

Understanding the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Boys & Young Men

HOW SERVICE PROVIDERS CAN BREAK DOWN BIASES
& BARRIERS TO HELP BOYS & MEN THRIVE



AUTHORS

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Jordan's Story

WRITTEN BY JORDAN MASCIANGELO,
CREATIVE DIRECTOR, MENHEALING

This story reflects one person's experiences. It is important to acknowledge that every individual impacted by commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) will have different experiences. There are additional challenges that boys and young men of color and those with different intersectional identities, including religious and cultural identities, may experience, and it is important to recognize the disproportionate impact of CSE on communities of color.

I grew up in a small rural town with a large catholic family. We never really had a lot of money growing up, but we managed okay. I loved our simple little life. I found fun and joy in the strangest of places and situations. I was always the ugly duckling though – the middle child, a little weird, more sensitive than most, more attached to my parents and 5 siblings than they were to me.

At 8 years old, my parents split. The divorce was cruel and messy. My siblings and I were used as pawns in their epic battle to one-up each other...and it ripped us apart. My brothers and sisters seemingly each chose a side, but I couldn't bear to. Instead, I isolated myself, turned inward. The life I knew and loved was swiftly torn away and I was forced to cope with a new one.

As time went on, inconsistency became the new normal. Everything in my life was continuously rotating – dad moving from place to place and job to job, mom's new string of boyfriends and partners in and out of the house, our limited financial security gone. I remember neighbors bringing groceries over cause we often had nothing to eat. All the while, the back and forth between mom and dad kept getting worse and more vengeful. The fighting and screaming was relentless. Even the siblings began to turn on each other. I was living in a haze of dysfunction for years.

When I was 13, I lived a very confused and lonely life, terrified by what each day could bring while also masking that fear so nobody would ask questions. I began cutting myself – high up on my arms and legs so as to not raise suspicion. When I saw the blood trickle out, for a few moments, the anxiety would disappear. The physical pain taking the emotional pain's place and giving me some semblance of fleeting peace.

Mom's in and out of the house seemingly came to an end when she met her second husband. He got her pregnant, quickly moved in, making it very clear that he was here for her and his unborn child, not us. Tensions in the home grew and grew as my siblings and I were continuously sidelined. The abuse from my stepfather evolved from verbal and emotional, to threatening and physical. My day-to-day life was always scary, but now it was dangerous.

My turbulent family life, coupled with my impending queerness, didn't allow me to make friends easily but I longed so badly to attach and be close with someone again. When I noticed a girl in my class had cutting scars like I did, I knew she was someone new that I could attach to. We became friends hard and fast and my need for closeness was satiated briefly. But her life at home, much like mine, was in turmoil, and as fast as we became friends, she was taken from me when her father murdered her and her siblings in a fit of rage. Devastation was becoming a theme in my life. I felt completely lost and alone. Again.

Life at dad's place began to look like an oasis when compared to what was going on at home with my mom and stepfather. My dad had been dating a woman (whom I actually quite liked) and they had decided to move in together in my grandparents old farmhouse. But with her came her brother – a 30-something-year-old man that needed a place to stay. He was fun, exciting and new; a breath of fresh air in the family. He seemed to love us kids and made a real effort to integrate himself into the fold. He took a particular interest in me right from the start. He paid attention to me, understood me, spent time with me. He felt like a father, an uncle, a brother, and a best friend, all at the same time. Exactly what I was missing and craving for so long. We became close.

“I trusted him, whole-heartedly. He was the only adult in my life who made me feel seen... making the grooming process easy for him.”

I trusted him, whole-heartedly. He was the only adult in my life who made me feel seen...making the grooming process easy for him. It began by talking about sex, pornography, and puberty. I started to feel comfortable around those things with him, while also feeling like it was just for us – our little secret. As my own sexuality was coming more into focus, so did the shame surrounding it. He provided a sense of safety in that regard, like maybe he could see that I was different in that way and that's why he was talking to me about these sexual things. I bought his trick hook, line, and sinker.

As time passed, I grew very attached to the perpetrator. Believing that he loved and cared for me and that I had someone that I could explicitly reveal my queerness to without actually admitting to it. It felt like a win in my young eyes. The sexual conversations we had gradually became more explicit before ultimately becoming physical. He had spun his web so masterfully that once sex talks became sex acts, I barely flinched. In fact, this man was so successful at exploiting my circumstances and feelings, that he didn't even have to put in the effort anymore; I quickly became the initiator. In my, now, 13-year old mind, I was officially complicit in what was happening. This relationship, this secret...was now mine.

As the war within my family dynamic continued to rage on, trauma became my new normal. The closeness I felt with the perpetrator was, for a time, all I had to hold on to, but as I grew older and more aware, the veil lifted. Puberty began to shift my perspectives and I slowly started to view the relationship between the perpetrator and I for what it actually was...abuse.

