights from decision making (Participants from 8/2 learning workshop). As one provider remarked, "Small nonprofits hold tremendous wisdom, yet we're shut out by restrictive systems." Similarly, another noted that Indigenous communities are rarely meaningfully engaged in developing culturally-responsive models of care (A006). The marginalization of these groups undermines policies appropriately addressing community needs. Potential solutions involve interweaving community guidance through required representation in planning (Participants from multiple learning workshops).

Lacking genuine collaboration results in ineffective programs according to accounts. As one provider explained, "we must build communication bridges – closing gaps in protecting these kids requires amplifying community voices kept silenced" (DSP007 interview). With open systems inclusive of those impacted, solutions can address diverse needs more responsively according to participants (Learning workshops 8/15 & 8/2). Potential solutions include requiring a certain percentage of planning task forces to include community members, providing core funding for grassroots groups, and streamlining contracting (Learning workshops).

Community insights improve cultural competence, accountability, and trust. As DSP007 explained, we must "build communication highways that close gaps in protecting these kids." But this requires dismantling barriers excluding community knowledge from coordinated systems. With inclusive partnerships, policies can address diverse needs equitably.

Additional Concerns

Biases within law enforcement and legal systems

Biases against male victims within legal systems deter disclosure and enable inequitable treatment according to recurrent accounts (DSP007; Learning workshops 8/15, 8/2, 7/25). DSP007 described profiling practices and dismissive attitudes further discouraging abused boys from reporting. Participants echoed observations that police and courts assume male deviance rather than trauma vulnerability (Learning workshops 8/15, 7/25).

While incremental training increases some awareness, participants asserted achieving true justice requires substantive anti-bias reforms addressing discriminatory enforcement practices according to many (A/DSP002; 8/15, 8/2 Learning workshops). Namely strict policies prohibiting documentation racial/gender profiling, coupled with community oversight bodies empowered to increase accountability and reduce documented disparities (7/25 & 8/2 Learning workshops).

As A/DSP002 summarized, "We must acknowledge and address biases that re-victimize exploited boys...Equitable justice demands it." But concrete accountability mechanisms are required to transform inequitable systems.

Identifying Harmful Sexual Behaviors

Minnesota's Safe Harbor framework aims to avoid criminalizing exploited youth through trauma-informed, rehabilitative services. However, well-intentioned programs like DU-10 and PIP-FASO reveal tensions between legal and social service perspectives that risk further harming vulnerable children. While designed as less punitive diversion approaches, in practice they still overlook victim identification within concerning contexts.

The "legal lens" initiating cases like DU-10 can displace support with punitive outcomes, as legal processes often lack trauma awareness. For example, DSP013 described a traumatized young boy placed with other boys after assault, subject to further stigma. Social workers aimed for rehabilitation, recognizing this youth's capacity for growth. However, the legal lens employs processes shown to risk re-traumatization, like pre-trial detention, adversarial interrogation, and stigmatizing court procedures (7/25 & 8/2 Learning workshops).).

One social worker explained, the "legal lens focuses on behaviors that delays recognizing underlying trauma." Research also demonstrates gender biases causing boys to be perceived as more culpable, influencing legal judgments (8/2 Learning workshops). Pressures to resolve cases quickly can further clash with trauma-informed principles.

In summary, the legal and social service lenses have inherent tensions around identification and rehabilitation of exploited youth. Well-intentioned diversion programs still need consistent protocols to uphold Safe Harbor principles within legal processes. Ongoing collaboration and training is essential to avoid criminalizing traumatized children needing support.

Service Needs and Gaps

Safety

Building on the housing gaps discussed previously, interviews underscored the extreme shortage of shelters and transitional programs designed specifically for male victims as a major barrier to safety (DSP005, DSP017). Despite statewide laws intended to protect trafficking victims, respondents emphasized that in practice, exploited boys and men still have nowhere safe to turn when seeking help. As A/DSP014 explained, only 4 beds statewide are dedicated specifically for male survivors, creating substantial barriers for this population.

The lack of welcoming, trauma-informed facilities equipped with protections for male victims leaves many with an impossible choice, according to accounts – either remain with their abuser or risk placement in mixed-gender facilities creating fear of humiliation or assault (DSP011). Relatedly, several providers highlighted the vital need to extend legal assurances protecting males from criminalization, as stigma currently deters help-seeking behaviors after abuse disclosure (DSP005).

Overall, expanding tailored emergency and transitional housing paired with legal protections is essential to establish safety pathways for male survivors. However progress first requires investments in customized shelters and trauma-informed services designed for exploited men and boys, an area historically under-resourced according to recurring insights (DSP005, A/DSP014).

However, progress requires investments in tailored housing and shelters, historically underfunded due to assumptions males are predators rather than victims needing refuge.

Physical and Mental Healthcare

Respondents highlighted critical physical and mental health needs and gaps impacting male trafficking survivors (DSP017, A/DSP014). Increased testing/treatment access is urgently required for conditions like HIV, STIs and Hepatitis more prevalent in this population (US Dept of Health and Human Services, 2022). However, stigma and lack of inclusive services pose barriers, with few competent providers equipped to serve males (DSP005, DSP017). Some cannot access lifesaving care due to biases.

Mentally, significant gaps persist around sustained trauma therapy tailored for men and boys according to recurring insights (SSI interviews with A/DSP014, DSP005), which cultural stoicism norms further exacerbate (8/15 Learning workshop). Prohibitively long waitlists also delay access to existing limited counseling programs, compounding untreated trauma (DSP005).

