

LGBTQ2IA+ YOUTH SURVIVORS OF TRAFFICKING

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UNDERSTANDING WHY NON-BINARY AND ALL LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, Queer, 2-Spirit, Intersex, Asexual, and Allies (LGBTQ2IA+) people are in “the life” is very important. Self-image and self-actualization are a basic need for all people and a uniquely characterized basic need of the LGBTQ2IA+ community. When young LGBTQ2IA+ people do not find outlets for self-expression and self-discovery in their homes, schools, and community, they often seek and find it in the sex trade industry. In these circumstances, “the life” quickly becomes one of the few areas of dependable gender and sexual orientation affirmation.

MISINFORMATION LEADS TO MISIDENTIFICATION, LACK OF SERVICES

A primary reason this population is so often misidentified and under-served compared with other populations of trafficking victims is the persistent knowledge gap among first responders and other stakeholders about the needs and experiences of LGBTQ2IA+ children experiencing commercial sexual exploitation. Even among those on the front lines of responding to trafficking, stereotypes and misinformation persist. Ideas like, “it’s normal for young boys to date and have sex with older gay men, it’s part of the culture of being gay,” undermine accurate assessment of when exploitation is occurring. Sadly, this perception of, and misunderstanding of, LGBTQ2IA+ youth and culture can lead to the denial of public services and presents a major barrier to identifying and responding to cases of commercial sexual exploitation in LGBTQ2IA+ children.

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF BOYS AND MEN

Sexuality is questioned at a young age, with some teenagers and pre-teens feeling that their sexual identity is their most important identity. While the following narrative exists in all genders, it’s important to explicitly state that boys and men are commercially sexually exploited. Young men and boys of all expressions are often exploited for their curiosity and interests and, consequently, their curiosity is weaponized against them. This can result in men who aren’t gay questioning their sexuality and having to come to a reckoning of sex beyond abuse. When survivors have abuse narratives that are part of their exploration narratives, this can create fuel for transphobia and homophobia if the time when survivors are exploring their identity—whether identifying as heterosexual, homosexual, queer, or otherwise—is embodied as unsafe, bad, and exploitative. Misunderstandings about and prejudices towards people of varying genders or their expressions have driven sexual

and gender-based violence. This is true for all genders. It is especially critical when working with LGBTQ2IA+ youth that providers and stakeholders respect a youth's chosen identity, including as it evolves and changes.

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF TRANSGENDER YOUTH

Unique to the transgender experience is the belief and practice that being in the sex trade is considered a right of passage. This norm is formed by other transgender people and elders in the community, stemming from their own survival in a world that rampantly discriminates and commits violence against transgender people. Finding community becomes an essential need for survival. From men who desire and seek out Transgender people, attracted by the prospect of something discretely obtainable and entirely consumable, to families who abandon Trans youth with nowhere to go and no way to survive at a young age, the combination of driving and pulling forces leave very few, if any, meaningful options for survival.

What a street economy provides is access to life saving hormones which are criminalized in several states, access to community of other transgender people, and buyers who affirm youth's gender; such affirmations and community fill a void that leave youth vulnerable to predatory men. In almost every way, there is an expectation and pressure to participate in the sex trade.

While this is where meaningful community exists, and where transgender people across America access life-saving mutual aid, harm reduction, respect, and simply survive, the sex trade is a dual edged sword. Transgender survivors need meaningful options outside of the sex trade and need protection from the commercial sexual exploitation of children. However, scarce options exist and this is further exacerbated by the criminalization of transgender medical care and access to public spaces.

No known current systemic response adequately identifies and responds to transgender non-binary children and provides a replicable means to be free from sexual exploitation. When you don't have access to exploring your sexuality in day-to-day life you enter into online and in-person ecosystems where opportunities for exploitation are abundant and normalized. Underground economies are oftentimes adjacent to narcotic economies, and some people become involved in both. Simultaneously, displaced accountability for causing a dependence on street economies conflates community care with the source of exploitation. With familial neglect and

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abuse most often a part of a transgender/non-binary youth's narrative, they may need to look for support systems outside their family. Indeed, 40-50% of the homeless and runaway youth living on the street are LGBTQ2IA+. Transgender, non-binary kids are hugely more likely to be on the street, often for the reasons of freedom of self-expression, where expressing and embodying one's transness/gender is more important than being compliant with a parent or guardian's political or religious beliefs around gender and sexuality.

IMPORTANCE OF HONORING SELF-IDENTIFICATION

While many trafficking survivors do not align with and/or strongly reject the terminology of "sex work," it is critically important to keep in mind that LGBTQ2IA+ youth will by and large identify with the term sex work far more than human trafficking, sex trafficking, or sexual exploitation. Imposing restrictions on LGBTQIA+ youth's use of the term "sex work" to identify themselves and their experience can simultaneously create barriers to identification of their victimization and inhibits a response based on trauma-informed care and promising practices.

AWARENESS OF BIAS AND DISCRIMINATION IS CRITICAL TO IMPROVING RESPONSES:

Discrimination by service providers is rampant when working with transgender non-binary survivors. Working with transgender non-binary people and trying to get them into shelter or programs is uniquely difficult. Consider: How do you exit the life when the traditional exit path through social services organizations is not accessible? Even when services are available, there are oftentimes arbitrary esthetic requirements for trans people accessing shelter to be femme enough, an arbitrary standard that shifts day to day based on the particular staff members' relative judgement and understanding of gender. Non-binary survivors may be forced to express and identify as femme to receive services. This may create states of gender dysphoria, which can lead to undesirable behaviors, program violations of codes of conduct and program exit/bars. These are issues easily avoided by gender inclusion policies and the elimination of esthetic requirements that are not required for other populations or demographics.