The realization that I wasn't safe in either of my parents' homes was crystallizing in my developing mind and I knew my only option was to leave both. I wanted desperately to live an existence beyond what I had known so far, and I was determined to make that happen, so I left. But I was sixteen years old, alone, riddled with trauma and mental health issues, in a new city, with no resources.

That old saying, you can't run from your past, is true; I tried. I ran and I ran fast. And for a minute, I truly believed I had beat it. I fought and clawed to make some semblance of a life on my own as a teenager. I wanted to make it work so badly. But trauma's nasty grip caught up quickly and sank its claws into me deeper than ever before.

The barrage of abuse and trauma that had swirled around me was so constant, it fundamentally changed who I was – twisting, warping and reshaping reality. I lost grip on what was right and what was wrong, who was safe and who was an enemy. Emotions that I once felt so deeply, faded. Trauma wreaked havoc on my body and mind and left me a shell of what I once was and without even realizing, it took over and I became its shadow. The emptiness was all-consuming.

My days soon filled with the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. My cutting habit became more and more extreme in an attempt to satiate the emptiness I felt. When that stopped working I turned to drugs. Each new unhealthy coping strategy not replacing the previous one, but just adding to the pile.

Substance abuse ushered in a whole new world of danger and violence. The very thing that I was using to numb my pain was also further incapacitating my grip on the world. It became hard for me to determine what was risky or dangerous, or maybe I just didn't care if it was anymore. Maintaining the habit proved difficult and when the habit transformed into dependency, I became desperately hopeless.

My trauma's appetite was evolving and it didn't take long for the substance abuse to lose its potency and effectiveness at feeding it. I was 17, searching for new ways to escape the pain after self-harm, running away and substance abuse were no longer quite doing the trick. At the time, it only felt like the natural next step when sex work fell into my lap one night. The details aren't necessary, but I was seemingly randomly picked up by a 30-something-year-old man, offered money in exchange for sex, and I accepted.

In my clouded brain, sex work seemed like a solution to many of my problems at the time. More than providing funding for my substance abuse, sex work gave me a sense of control and purpose. I felt like I was now making the decisions about who I was having sex with and it felt powerful. And while the honeymoon phase with sex work ended fairly quickly the first time I said no to a john and was beaten and raped for it, the feeling of being wanted and desired was so potent, I kept going back.

At that point in my life, I believed sex was the only real skill I had and I was good at it. I found an odd comfort in letting myself be abused and sexually mistreated over and over again. I was used to its nuance, its smell, its warmth. In some strange way, I felt this was where I belonged. I still had dreams and fantasies about being someone else, but not much hope that I could ever reach that.

Over the years, each trauma I endured took a piece of me – by the time I was 19 years old, I was a sitting duck. An easy target to exploit. I met a man, in his thirties and seemingly with my best interests in mind. I was so desperate to be loved by someone, he really could have been anyone, to be honest. But he was nice and kind and I needed that. I confided in him, told him my stories, revealed things I had never told anyone before and let him in. For a moment, I felt safe again. I trusted him.

History repeats itself and I fell into the trap. Again. After he groomed me, once he had all the information he needed, he used it against me to get what he desired and I became trapped. My substance dependency, my low self-worth, my absent and dysfunctional family, my self-harm habit, the molestation, the sex work, my lies, my shame...it all became his ammunition to tear me apart. His sexual desires, his friends' sexual desires, strangers' sexual desires – all had to be met by me and if I didn't comply, he would take away the drugs, but worse, he would expose everything about me to the world.

My “partner” held me captive and trafficked me using my drug dependence and my shame, completely stripping me of any power.

The solution to freeing myself from trafficking began with unraveling that shame. Even after the endless storm of trauma that had been engulfing my life for years, somewhere, deep down, I had held onto that fantasy of being something better. When there was nothing else left, I had to reach down and grab that fantasy and at least try to pull it to the surface.

For years I thought I was one in a million. For years I thought that I was only here on this earth to be used and abused by others...and I almost accepted that.

Then I met other male survivors; other men who I didn't have to explain my life to; other men who got it, who saw me. That fantasy of being something more grew, it crystallized. And after I committed to doing the work, it was no longer just a fantasy. It was real. I was healing. I then knew I could be more than just my trauma. I could be Jordan again.

I held on and never looked back.

JORDAN'S REFLECTION

Unfortunately, my story is not unique. It is likely that many of the boys and young men you serve have had similar experiences and feelings. I would encourage you to think about these themes and consider them your own work. Does my story inform or change how you may see young men and boys in the future? How might it change how you will engage with them?

Issue Brief for Service Providers

The goal of this issue brief is to raise awareness about the impact of commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) and sex trafficking on boys and young men. This document highlights best practices to improve identification of and responses to boys and young men impacted by CSE.