Additionally, prohibitively long waitlists for existing services create barriers to timely trauma care (A/DSP014). Investments are critically needed to expand access to healthcare customized for male victims, reduce stigma through training, and address waitlists by growing the workforce and streamlining referrals. With improved services, we can increase help-seeking and healing among exploited boys and men. Substantially expanding customized male healthcare services, reducing stigma through staff training, streamlining strained referrals, and growing the workforce emerged as vital solutions enabling healing and stop gaps leaving boys underserved (A/DSP014, DSP005). With improved services, service providers indicate they can increase help-seeking and healing among exploited boys and men.


Case Study: Serving a Cisgender Straight Boy in a Sexual Exploitation Program (DSP005)

One participant shared the example of a sexual exploitation and trafficking program grappled with the unique challenges of serving a cisgender, straight boy engaging in transactional sex. The boy openly shared that he traded sex with anyone to meet his basic needs, while clearly identifying as a boy who liked girls and was straight.

The program faced challenges in providing services due to only having female-identified staff at the time. Although the boy agreed to work with a female staff member, unhealthy boundaries emerged as he made advances and pushed limits with the staff. Despite the program's attempts to address these issues through conversations and service adaptations, the boy ultimately disengaged and went missing.

This case raised questions about the program's capacity to provide the specialized support a cisgender straight boy engaging in transactional sex for basic needs might require. While basic services could be offered, the lack of male-identified staff and concerns about the appropriateness of the program's training and approaches for this population were highlighted.

The case study underscores the need for sexual exploitation programs to consider and address the unique needs of cisgender straight boys. This may involve recruiting male-identified staff, providing tailored staff training, and developing specific strategies to effectively engage and support this population. Further research and solutions are needed to better understand and meet the needs of boys and young men impacted by sexual exploitation.

Education and Employment

Respondents emphasized major education and employment gaps plus needed adaptations to effectively serve male trafficking survivors based on common vulnerabilities (DSP005, DSP017, A/DSP014). The disparities in access to specialized services for sexually exploited boys and girls are further highlighted by Swaner et al. (2016), who found that only 15% of sexually exploited boys had received any form of specialized services, compared to 65% of sexually exploited girls. This stark difference underscores the urgent need for expanding gender-specific, trauma-informed services tailored to the unique needs of male survivors.

In education, increased flexibility is required in rigid pathways towards completion that currently fail exploited youth facing instability according to providers (DSP005, DSP017). For example, one youth interested in vocational trades could not manage an inflexible, unsupported program which was not adaptive to his particular trauma patterns. Customized, interest-based job training is also critically lacking (DSP017). Developing practical skills matching individuals' strengths is essential (A/DSP014). Providers explained traditional settings with rigid policies like truancy laws often fail exploited youths experiencing instability.

Additionally, mentorship initiatives emerged as vital to fostering life skills and hope needed to envision futures amidst trauma (DSP005). But substantial investments are urgently required for programs designed to empower male survivor resilience according to participants (A/DSP014, DSP017). With proper support, they can develop knowledge and tools to reach full potential.

Discussion & Analysis

This mixed methods study aimed to examine the experiences of boys and young men who access frontline services in Minnesota after enduring sexual exploitation and abuse. The research centered around three core questions:

1. What current cases exist involving boys who have experienced exploitation and abuse (including online)?

2. How are these boys accessing services and getting connected to frontline providers?

3. What obstacles or gaps exist in providing adequate intervention and support?

A convergent design collected qualitative insights regarding service provision alongside quantitative prevalence data in order to holistically investigate these issues. Surveys documented the scope and characteristics of cases providers currently handle. In-depth interviews illuminated common barriers and system gaps that deter disclosure or limit available care.

What current cases exist involving boys who have experienced exploitation and abuse (including online)?

The findings reveal insights into current cases involving commercially sexually exploited youth encountered by providers in Minnesota. Mixing quantitative prevalence data with qualitative case examples, several key themes emerge surrounding:

- The age range and gender diversity impacted
- Risk factors enabling exploitation
- Tactics used by offenders
- Contexts rendering youth vulnerable

Age of Initial Victimization

Survey data indicates the average age of initial exploitation occurs around ages 11-15 for over 60% of youth served in this study. However, provider caseloads concentrated in older adolescents from ages 18-24 years old (37% of youth clients).

This gap between the onset of exploitation in early adolescence and later identification in legal adulthood suggests potential delays in early intervention during formative developmental phases. Recent research has explored the concept of stress recalibration during sensitive developmental periods, with the perinatal period being a potential window of stress recalibration in adult life, characterized by heightened neural plasticity and marked changes in stress system function (Howland, 2023). While complexities exist in delineating the boundaries of perinatal stress recalibration, this concept may have implications for optimizing interventions and understanding mechanisms of risk and resilience.

Research shows entrenched societal attitudes minimize recognizance of male victimization (Mariaca Pacheco & Miles, 2023), while taboos prevent adolescent boys from disclosing abuse until years later. Yurteri et al. (2021) found that delayed disclosers of child sexual abuse were younger, more likely to be victims of intrafamilial abuse, and less likely to have experienced penetration or made voluntary disclosures. These findings highlight the need for age-appropriate education and prevention programs to increase awareness of sexual abuse, particularly intrafamilial abuse, and promote voluntary disclosure in children and adolescents, especially for younger age groups.

Without early, empathetic intervention grounded in trauma-informed principles, unhealthy coping mechanisms like substance abuse often take root (Watkins et al., 2018). Proactively addressing risk factors for exploitation before unhealthy patterns become entrenched through adolescence is imperative according to prevention models (CDC, 2004). Therefore closing gaps in early identification and access to supportive services should be prioritized, especially for marginalized male youth.

Gender Breakdown

While exploitation impacts youth across the gender spectrum, survey data indicates a majority (75-90%) of current caseloads involved cisgender females. Transgender youth were increasing but still a minority portion (~5-10%) of

clients. However, very few providers reported experiencing cases involving cisgender boys specifically in the past year.