For too long, the commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) and sex trafficking of boys and young men has been underrecognized and underreported.¹ The dominant narrative has focused on the CSE of adolescent girls, with the little attention that is paid to boys and young men focusing on males as willing participants, sex buyers, or exploiters, rather than victims.² However, there is growing recognition that boys and young men also experience CSE and there is a need for improved identification, as well as support and services, to help them heal and thrive.

WHAT WE KNOW

Prevalence

While it is difficult to identify precise data, studies suggest that between 31% and 71% of youth impacted by CSE are male.³ And while the prevalence data varies, researchers agree that the number of boys and young men impacted by the commercial sex trade is much greater than many believe. As with females, there are significant racial disparities among those impacted by CSE.

- A 2016 national study of youth involved in the sex trade found that **36% were cis male** and **less than 1% (6 youth total) were trans male**.⁴
 - Of cis male youth, 69% were Black/African American, 14% were white, 7% were multi-racial, 8% were Hispanic/Latino, and 2% were other.⁵
- A national longitudinal study found that the prevalence and frequency of adolescent CSE exposure was **higher among males than among females**.⁶

31% to 71%

**OF YOUTH IMPACTED BY
COMMERCIAL SEXUAL
EXPLOITATION ARE MALE³**

- Of participants who reported having one episode of CSE before or during adolescence, 39% were female and **61% were male.**⁷ Of participants who reported repeat CSE exposure before or during adolescence, 29% were female and **71% were male.**⁸
- A 2018 study with homeless youth in Philadelphia, Phoenix, and Washington D.C. found that of youth who were sex trafficked, **31% were male**, 56% were female, and **13% were transgender.**⁹
- A study from 2014 to 2016 with 641 homeless youth across ten cities in the U.S. and Canada found that **one in ten cisgender men had experienced sex trafficking.**¹⁰
- A 2015 study of New York City youth who engaged in survival sex, who were identified as LGBTQ, young men who have sex with men (YMSM), or young women who have sex with women (YWSW) found that **47% were cisgender male, 3% were transgender male**, 36% were cisgender female, 11% were transgender female, and 2% were transgender “other.”¹¹
- A 2008 study of youth impacted by CSE in New York City found that **53.5% of youth were cisgender male**, while 42% were cisgender female and **4.5% were transgender.**¹²

[AND BOYS TOO: AN EPCAT-USA DISCUSSION PAPER ABOUT THE LACK OF RECOGNITION OF THE COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF BOYS IN THE UNITED STATES](#)

Sexual Abuse and CSE

- At least **1 in 6** men have been sexually abused or assaulted¹³
- Male youth who have histories of sexual abuse are at **8.21x greater risk** of later sex trafficking¹⁴
- Males are less likely to disclose abuse than females – in one study, **only 16% of men**, compared to 64% of women, with documented histories of sexual abuse considered themselves to have been sexually abused¹⁵
- Data suggest that male survivors of childhood sexual abuse delay disclosure well into adulthood¹⁶

MALE YOUTH WHO HAVE HISTORIES OF SEXUAL ABUSE ARE AT

8.21x greater risk

OF LATER SEX TRAFFICKING¹⁴

“Some people choose to disclose years down the road. Whenever they make the decision to disclose, help them to understand they’ve done nothing wrong.”

-CHRISTOPHER THERON CASEY

The Impact on Health

Commercial sexual exploitation before or during adolescence is associated with negative health outcomes both during adolescence and into adulthood. Compared to individuals with no history of CSE, both males and females with a history of CSE were more likely to report worse overall health, depressive symptoms, and suicidal thoughts during their adolescence.¹⁷ Males with a history of CSE were more likely to continue to report depressive symptoms into adulthood than males with no history of CSE.¹⁸

VULNERABILITIES & PATHWAYS TO COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Males and females have many similar vulnerabilities for CSE.¹⁹ **Primary risk factors for boys and young men experiencing CSE include:**

- Histories of abuse²⁰
- Exposure to childhood adversity and trauma without adequate support²¹
- Homelessness as a result of running away or being kicked out of the home²²
- Familial rejection of sexual orientation or gender identity²³
- Poverty, including housing instability, food insecurity, and/or lack of basic supports such as transportation²⁴
- Substance misuse and dependency experienced by themselves and/or caregivers²⁵
- Involvement with child welfare and/or juvenile justice systems

“For me, poverty was a big issue, as well as being in a place with no services for people experiencing sexual trauma. For years, no one ever screened me or asked the right questions.”

-EVAN MATTHEW TAYLOR, FOUND CARE

Differences in risk factors for males

Sexual abuse history - A national longitudinal study found differences in risk factors for CSE by sex, with a higher risk of CSE noted among males with a history of child sexual abuse or sexually transmitted infections compared with females.²⁶

Substance use - Research shows that “[a]lthough anyone can use substances for coping, males are more likely than females to use illicit drugs and develop substance use disorders.”²⁷

Intersection with sexual orientation and gender identity

- There is a misperception that all males who experience CSE and have sex with men are gay. While LGBTQ+ youth are overrepresented among boys and young men experiencing CSE, the majority of male youth experiencing CSE are heterosexual.²⁸
- Shame and stigma about being gay or being perceived as gay by family and community prevents many boys and young men from disclosing sexual abuse.²⁹
- For many boys and young men, familial rejection of sexual orientation or gender identity leads to homelessness, forcing them to engage in commercial sex to meet their basic needs.³⁰

Criminalization and CSE

Boys who experience CSE are treated harshly, and go unrecognized as victims within the juvenile and criminal legal systems. A 2008 study of youth impacted by CSE in New York City found that “there was a clearly gendered pattern to their interactions with law enforcement.”³¹ The study found that boys experienced “significantly more encounters with the police than girls, especially for charges like ‘disorderly conduct, drug possession, jumping the turnstile in the subway, or trespassing.’”³² Similarly, a 2016 national study of youth involved in the sex trade found that cis males were more likely to report ever having been arrested than cis females.³³ Rather than identifying male youth as victims of trafficking when they come into contact with law enforcement, these youth continue to be criminalized. **Involvement with the juvenile or criminal legal system itself can actually exacerbate vulnerability for CSE,** since having a criminal record can create barriers to obtaining employment, housing, and public benefits, leaving few options for individuals to support themselves outside of exploitation.



The infographic features a blue background with white icons and text. At the top left is a police car icon, and at the top right is a handcuffs icon. The central text reads: "Victims experience high rates of interaction with juvenile and criminal legal systems, which create barriers to:". Below this text are four circular icons, each with a white diagonal slash through it, indicating a barrier. The icons represent: 1. Education (a graduation cap), 2. Housing (a house), 3. Employment (a briefcase with a magnifying glass), and 4. Public Benefits (a heart with a pulse line). Below each icon is its corresponding label in white capital letters: EDUCATION, HOUSING, EMPLOYMENT, and PUBLIC BENEFITS.

SOURCE: YOUTH WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE & NATIONAL CENTER FOR YOUTH LAW ADVOCATES

Substance Use and CSE

Substance use disorders are linked to trafficking for a variety of reasons: traffickers exploit victims' existing use by providing substances to coerce them into trafficking; traffickers may force victims to use substances in order to create dependence and prevent them from exiting; victims may engage in survival sex, trading sex for drugs, to support a dependency; and many victims use substances to cope with both the trauma of trafficking and other trauma.³⁴ In addition, shame and stigma associated with addiction and/or substance use, **fear of criminalization for drug use, fear of experiencing withdrawal, and fear that they will not be believed due to their substance use, may prevent a person from coming forward and disclosing abuse to law enforcement or service providers.** And program restrictions, such as requiring sobriety to stay in a shelter or other housing, may prevent victims from accessing services they would need to exit exploitation.³⁵

MULTIPLE FACTORS BLOCK YOUTH FROM ACCESSING HELP TO ADDRESS SUBSTANCE USE



Fear, shame, trauma, and criminalization may prevent a person from disclosing substance use issues and accessing help.

SOURCE: RAND HEALTH QUARTERLY

BARRIERS TO IDENTIFICATION & DISCLOSURE

Gender stereotypes and biases about males prevent identification of male youth impacted by CSE.³⁶

These beliefs and biases impact both why males may be reluctant to seek and accept services, and why males may not be offered, or able to find, services.³⁷

Breaking Down Harmful Stereotypes That Lead To Exploitation of Males

GENDER STEREOTYPES & MYTHS	TRUTH
<p>Stereotype: Boys are expected to be strong and self-sufficient, and taught that to be anything less is weak, while girls are viewed as vulnerable and in need of protection.³⁸</p> <p>Myth: If a boy experiences abuse or harm, he should tough it out. If a girl experiences abuse or harm, she deserves help and protection.</p>	<p>Young people across the gender spectrum experience abuse and harm and deserve support and services to aid in their healing. No one young person should be expected to endure that abuse in the name of toughness.</p>
<p>Stereotype: Cultural norms do not recognize or accept that boys and young men are victims of sexual abuse, assault, or rape.³⁹</p> <p>Myth: Boys and young men can't be sexually abused.⁴⁰</p>	<p>At least 1 in 6 men have been sexually abused or assaulted.⁴¹ Between 31-71% of youth impacted by CSE are male.⁴²</p>
<p>Stereotype: There is a societal standard for men to provide, leading to an assumption that boys and young men who engage in forced sexual labor are doing so as a mutual agreement in exchange for benefits and/or services.⁴³</p> <p>Myth: If boys and young men do experience CSE, it is because they are voluntarily choosing to engage in it, and therefore aren't victims.</p>	<p>Under federal law, any person under age 18 who trades sex for anything of value is a victim of trafficking. This includes survival sex to meet their basic needs.</p>