This low indication of male cases aligns with cited research on under-identification of boys and young men exploited through sex trafficking ([2023](#)). Recent analysis of Minnesota Student Survey data found similar rates of trading sex reported by adolescent boys and girls identifying as straight (1.2% vs 1.5%). However, it is crucial to note that gay boys reported higher rates of trading sex compared to their heterosexual counterparts ([Martin et al., 2023](#)), emphasizing the need for appropriate, identity-affirming care for this population.

This discrepancy reveals how macro-level statistics alone fail to fully convey the painful human impacts of abuse. For marginalized male survivors who manage to access support, individual case histories underscore systemic failures across institutions like child protection, housing, and healthcare that enable chronic exploitation when social safety nets falter ([Gagnier et al., 2017](#))

Lingering cultural biases shape societal blindness towards male victimization ([Forde & Duvvury, 2016](#)). **It is imperative to ensure that all male survivors, regardless of sexual orientation, have welcoming places to receive services.** Transforming restrictive norms remains crucial so all sexually exploited youth can be accurately identified early and connected to appropriate trauma-informed, identity-affirming care.

Failures Enabling Exploitation

Individual cases underscored systemic failures across child protection, housing, healthcare, and justice systems that enable youth to fall through cracks. One support worker recounted a 15 year old boy facing chronic violence within his family without intervention over years..

Lacking protection from abuse at home, he was repeatedly exploited by neighborhood traffickers trading temporary shelter and food for sex acts out of desperation. Eventually arrested for stealing food, his account of exploitation was dismissed by police as a false excuse despite exhibiting trauma symptoms. After years of being afraid to disclose exploitation, this case encapsulates gaps across systems that should protect vulnerable boys ([Gagnier et al., 2017](#)).

Other respondents described adolescent boys too anxious to attend school after bullying, couch surfing between unsafe relatives after parents were lost to addiction and incarceration. Trusted mentors manipulated their intensifying emotional void, gradually coercing them to recruit peers for commercial exploitation with manipulative threats. Each tragedy reveals youth sliding towards high-risk behaviors without interventions addressing unmet core needs, aligning with research on the role of unhealthy coping mechanisms in the context of trauma and exploitation ([Watkins et al., 2018](#)).

Across cases, lack of trauma-informed awareness coupled with restrictive gender norms enabled dismissal of exploitation red flags ([2023](#); [Forde & Duvvury, 2016](#))**,** highlighting the need to recognize and mitigate gender bias at individual and systemic levels when investigating cases of exploitation and abuse (U.S. Department of Justice, 2022). Instead of empathy, reactive policies criminalizing adolescents demonstrating complex stress reactions recurred. Transforming culture and competencies among families, institutions and authorities remains imperative to nurture, instead of punishing, the most marginalized youth.

Key Risk Factors

Frontline providers frequently cited adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) as precursors enabling subsequent exploitation. ACE exposure is common but largely unexamined among youth in the juvenile justice system, with one study of over 64,000 juvenile offenders finding that only 3% reported no ACEs while the majority reported multiple ACEs, highlighting the need for more research in this population (Baglivio et al., 2014).

Locally, respondents observed complex trauma from caregiver substance abuse, mental illness, abandonment or death often resulting in cycles of foster care placement and homelessness. Without stability or social support, youth increasingly demonstrate maladaptive coping through risky behaviors

As research shows, childhood trauma exposure leads to alterations in neural networks involved in threat processing, emotional regulation, and executive functioning, which are associated with increased risk for psychopathology and maladaptive behaviors in youth (McLaughlin et al., 2019). When basic needs aren't met, risky choices seem reasonable. Seeking money, food, shelter, drugs or affection through exploitative sources appears an unavoidable means for survival. Gradually, poor self-worth becomes entrenched.

However, literature reveals that safe, stable, and nurturing relationships can buffer against the detrimental effects of early life stress. Sensitive caregiving promotes adaptive neurobiological regulation and resilience in children exposed to adversity (Hambrick et al., 2019). A trauma-focused intervention fostering positive parenting skills led to reductions in child trauma symptoms and behavioral problems, with enhancing supportive parent-child relationships being a key mechanism for promoting resilience in trauma-exposed youth (Racine et al., 2020). . As one navigator explained, "If we can help repair relationships with family members who genuinely care or identify mentors youth trust, it often makes all the difference in their healing and stability." Community ties should be nurtured, not neglected, among systems aiming to reduce risk.

Isolation Tactics

Beyond adversity, findings reveal how traffickers frequently isolate youth from protective community ties over time. Echoing past research Mostajabian, et al, 2019), respondents described offenders patiently building emotional dependency by supplying initial affection, gifts, privileges lacking in a child's life.

Gradually, exploiters position themselves as the sole source of attention youth yearn for due to caregiver absence, conflict or emotional neglect. One support worker explained this disturbing dynamic: "Manipulators present themselves first as the only person paying attention to a boy's interests, troubles at school, family situation - slowly making themselves indispensable to fill that emotional void."

Eventually dependency becomes deliberately abused through coercive control tactics. Providers noted how substances strategically lower inhibitions alongside threats that overwhelm adolescent coping skills already depleted by trauma. Each element intends to isolate victims from external contacts that might intervene while trapping youth in a cycle of exploitation.

How are these boys accessing services and getting connected to frontline providers?

The data reveals a number of common pathways bringing sexually exploited boys into contact with frontline providers. While formal identification remains challenging, initial outreach frequently starts through housing and emergency placements sought when fleeing untenable home environments according to findings.

Housing services as first point of contact

Both survey statistics and case histories suggest housing precarity frequently serves as the initial catalyst enabling victim access to frontline providers. Aligning with cited research linking homelessness to heightened exploitation risks (Grattan et al., 2022), engagement often starts through crisis housing services.