GENDER STEREOTYPES & MYTHS	TRUTH
<p>Stereotype: Males are viewed as having “total control” over their bodies and external relationships,⁴⁴ and are also viewed as having more agency to leave situations of abuse and exploitation.⁴⁵</p> <p>Myth: Boys and young men involved in the sex trade are willing participants. If a boy or young man didn’t want to sell sex, he could have left the situation.</p>	<p>Boys and young men can experience coercion, control, and manipulation the same as any other young person experiencing CSE does. It can be just as difficult for males to escape or leave exploitation as for any other youth.</p>
<p>Stereotype: Males are viewed as sexual beings who desire and pursue sex.⁴⁶</p> <p>Myth: If a boy experienced sexual arousal, orgasm, and/or ejaculation during abuse, he wanted and/or enjoyed it.</p>	<p>Sexual arousal can be an involuntary/automatic physiological response, even in situations that are traumatic or painful. Erections and arousal can happen very spontaneously for a lot of boys and young men, but society and culture has taught males that the orgasm and/or ejaculation signals “completion” and therefore consent.</p>
<p>Stereotype: Society often portrays males as perpetrators or aggressors, and females as victims.</p> <p>Myth: Boys and young men involved in the commercial sex trade are exploiters, buyers, or willing participants, while girls and young women are victims of CSE.</p>	<p>Boys are also victims of CSE, and can be trafficked by people of all genders.⁴⁷ Excluding female pronouns when discussing a potential perpetrator can lead to missed identification of males trafficked by females.</p>
<p>Stereotype: There is a presumption that most boys and young men who experience CSE are bisexual, gay, or transgender.</p> <p>Myth: Being a male survivor means you’re gay.</p>	<p>While LGBTQ+ youth are overrepresented among male youth experiencing CSE, the majority of male youth experiencing CSE are heterosexual.⁴⁸ Abuse stems from the abusive person’s willingness to abuse someone – it has nothing to do with the sexual orientation, preferences or desires of the victim.⁴⁹</p>

“When I shared what was happening to me, people assumed something was wrong with me. They told me, ‘You’re gay and you don’t know it.’ A handful of friends knew that I had wished to have been born as a girl during childhood, but no one completely understood I was always nonbinary and lesbian. Most of my abuse and exploitation over sixteen years was by men, it was horrifying and violent. People didn’t realize that my exploiters and buyers included women, and I confused that with love.”

-DAVID ZIMMERMAN (HE/THEY), LIVED EXPERIENCE CONSULTANT

HOW GENDER STEREOTYPES AND MYTHS PREVENT IDENTIFICATION OF CSE AMONG MALES

Same Indicators of Trafficking, Different Interpretation

Research has found that while the **indicators of trafficking are consistent** across the gender spectrum, they are **interpreted differently by providers** depending on the young person’s gender identity.⁵⁰ While providers may recognize certain characteristics or behaviors as indicators of risk of CSE for cisgender girls, they may not interpret the same indicators as suggesting a risk of CSE for cisgender male, transgender, and gender nonconforming youth.⁵¹ In practice, this differential treatment can look like this:

GIRLS	BOYS
<p>When a girl leaves foster care and returns with her hair and nails done or new clothes, providers suspect she obtained them through exploitation and interpret that as a risk of CSE.</p>	<p>However, when a boy returns to care with new shoes and jewelry, providers assume he stole the items or is involved in gang activity.</p>
<p>When a teenage girl is in a relationship with an older man, providers suspect there is coercion or abuse, and further investigate the relationship.</p>	<p>When a teenage boy is in a relationship with an older man, providers assume he is gay, that he desires sex and is a willing participant, and that he could leave if he wanted to; the providers do nothing.</p>

Difficulty Self-Disclosing Abuse

Gender stereotypes and biases make it harder for boys and young men to disclose their exploitation. They may be uncomfortable asking for help or fear they will not be believed.⁵² Some boys and young men may be discouraged from disclosing because service providers use language that implies males are more likely to perpetrate violence than experience it as a victim.⁵³ This is compounded by anti-trafficking outreach materials, pictures in brochures, and marketing focusing exclusively on females, which reinforces this bias.⁵⁴ Boys and young men may also internalize societal stereotypes suggesting that they should or do always desire sex, and therefore do not view their exploitation as abuse. **When males do not see themselves represented as victims, they internalize those messages, and are less likely to self-identify or seek out help.**

“When I disclosed to my family what had happened, they told me it was best that I keep it to myself. I kept quiet for 20 years until 6 years ago, I couldn’t go on anymore. Finally, after 20 years, I was able to get connected to trauma-informed therapists who didn’t shame or blame me.”

-SURVIVOR

“Shame and stigma made it hard to disclose what was happening. There was this whole layer of toxic masculinity – I couldn’t cry or show any weakness. It wasn’t until I connected with other survivors and realized I wasn’t alone that I could talk about what was happening.”