Specifically, over 80% of providers reported housing assistance requests as the top presenting need from commercially sexually exploited youth (Online survey data). Individual stories underscored chronic couch-surfing, shelters, and transitional facilities as common entry points bringing high-risk boys to providers' attention according to recurring insights (A/DSP014, DSP011).

However, findings also indicate emergency placements available to boys remain extremely limited statewide. With only 4 dedicated shelter beds specifically equipped for commercially sexually exploited males, few options exist tailored to their recovery needs (A/DSP014). This unmet demand leaves boys dependent on profoundly unsafe environments when fleeing trauma, as one social worker summarized: "without basic security, we perpetuate exploitation cycles" (DSP005).

Cultural Connections for Native Youth

The findings suggest that for Indigenous youth specifically, establishing care through tribal or Native-centered community agencies is uniquely vital to rebuilding trust after exploitation. Quantitative data revealed over 65% of providers encountered cases involving Native American youth, elucidating disproportionate representation and risks compared to statewide demographics.

Aligning with cited research on the protective impacts of cultural connectedness (Mohatt et al., 2014), the established rapport and shared heritage within tribal networks better facilitates engagement with Native victims compared to mainstream government providers. One administrator noted the need to address underlying systemic factors contributing to "a hugely disproportionate number of Native youth impacted" (Participant from Learning Workshop, 8/2/23).

Additionally, respondents noted that historical oppression and intergenerational trauma often create barriers for Indigenous youth to initially reach out to systems and providers associated with assimilative policies. Professionals serving tribal youth must provide care "through Native organizations who understand that context" in order to rebuild trust (Learning Workshop, 8/15/23), according to several accounts. The familiarity and cultural alignment of these grounded settings positions their teams to deliver care aligned with strengths and values adapted for this population.

Bridging Care for LGBTQ+ Youth

The findings revealed LGBTQ+-focused community organizations frequently serve as critical initial access points for diverse gender minority youth needing specialized care after exploitation trauma. These agencies often stand at the intersection of homelessness, healthcare, and counseling services equipped to address common sequelae like depression, PTSD, and substance abuse among LGBTQ+ adolescent populations (Barnert et al., 2016).

By working across systems service providers coordinate medical care, basic needs, and identity-affirming counseling that specifically meets the needs of this group according to recurring insights (A/DSP014, DSP017). For example, one SSI participant explained, "We bridge everything from hormone therapy, STI testing, accessing shelter beds, obtaining identification documents, to trauma-based therapy all under one roof. That's why exploited youth come to us first - we provide wraparound support in a safe atmosphere." (DSP017).

However, findings indicate capacity remains constrained relative to community needs. All administrators noted steady growth in LGBTQ+ youth seeking help after exploitation or trafficking locally, elucidating increasing awareness of these agencies' vital positioning to address unmet needs through holistic, empowering care (A/DSP015, Online survey data).

Shortage of tailored shelter beds

The findings underscore the critical shortage of housing resources specifically designed for commercially sexually exploited boys and young men, aligning with previous research highlighting gaps in shelter capacity for youth (HUD, 2024).

Quantitatively, 100% of providers noted lack of available housing tailored for male victims as a major barrier in connecting youth to safe alternatives after fleeing exploitation (Online survey data). With only six emergency shelter beds dedicated for this population across Minnesota, administrators described desperate reliance on profoundly unsafe environments instead (A/DSP014).

This unmet demand leaves boys with no choice but dangerous dependency according to accounts from both survey data and semi-structured interviews. Whether unsuitable facilities like juvenile detention, adult homeless shelters, or even return to abusive guardians - few appropriate housing alternatives exist when an exploited boy reaches out (DSP005).

Within youth housing services broadly, findings exposed a shortage of trauma-informed, male-centered capacity. As one director emphasized, "The few shelters trying to help lack staff competencies, therapies or peer support for boys with PTSD. Without basic understanding of their needs, we maintain trauma cycles" (DSP017).

Ultimately, complex barriers spanning policy constraints, financial bottlenecks and social stigma collectively restrict access to safe housing for male survivors. But transforming shelter designs, training and public awareness are imperative first steps administrators recommended towards equitable access for boys needing refuge.

What obstacles or gaps exist in providing adequate intervention and support?

Biases and Assumptions

Per insights shared across respondents, prevailing sociocultural biases severely constrain adequate identification and support for commercially sexually exploited boys and young men. At an individual level, gender constructs fostering notions that males cannot be victims undermine recognition and response according to findings. Respondents noted how stereotypes that "real men" exude complete physical and emotional self-reliance brings stigma rather than assistance when adolescent boys demonstrate vulnerability through exploitation disclosure (A/DSP014). One learning workshop with providers on masculinity revealed these notions persist professionally: "there is an assumption boys can protect themselves - so admitting abuse means betrayal of male norms" (8/15 Learning Workshops). Re-educating the public to transform biases limiting understanding of diverse male survivor experiences was deemed imperative.

Additionally, several accounts illuminated how stereotypes and stigma surrounding same-sex relations amplify dismissal if adolescent boys report exploitation by men. A/DSP014 explained this leads systems, which were meant to protect youth, to instead "ignore signs, blame the behaviors not the abuse experiences." One community advocate described the intense persecution young Two-Spirit Native males face if violations of heteronormativity become known, especially within insular rural towns (CA001). With youth access to inclusive role models for healthy identity development already scarce in outstate tribal contexts, the implications of disclosure without assured confidentiality can be devastating socially according to findings.

Institutionally, underrecognition of diverse non-binary orientations and expressions among male youth populations further marginalizes those already facing adversity and family estrangement. For LGBTQ+ adolescents especially, assumptions engendering shame around sexual orientation were noted across respondents as severely inhibiting help-seeking when complex trauma manifests through detrimental coping methods. Unless cultural and systemic biases transform to fully include male survivors across the gender spectrum, large segments of exploited youth will remain hidden according to findings (A003/A004).

Access and Care Obstacles

While transforming restrictive norms remains foundational, respondents simultaneously emphasized how historical oppression and ongoing interpersonal discrimination sustain barriers to equitable access and care for marginalized boys following exploitation trauma.

Accounts revealed how generational cycles of violence, family fracturing, and community severance through policies like boarding schools continue eroding trust in protective systems for Indigenous youth according to regional advocates (A/DSP014). Repeated failures answering relatives' reports of missing Native girls perpetuate skepticism that declarations from Native boys will be handled seriously either (DSP008). Reactionary prejudice faced by youth of color seeking child welfare services further compounds reluctance. As A/DSP014 surmised, "when past help meant punishment, why risk reaching out now?"

For gay and bisexual boys, the intersecting stigma surrounding both sexual trauma and orientation deters openness according to findings. One administrator explained: "boys hear other kids insulting gay peers with the same slurs thrown at their abusers - so they bottle up trauma to avoid more shame" (A/DSP002). Remaining silently

disconnected to conceal marginalization brings profound risks as externalizing behaviors manifest during developmental years instead of healing engagement.

Institutionally, overlooked screening and outdated frameworks repeatedly failed recognizing diverse male cases. As insights revealed, rushed intake forms and risk tools assuming feminine norms means key signs get missed while data gaps hiding male prevalence persist (DSP015). Associated funding constraints on responsive, identity-affirming services stem from these embedded institutional biases according to findings. One director described the essence of this obstacle: "the system only seeks templates matching assumptions; so what about those who do not fit?" (A/DSP002). Revising engrained systemic processes to comprehensively include male victims remains imperative.

Societal Drivers of Desperation

While individual biases and access barriers represent significant obstacles directly deterring male survivors from support, findings also underscored deeper societal and political dynamics enabling the desperation that traffickers exploit according to accounts.

On a cultural level, administrators explained how the combination of pervasive poverty concentration in marginalized areas with ubiquitous media messages glorifying material wealth prime youth ambitions towards risky choices (A/DSP014). "When legal livelihood pathways seem unattainable yet kids see peers flaunting clothes and cars allegedly through sex trade 'gifts', it breeds rationalization of exploitation," one explained (SSI Themes). Reforming representations and expanding economic access could significantly disrupt this manipulative driver.

Additionally, policy tensions between criminal justice approaches and therapeutic aims raised concerns over sustaining trauma for affected boys. Well-intentioned youth diversion programs still emphasize probation requirements over rehabilitation according to findings. As DSP013 explained: "pressure to earn program completion means we punish adolescents demonstrating complex stress reactions rather than compassionately addressing root causes." Although progress is underway expanding law enforcement training, fully dismantling lingering stigma-based oppression remains vital to enact supportive rather than punitive mindsets institutionally.

On a final structural level, while celebrated policies like Safe Harbor intend trauma-informed support, persistent housing and care service gaps specifically for marginalized male youth still inadvertently restrict access in reality according to accounts. Without addressing larger resource constraints first, culture change can only partially reduce barriers. Expanding funding for inclusive emergency shelters and long-term coordination alternatives tailored to boys' needs are essential first steps cited (DSP001).

Stepping Back & Looking Outward

Stepping back, the research reveals that exploited boys and young men face strikingly similar barriers to equitable identification, access, and support globally according to findings. Biases rooted in masculine constructs consistently deter help-seeking everywhere - from Minnesota to Mumbai. Recent studies confirm these patterns across contexts (Nodzenski & Davis, 2023).

Simultaneously, services and safe spaces catered to the needs of male survivors particularly remain severely constrained on an international scope according to published figures, further silencing victims worldwide. However transformed locally, no intervention can wholly disrupt the ubiquitous impacts of these restrictive social forces

without coordinated cultural shifts spanning communities and legal systems. The work begins at home, but global progress depends on unified understanding and alliance against marginalization across identities.

On an individual level, this demands realigning our own assumptions about gender ideals and vulnerability. Institutionally, protections and trauma-informed care must expand to comprehensively serve all youth, embracing leadership from survivors across the spectrum who face discrimination currently. And collectively, we must advocate together for human rights policy reforms and responsible media that empower healthy masculinities and self-determination rather than toxic stereotypes or desperation.

While tailored solutions remain vital, global collaboration is equally essential to accelerate this vision according to findings. The challenges faced by sexually exploited boys and young men are not unique to Minnesota. ECPAT International's Global Boys Initiative research (2023) has identified similar barriers to equitable identification, access, and support for this population across diverse countries and cultures. The Initiative's findings underscore the need for a comprehensive, multi-level approach to address the global issue of the sexual exploitation of boys and young men. And local investments like mentorship programs in Minnesota particularly help seed hope. As one respondent wisely explained, "context may differ from Mumbai to Minneapolis - but the core human needs for safety, trust, and care remain constant across borders and backgrounds." (A004). Uniting in this shared understanding of our collective humanity represents the path ahead.

Recommendations

I. Cross-Cutting Recommendations for Systemic Change

A. Shift Mindsets and Approaches

Widespread societal biases and assumptions surrounding gender and vulnerability must be confronted in order to transform recognition of and response to male victims across institutions and systems.

Multi-pronged initiatives that encompass training, public awareness and appropriate trauma response are essential to catalyze culture shifts.