-ERIC HARRIS, BSW HUMAN TRAFFICKING FIELD CONSULTANT

Fear of Consequences of Speaking Up Discourages Youth From Disclosing CSE

For some young people, fear of what will happen if they disclose exploitation prevents them from speaking up. The potential impact of disclosing abuse or exploitation can be devastating: being bullied or facing violence at home, school or placement; or being ostracized or forced to leave home or a community, such as a faith-based community. This is especially true when an exploiter is in a position of power in a family or community, such as the family matriarch or patriarch or a priest. There is also often a fear that others will make false assumptions about one’s sexual orientation if CSE is revealed – whether accurate or not. For some young people, the fear of repercussion may seem, and in some cases, be worse than enduring the harm of CSE, causing many to avoid seeking help.

“Growing up Catholic and in a rural community, ‘gay’ wasn’t a term, let alone an identity, that I ever was allowed to learn about or explore. In my young head, ‘gay’ was rare, it was wrong. I knew at a young age that I felt different in that regard, but by the time I had the maturity and hormones to formulate any semblance of a sexual identity, I had already been molested by a much older man, so ‘gay’ was the perpetrator. The perpetrator made it well known that he knew I was gay and with that, being gay became associated with him and our ‘secret.’ Admitting I was gay, was an admission of my complicity in ‘the secret’ and disclosing ‘the secret’ was admission that I was gay. A perfect recipe for silence.”

-JORDAN MASCIANGELO, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, MENHEALING

Misinterpreting Survival Sex

Studies show that boys are more likely to be recruited by friends or peers, or be engaging in survival sex to meet their basic needs, rather than being trafficked by a third-party exploiter.⁵⁵ And thus, providers may be less likely to identify this as trafficking, but this perception is wrong. **Under federal law, any person under the age of 18 who trades sex for anything of value is a victim of trafficking – no force, fraud, or coercion by a third-party exploiter is necessary.**

SERVICE NEEDS & SERVICE PROVISION

Services specifically for boys and young men impacted by CSE are scarce.⁵⁶ In addition, boys in the sex trade often engage in commercial sex to meet their basic needs, but few services exist for at-risk boys to meet those basic needs, including housing, food, and clothing.⁵⁷ All services provided should be **trauma-informed, gender-inclusive, and culturally-responsive.**

The **primary service needs** that have been identified for boys and young men impacted by CSE include:⁵⁸

- Adequate/safe long-term housing with case management services
- Compassionate health care
- Long-term behavioral health care, including mental health and substance use treatment

- Educational programs
- Job training/apprenticeship and/or vocational training programs
- Mentoring relationships and peer support
- Extracurricular activities aligned with interests

➤ [NHTTAC'S HOW TO IMPROVE SERVICES FOR MALES EXPERIENCING TRAFFICKING](#)

“Before I started recovery, I thought that male survivors didn’t exist, and if they did, they were the exception. I believed I was, quite literally, one in a million. Humans need connection. Sexual trauma isolates you, often ripping away that ability to connect with others. Until I met other male survivors, men who had similar experiences and feelings as me, I thought I would never be able to connect again.

Peer support was absolutely crucial for me. It saved my life. Healing cannot be done alone.”

-JORDAN MASCIANGELO, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, MENHEALING

The Importance of Connection

Given the stigma and silence that often accompanies exploitation among boys and young men, the power of relationships can be transformative. Survivor mentorship – for both peers and adults – can be impactful and aid in healing for boys and young men who have experienced sexual trauma.⁵⁹

It is also extremely valuable to create spaces where survivors can share what they’ve gone through among others who have experienced something similar, free of judgment. There are a lack of opportunities and spaces like this. Consider how these can be built in your own community. Even if there are no trafficking-specific resources in your community, consider other types of mentors or groups that can support connections with young people experiencing CSE about other things going on in their lives, such as shared interests. This helps survivors to see themselves and their value beyond their experiences of abuse and exploitation.

➤ [YOUTH COLLABORATORY TOOLKIT: BOYS & CSEC](#)

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHTS



BOB'S HOUSE OF HOPE

“Bob’s House of Hope is the first place I have felt seen and heard. It’s the first place that has ever felt like home.”

-RESIDENT AT BOB'S HOUSE OF HOPE

Bob's House of Hope operates as a comprehensive residential program and safe house for young adult male-identifying survivors of sex trafficking. Their goal is to provide a safe place to live for male survivors to rest, recover, and rebuild, and to empower young men with the skills and trades they need to sustain themselves and reach independence after a lifetime of trauma.

➤ [BOB'S HOUSE OF HOPE](#)



“Meeting other men who have similar experiences to my own was the single most impactful thing that I have done in recovery.”

-JORDAN MASCIANGELO, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, MENHEALING

MenHealing is dedicated to providing healing resources for men, age 18 and older, who have experienced sexual victimization during childhood and/or as an adult. Their retreats and workshops offer a wide range of activities designed for safety and with attention to how to engage male survivors who may have a long history of isolation.

➤ [MENHEALING](#)

giantslayer.