Specific considerations:

- Implement ongoing extensive training across all youth-serving sectors focused on countering ingrained gender biases. Programming should promote nuanced understanding of diverse trauma reactions in boys and young men, which are often overlooked due to restrictive norms. It should directly address assumptions that males cannot be victims or have varied responses. Frontline staff exposure to current data and survivor accounts also increases inclusive attitudes. Applied training paired with changes in protocols can expand equitable identification.
- Launch public awareness campaigns confronting toxic norms of masculinity and stigma surrounding male trauma. Advertising tailored for professionals and parents should challenge gender assumptions on vulnerability and emphasize that exploitation can profoundly damage youth regardless of gender identity. Representations should depict diversity within males rather than rely on stereotypes. Messaging promoting

healthy concepts of masculinity and acceptance can influence attitudes to see beyond restrictive ideas on victimhood.
- Standardize alternative actions responding to crisis behaviors in youth that aim to understand root causes versus defaulting to punishment. Procedures should outline recognizing diverse trauma reactions and emphasize empathetic engagement centered on healing. Staff across justice, education and child welfare settings require guidelines distinguishing behaviors driven by trauma versus those requiring disciplinary intervention. Patience, care and access to support must become the frontline for exploited youth versus risks of criminalization.

B. Coordinate Tracking and Data Sharing

Lack of coordination or information sharing across youth-serving institutions like education, child welfare, healthcare, and justice severely impedes continuity of care and service access for exploited boys and young men. Implementing proper data infrastructure and communication protocols can significantly improve outcomes.

Specific considerations:

- Construct shared data tracking systems accessible to key agencies like schools, child protection, community programs, healthcare centers, police, and courts to facilitate responsible information exchange. Common platforms allow providers to track case history, client needs, program referrals and engagements across organizations with appropriate consent procedures.
- Institute mandatory "warm hand-off processes" for transitions between youth-serving providers to enable seamless, coordinated care. These processes should involve:
  - Thoroughly reviewing the youth's background details, history, and any special accommodation needs with the new provider.
  - Directly introducing and establishing connections between the youth/family and the new provider.
  - Using standardized checklists to ensure all relevant information is conveyed and contacts are properly transitioned.
  Warm handoffs with these comprehensive procedures can vastly improve continuity of care and follow-through compared to current dropoff rates as high as 60% when youth transition between providers. However, protocols must balance sharing necessary details against protecting privacy and trust, which can be violated during these vulnerable transition periods.

By enhancing the capacity to track client engagement across systems and establishing structured protocols to guide communication between providers, exploited boys and young men are far less likely to fall through cracks as they navigate a fragmented network of support services. Multi-sector continuity of care is achievable through intentional alignment of data systems and practices, prioritizing accountability and service excellence at critical transition points.

C. Reduce Criminalization

A predominant systemic factor enabling continued exploitation of male survivors is the criminalization and incarceration of youth exhibiting crisis behaviors. Policy and culture change are essential to disrupting pathways to detention.

Specific considerations:

- Advocate Safe Harbor legislation to align state and federal human trafficking victim protections for coerced minors. Qualitative insights indicated inconsistent decriminalization implementation statewide, risking unjust incarcerations. Ensure complementary resourcing for trauma-informed, community-led rehabilitation alternatives to detention along with public awareness campaigns on rehabilitative priorities.
- Multiple participants underscored trends of reflexive arrests and sentencing of marginalized student groups for non-violent behaviors reflecting trauma. Institute strict court diversion and school counseling support mandates demonstrating recidivism reductions over 50% versus traditional probation. However, research shows coercive environments risk further harm - successful restorative and relationship-based models require voluntary, empowered engagement on youths' terms.

Transforming ingrained carceral responses requires mutually reinforcing policy and practice alignment spanning legislation, law enforcement, education and community providers. With non-punitive support in place, reducing criminalization and incarceration of exploited boys can accelerate cultures that empower healing.

II. Supporting Vulnerable Youth

A. For Social Service Providers

1. Housing and Shelter

Safe housing and shelter options designed explicitly to address the unique risks and circumstances of male juvenile victims remain severely constrained statewide. Expanding emergency, transitional, and long-term residential programming tailored for diverse male youth is an urgent priority essential for both refuge and access to ongoing support.

Specific considerations:

- Substantially expand availability of emergency and longer-term housing tailored to the specialized needs of commercially sexually exploited boys and gender diverse youth. The data revealed a severe shortage of such designated bed space and shelter availability despite research confirming housing instability being a primary risk factor. Ensure program funding and development matches known prevalence rather than historic concentration solely on resources for girls.
- Incorporate trauma-informed design of physical settings and policies that balance structure with healthy independence. Respondents frequently cited the value of positive risk-taking in healing. Allow for mentorship opportunities from carefully vetted male staff who can relate to participants' experiences where comfortable. Oversight solely by women risks sustaining traumatic skewed power dynamics.
- Consider cohort models that group participants based on age, background, phase of recovery. Data showed LGBTQ+ youth require affirmative environments where they will not face discrimination based on gender identity or orientation. Accommodate needs around transitioning, hormone therapy.

Data reveals that expanding the continuum of housing solutions inclusive of short-term shelters and supported transitional settings is essential to establishing stability, life skills, and permanent connections. However equity in access and voice must remain centered for program integrity.

2. Engage Male Youth Through Community Programs

Preventively fostering emotional, social, and practical competencies for healthy development in at-risk boys must complement trauma recovery efforts. Safe community spaces facilitating positive mentorship and modeling self-efficacy are equally vital.

Specific considerations:

- Incorporate research-based social-emotional learning components focused on processing trauma, managing emotions, forming healthy relationships, and related skills into youth enrichment programming, starting as early as elementary school. Curricula shown to reduce high-risk behaviors in vulnerable boys promote competencies like distress tolerance, positive identity, and non-violence.
- Establish a structured network of caring, culturally-competent male mentors with related lived expertise to provide trauma-informed coaching/activities that help clients build life skills, decision latitude, and self-confidence. Require extensive vetting and reference checks prior to client interaction. Provide training on constructive modeling, appropriate boundaries, and abuse reporting. While still scaling capacity, actively recruit, train and retain positive male staff and volunteer mentors from within marginalized communities to guide enriched programming.

Countering the absence of consistent, empowering male influences by fostering supportive connections through informal and formal learning opportunities can provide the meaningful relationship context many exploited boys lack to constructively regain personal agency.

3. Expand Access to Mental Healthcare

Meeting the extensive counseling and ongoing trauma support needs of commercially sexually exploited boys and young men statewide requires increasing current service availability along with strengthening informal response capacity embedded in schools, shelters, and community programming.

Specific considerations:

- Significantly expand specialized counseling and support groups accessible to male victims. Multiple respondents highlighted long waitlists for therapists competent with complex trauma and lacking understanding of male victimization, with statewide ratios representing only 1 provider for every 15,000 exploited boys based on prevalence estimates. Services must resonate with diverse individuals; choice and voluntary participation is essential.
- Respondents frequently cited how many affected male youth initially avoid formal clinical interactions. Thus, fostering informal emotional support components into adjacent environments can provide critical bridges. Training case workers on recognizing trauma symptoms, bringing clinicians into schools/shelters for consultation, integrating peer support and self-care skills into programming were all advised to meet youths' levels of readiness. While expanding clinical access remains vital long-term, endemic bias around male vulnerability necessitates approaches also elevating alternative paths to help.

Sustaining trauma recovery requires that accessible, empowering clinical services are strengthened rather than withdrawn once initiated. But adjacent environments equally require literacy on support provision that meaningfully fills gaps before youths' readiness. Collective responsibility must augment individual healing pathways.

4. Closing Gaps for Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Youth

- Develop and implement policies and practices that ensure access to safe, gender-affirming shelter and housing options for transgender and gender non-conforming youth.
- Provide mandatory training for staff in all youth-serving organizations on the unique needs and experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming youth, including best practices for creating inclusive and affirming environments.
- Establish partnerships with LGBTQ+ organizations and healthcare providers to ensure access to gender-affirming medical care, mental health support, and other specialized services.
- Advocate for policies and funding that prioritize the needs of transgender and gender non-conforming youth, recognizing their heightened vulnerability to exploitation and marginalization.

B. For Child Welfare Systems

1. Enhance Screening and Identification

Effectively identifying male victims of trafficking amongst child welfare system intakes in an unbiased, trauma-informed manner requires adopting inclusive screening instruments proven with boys and non-binary youth and extensive workforce competency building.

Specific considerations:

- Multiple respondents indicated lack of effective, standardized screening protocols calibrated and evaluated for diverse genders, inadvertently risking bias. Research and implement tools scientifically inclusive beyond binary constructs, chart pathways for confirming exploitation. Structure periodic re-screens for both initial intakes plus ongoing service qualifications capturing evolving risks.
- The research revealed paternalistic attitudes on masculinity and trauma responses resulted in overlooking male cases. Thus ensure extensive new curriculum requirements unpack gender/orientation assumptions, aggression/delinquency as trauma signals before authorizing tool deployment. Stress empathetic cultural competence. Regularly audit intake disparities, require reflection on what vulnerability factors tools might miss per participant insights on gaps that allow victim boys to slip through.

Workforce preparedness combined with reliable tools designed for equitable identification of male trafficked youth form the bedrock on which trauma-informed response and access to help hinges. Standardization enables transparency on gaps that must continually confront bias.

2. Coordinate Care and Service Access

Preventing exploited boys and young men from falling through cracks between the child protection system and external youth-serving agencies requires designating internal referral coordination hubs. Formalizing information sharing and simplifying procedures can increase utilization of key aid such as legal services where widespread barriers exist.

Specific considerations:

- Formally establish care coordination staff positions within child welfare agencies to facilitate centralized referrals, information sharing with consent, and service access support for confirmed minor trafficking victims. Approved coordinators serve as internal case managers connecting males to health counseling, legal advocacy, housing/placement, educational needs and other assistance through maintaining provider relationships, individualized guidance and reducing bureaucratic hurdles.
- Develop simple templates of key processes for securing legal rights, healthcare, therapy and other oft-underutilized services frequently confusing for exploited male youth specifically. Remove jargon, tailor assistance to those with trauma impacting executive functioning. Build basic how-to materials such as securing a protection order, activating Medicaid, or locating an LGBTQ+ competent counselor. Equip coordinators to furnish procedural scaffolding without relying solely on vulnerable youths' own perseverance.

Deliberate infrastructure investments designating care coordination police junior interactive functions at-the-ready for male client level while also fostering institutional service connectivity strengthen continuity as youths traverse complex systems.

C. For Law Enforcement and Schools

1. Foundational Culture Change

Shifting ingrained attitudes and responses towards exploited male youth within enforcement and education settings requires extensive initial and ongoing training focused on the intersections of trauma-informed principles, healthy masculinity paradigms and anti-racism competence.

Specific considerations:

- Construct required trauma and bias training for school resource officers and justice staff on nuances of victimology, followed by regular refreshers. Content should cover empathy skillbuilding, healthy masculinity paradigms, anti-oppression competence and alternatives to punitiveness. Include impactful survivor panels. Trauma stewardship begins with self-work.
- Provide parallel foundational cultural humility modules for educators, counseling and leadership around recognizing student trauma signals and harm reduction over disciplinary defaults. Multiple respondents indicated frontline school gaps in awareness. Convey trauma-informed mindfulness, restorative options as preferable first-line for crisis incidents based on recurring themes.
- Authorize financial incentives for districts adopting enumerated non-punitive crisis response approaches demonstrating recidivism reductions - from peer mediation to urgent response teams safely de-escalating episodes. The data reveals structural biases yield disproportionate suspension/expulsion of marginalized student groups. Support culture shifts reconciling historical injustice.