“Few organizations have existing survivor-led policies, protocols and procedures to identify and support boys and men. We can and must help to change that.”

-NATHAN EARL

Under the giantslayer. brand, Nathan Earl provides training and technical assistance to communities and organizations to prevent violence against boys and male-identifying individuals. This training and technical assistance includes curriculum development and delivery, research instrument review and recommendations, survivor identification, community mobilization, outreach and engagement, business coaching, program development, strategic planning, policy and protocol review, and more.

➤ [GIANTSAYER.](#)

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS

When working with boys and young men who may be impacted by CSE, it is important to keep in mind the principles and recommendations outlined below. The goal is not disclosure, but to provide access to support and services. Also keep in mind that trafficking might not be the young person's biggest concern at the moment or ever – ask, listen to, and prioritize what they identify as their wants and needs.

Overview of Recommendations

1. Recognize & Address Biases
2. Require Training & Education
3. Engage & Partner with People with Lived Experience
4. Improve Identification & Screening
5. Build Services & Safe Spaces for Boys & Young Men
6. Expand Funding & Invest In Services for Boys & Young Men Impacted by CSE
7. Ensure Representation & Inclusivity in Language, Materials & Staffing
8. Invest in More Research

CENTER YOUTH. Because a key aspect of CSE is loss of control and agency over one's own body and choices, it is important for youth impacted by CSE to feel empowered to recognize and voice what they want and need based on their unique circumstances. Youth input is essential both at the individual level, and in program and policy level discussions. Rather than make assumptions about what youth may want or need, ask them and try your best to make that happen. Youth voice and choice should be integrated into all recommendations below.

➤ [LEARN MORE: YOUTH SURVEY AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT TIP SHEET](#)

“Meet people where they are at. If I tell you something is not working for me, we need to change it. If something doesn't work, let's try something else.”

-EVAN MATTHEW TAYLOR, FOUND CARE

1. Recognize & Address Biases

- Examine and address your own biases and assumptions about boys and young men, both at the system and individual level
- Recognize the importance of a young person's racial, cultural, tribal, and religious identities – and the intersection of these identities with gender and sexual orientation. It is critical to understand a youth's multifaceted perspectives, identities, and experiences and provide individually tailored services
- Do not assume sexual orientation or gender identity, and do not assume sexual behavior aligns with sexual orientation. Prioritize creating safe spaces for youth to share their SOGIE

2. Require Training & Education

- Require robust, comprehensive, ongoing training, coaching, and education about the experiences of boys and young men impacted by CSE for all youth-serving staff and providers
- Offer such training and education to families, caregivers and community-members more broadly to support prevention and identification
- Develop training that centers voices of people with lived experience and provide compensation to those trainers
- Training should cover topics including the impact of societal beliefs about masculinity and gender stereotypes, vulnerabilities and pathways to CSE, service needs, and best practices for supporting boys and young men impacted by CSE
- Be familiar with the legal and policy landscape – both federally and locally – especially as it relates to treatment of young people in the commercial sex trade

3. Engage & Partner with People with Lived Experience

- Engage and partner with people (both adults and young people) with lived experience with CSE in all aspects of your organization's work - including direct service provision, program and policy development, communications, and training. This should be done with the understanding that the expertise of folks with lived experience goes beyond the sharing of their story. Avoid tokenization and recognize the importance of including diverse experiences
- Hire individuals with lived experience onto your staff to help build safe spaces and peer support for boys and young men impacted by CSE to connect and be in community with one another. This

can include mentoring and other direct services positions, and also leadership, fundraising, policy and communications positions to ensure broad representation

- Provide equitable compensation for all lived experience expertise - whether on an employee or consultant basis - that values lived experience equally to other types of experience, such as education

4. Improve Identification & Screening

- Screen young people of all genders for CSE – screening universally ensures that certain young people are not missed due to common misperceptions about who is and isn't impacted by trafficking⁶⁰
- Incorporate trafficking screening into intake processes for boys within child welfare, probation, health, and education systems, as well as at runaway and homeless shelters and drop-in centers, and other social services agencies
- Counter the shame and stigma that often prevents boys from disclosing abuse by creating safe, non-judgmental spaces for boys and young men to feel comfortable sharing their experiences
- Do not focus on getting the youth to self-disclose or identify abuse or exploitation. The goal of screening and identification is to identify and connect the young person to needed resources to support safety and stability

5. Build Services & Safe Spaces for Boys & Young Men

- Focus on relationships first. Create opportunities for connection with male mentors, including survivor mentors, male staff members, and people in the community to cultivate a sense of belonging
- Increase access to resources and services for at-risk boys to meet basic needs, including food, housing (emergency, transitional and long-term), and clothing
- Increase access to job training and/or vocational training programs

“Mentoring, job training, and apprenticeship are crucial. A lot of men want to start over but have no place to start.”