Cultivating institutional empathy and accountability through understanding work at the intersection of oppression and trauma bears great potential. But impact relies upon commitment to personal and culture shifts through sustained engagement.

2. Limit Arrests/Incarceration of Youth

A paradigm shift minimizing arrest and incarceration responses to behaviors of exploited male youth represents an urgent priority in mitigating criminalization risks. Establishing supportive community partnership-led engagement models focused on voluntary services as default first-line also aids trust.

Specific considerations:

- Develop departmental protocols making immediate referral linking to specialized trafficking support services standard upon suspicion or confirmation of victimization instead of detention. Create warm hand-off infrastructure between child protection, behavioral health responders, and community providers equipped to avoid triggers re-traumatizing youth during transition through empathy, care, and addressing immediate needs first.
- Expand community crisis co-responder programs integrating neighborhood peers, mental health outreach, and cultural humility into engagement models reversing tendencies towards police escalation when facing non-violent behavioral distress incidents involving male youth. Grant funding should incentivize embedding authentic community leadership in crisis divergence over recurring to patterns of force. Formalizing this partnership framework can balance accountability with compassion.

Committing to sustained culture and structural shifts that unlock alternatives emphasizing voluntary support service connection over arrests represents progress. Building community leadership to drive the solutions upholds dignity. Redressing the default to incarceration remains complex but within collective will.

3. Build Collaboration and Data Sharing

Establishing formal coordinated frameworks for information sharing and collaborative case management across law enforcement, child welfare, community providers, and adjacent institutions remains inconsistent statewide, constraining continuity for at-risk males.

Specific considerations:

- Construct Regional Exploited Youth Community Coordinated Response Teams incorporating relevant agency leadership in quarterly forums to address systemic gaps, resource shortages, and case complexities. Set priorities via an interdisciplinary lens. Formalize specific partnership protocols enabling smoother referral care transitions for juvenile trafficking victims. Assess obstacles like information silos.
- Institute common consent-based Authorization to Release Confidential Information forms permitting vulnerable boys to pre-approve necessary background sharing with trusted partners like law enforcement, schools, shelters, legal/medical clinics. Simplify form accessibility in transitional settings before disconnects occur. Don't assume tech access or capacity harnessing complex bureaucracy.

While upholding stringent privacy, protocols exempting care coordination can fill dangerous gaps without requiring heroic self-advocacy burdens on trauma-impacted boys unaware of partner roles/constraints. Formal partnership commitment forums add accountability yielding creative solutions.

D. For Research and Policy

1. Center Survivor Voices in Studies

Catalyzing paradigm shifts in collective understanding of commercial sexual exploitation demands avoiding dominant cultural assumptions by deliberately seeking marginalized firsthand expertise through research prioritization.

Specific considerations:

- Allocate ongoing state funds specifically for qualitative and participatory inquiries on experiences of male trafficking survivors inclusive of diverse ages/backgrounds. Require Centering methodologies amplifying community expertise through vehicles like survivor-led advisory councils collaborating on framing, analysis, and application.
- Mandate government/academic/nonprofit evaluation bodies include proportional representation of male & gender diverse survivor voices guiding priorities and sensemaking in human-centered rather than extractive token manners. Structure processes/compensation for equitable, sustained partnership versus one-off "inputs."

Welcoming and compensating voices historically pushed to margins in centralized knowledge building efforts enriches understanding, forming the bedrock for shifting norms. But power-sharing requires upfront resource commitments many find threatening. Leadership first in funding the capacities for such pluralistic insight gathering sustains the hope of positive change.

2. Expand Gender-Inclusive Protections

Achieving equitable identification, service access and safety for commercially sexually exploited boys and gender expansive youth requires legal and budgetary commitments aligning systems to recognized needs consistently overlooked.

Specific considerations:

- Reform state statutes with narrow definitions of sex trafficking victims excluding exploitation of boys, transgender and gender non-conforming youth. Pass language mirroring federal Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act acknowledging the full spectrum of survivors explicitly across gender diversity. Consult experts like ECPAT-USA's technical guidance.
- Mandate government agencies breakout demographic data indicators on trafficking, maltreatment, and proportional funding for services by gender identities in public reports. Require explanations addressing disproportionality like shelters restricted to cis females. Tie budgets to addressing gaps, similar to educational equity measures.
- Appropriate additional funding over the next 5 years specifically for grants tailoring housing, mental healthcare, youth programming and outreach catering to at-risk male populations through state funds or special budget requests. Require funded interventions meet demonstrated need based on victim prevalence versus historic concentrations only on females. Sustaining access improvements relies on targeted resourcing turning past inequities.

Transforming awareness starts by concretely naming oppression's painful past and articulating more boldly the terms of our shared future vision through permanent policy and budget codification.

Conclusion

This exploratory mixed-methods study contributed vital initial data highlighting previously under-examined experiences of commercially sexually exploited boys and young men accessing social services in Minnesota. Findings revealed scope across age and background demographics, referral pathways frequently catalyzed by housing instability, and critical gaps regarding inclusion, resources, and equitable access spanning individual to policy levels.

While limited in scope, the research indicates boys and gender diverse youth face substantial but often overlooked exploitation risks and barriers to care like rigid norms deterring disclosure alongside service gaps excluding male victims. Tackling pervasive biases and tailored solutions is imperative.

Critically, the inquiry documents this hidden population's risks and needs distinctly for the first time. But wider investigations are urgently required to fully capture the diversity of boys' experiences across cultural groups and inform responsive support. This project marks just the beginning of the vital work ahead to equitable identification and access.

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