-CHRISTOPHER THERON CASEY

- Increase access to substance use treatment programs and reduce stigma around substance use and dependency
- Examine your intake and service provision policies to make sure they are inclusive of boys and young men. For example, if you provide hygiene products as part of shelter services, offer shaving cream or boxer shorts, in addition to tampons and hair products. Also consider revising intake questionnaires to be inclusive of males, such as framing questions about abuse in gender-neutral terms
- Practice harm reduction for boys engaging in commercial sex, such as education on safe sex practices, including how to access preventative care and treatment for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, strategies to keep their friends informed of their whereabouts, defending themselves against aggressive behavior, and strategies to reduce the risk of drug use, such as clean needle exchanges and use of Fentanyl test strips
- Recognize and seek to reduce the shame and stigma boys may be experiencing by reaffirming resilience and that they are not alone
- Focus on addressing the young person's needs, rather than focusing on the needs of law enforcement, systems, or service providers (for example, to prosecute a case against a trafficker)
- Recognize that male survivors may have a preference regarding the gender of their service providers depending on the gender of perpetrators – ask, accommodate, and acknowledge this may change over time

6. Expand Funding & Invest In Services for Boys & Young Men Impacted by CSE

- Seek funding to invest in building services, programming, and safe spaces specifically for boys and young men impacted by CSE
- Evaluate whether programming focused on girls can be expanded or adapted to include boys, and if appropriate, advocate for and invest in the expansion of programming to be include boys
- Funders should consider whether funding streams to support youth impacted by CSE or other gender-based violence are available to male-serving providers and if not, seek expansion of those funding sources

7. Ensure Representation & Inclusivity in Language, Materials & Staffing

- Evaluate your marketing and outreach materials, website, and online presence to ensure they are inclusive of all gender identities. Use gender-inclusive language and imagery in both external materials as well as programming, training and policy materials to signal inclusion to both staff and youth

- Recognize that not all boys and young men will identify their experiences as CSE or sex trafficking. Some may identify as victims or survivors, while others will not. Empower them to use the language they feel comfortable with
 - For example, if a young person refers to their suspected trafficker as their partner, use that word, too. Or if a young person describes their experience as “selling myself” or “sex work” use those terms rather than “trafficking”
- Use gender-neutral language when asking about relationships. Do not assume the SOGIE of exploiters, traffickers or partners based on the SOGIE of the youth
- Hire staff, mentors, and volunteers who represent the range of identities of the boys and young men you serve

8. Invest in More Research

- Conduct additional research to gain an accurate estimate of the prevalence of boys and young men impacted by CSE in your community, as well as a deeper understanding regarding vulnerabilities and service needs
- Invest in research to understand and respond to the biosocial intersectionalities common to boys and young men experiencing CSE, such relationships between substance abuse, sex trafficking victimization and HIV/AIDS among marginalized, at-risk, and victimized males, in particular, boys and young men of color and gay, bisexual, transgender and queer individuals⁶¹
- Include youth-centered practices in planning, conducting and disseminating research to ensure that the subjective experiences of young people are used in conjunction with qualitative methods. This may include methods such as surveys, interviews and focus groups as well as youth-led research, using Youth Participatory Action Research principles and processes⁶²

“Ask if I’m okay. Look into my situation and let me know what you can do to help. Empower me to live my life in the way that is best for me.”

-JOSE LEWIS ALFARO, LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT & CONSULTANT

Resources

RESOURCES FOR SURVIVORS

- [MenHealing](#): Is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to providing accessible help, resources and community for male and male-identifying survivors of any type of sexual victimization. Community and grassroots-driven, MenHealing's aim is to heal, inspire and help break isolation for survivors.
 - [Video Archive](#)
 - Muchos de estos videos también están disponibles en [español](#)
 - [Podcast](#)
 - [List of additional resources](#)
- [Bob's House of Hope](#): Provides a home built on safety and community to meet the unique needs of male survivors of sex trafficking.
- [FORGE](#): Reduces the impact of trauma on trans/non-binary survivors and communities by empowering service providers, advocating for systems reform, and connecting survivors to healing possibilities.
- [Tin6](#): Aims to help men who have had unwanted or abusive sexual experiences live healthier, happier lives.
- [National Sexual Violence Resource Center \(NSVRC\)](#): Nonprofit focused on providing information and tools to prevent and respond to sexual violence.
 - [Podcasts](#)
- [RAINN](#): RAINN created and operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline (800.656.HOPE) and carries out programs to prevent sexual violence, help survivors, and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice.
 - RAINN también está disponible en [español](#).
- [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#): The Lifeline provides 24/7, free and confidential support (by call, online chat, or text) for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for the public, and best practices for professionals in the United States.
 - Services are available for those who are [deaf & hard of hearing](#).

- Estos servicios también están disponibles en [español](#).
- [MaleSurvivor](#): An organization committed to preventing, healing, and eliminating all forms of sexual victimization of boys and men through support, treatment, research, education, advocacy, and activism.

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