A SURVIVORS' PERSPECTIVE:

During my own experience selling sex as an underage minor, a law enforcement officer pulled a 62+ year old buyer over, with me sitting in the front seat at the age of 14. It was the middle of the night on a country road and the police officer told me to feel lucky he "had better things to do anyways" and that he "knew what I was doing." Then he left me in this man's car to continue to sell him sex in the middle of the night on a school night. Without law enforcement's buy-in on addressing the commercial sexual exploitation of LGBTQ2IA+ youth, we will remain unable to systemically identify and respond to trafficking of all children.

CONCLUSION:

LGBTQ2IA+ youth's increased risk of homelessness, likelihood of lacking support from family or community if they come out in a religious space, and likelihood to experience sexual abuse as a child, demands that adults provide radically unquestionable inclusion of LGBTQ2IA+ youth in our communities.

Regardless of stakeholders' political ideologies or religious beliefs, children of any demographic do not belong in the sex industry, period, whether the child is transgender, queer, gay or otherwise not heterosexual or the gender assigned at birth. Our nation's children are first and foremost children.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND APPROACHES:

1. Training for law enforcement specifically on the trafficking of LGBTQ2IA+ youth.
2. Policies mandating response to all children being sexually exploited with clear consequences for biased service provision.
3. Funding and access for LGBTQ2IA+ specific advocacy groups to provide care to CSE youth.
4. Remember these children are, as a matter of fact, simply children at the end of the day.

POINTS OF UNDERSTANDING:

1. Understanding that traffickers depend on the general public's bias against LGBTQ2IA+ youth in order to continue exploiting them.
2. Less likely to be assessed by child welfare as a victim/survivor of trafficking.
3. As one juvenile justice judge stated, boys and LGBTQ2IA+ youth are more likely to come into the system on other criminal charges and not be seen as victims of sexual exploitation.

TRIBAL AND INDIGENOUS YOUTH

BY Anne LaFrenier-Ritchie, Safe Harbor Regional Navigator, Someplace Safe, Fergus Falls, MN

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN NORTH AMERICA HAVE HAD COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCES THAT increase their vulnerability towards sex trafficking. Federal policies in the United States and Canada forced Indigenous people to leave their homelands and move to reservation communities, which criminalized access to traditional foodways and livelihoods as well as ancestral sites that were spiritually and culturally significant. Federal policies further stripped Indigenous people of their language, cultural healing practices, and community connections through forced attendance at boarding schools. Indigenous children as young as three years old were physically removed from their homes and transported to schools across the country, where they were physically, sexually, and emotionally abused due to their Indigeneity. Traditional methods of healing and community connectedness were made illegal, and these shared traumas have been passed down from generation to generation through the act of DNA methylation, epigenetic changes to our DNA's molecular structure.¹ In fact, it was illegal for Indigenous people in the United States to access cultural sites and engage in cultural healing practices until 1978. In addition to shared collective trauma, Indigenous people today experience elevated risks for all types of harm, including sexual assault, physical violence, stalking, and homicide. Indigenous people also experience significantly higher rates of police brutality, including death by law enforcement.² Lack of appropriate response from designated institutions such as law enforcement, medical, child welfare, and judicial systems have resulted in the community-based Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relatives movement across the United States and Canada. These collective experiences of systems harm have greatly impacted how Indigenous people choose to engage or disengage with these institutions.

Certain interpersonal and community conditions put individuals at higher risk for being sex trafficked. Indigenous peoples' experiences of violence, coupled with inequitable access to basic needs and fair treatment from systems of support put them at higher risk for sex trafficking. This fact sheet serves as a starting point on better understanding special considerations for working with Indigenous communities and Indigenous victim/survivors of sex trafficking. This document is not one-size-fits all and points may not be reflective of all victim/survivor experiences. Remember to allow individual victim/survivors to identify their own histories, experiences, and needs.

- ▶ Due to well-documented bias and racist practices against Indigenous people and child welfare, health care, judicial/criminal legal systems, schools, and other systems, many victim/survivors, their families, and their communities are reticent to engage with systems. This may be due to di-

1 Peng, H., Zhu, Y., Strachan, E., Fowler, E., Bacus, T., Roy-Byrne, P., Goldberg, J., Vaccarino, V., & Zhao, J. (2018). Childhood Trauma, DNA Methylation of Stress-Related Genes, and Depression: Findings From Two Monozygotic Twin Studies. *Psychosomatic medicine*, 80(7), 599–608. <https://doi.org/10.1097/PSY.0000000000000604>

2 House, The White (2021-11-15). "Executive Order on Improving Public Safety and Criminal Justice for Native Americans and Addressing the Crisis of Missing or Murdered Indigenous People". *The White House*. Retrieved 2023-12-17.

rect harm experienced by the victim/survivor or their family or community. Consider centering community-based, holistic public health approaches to responding to sex trafficking when serving this population.

- ▶ Indigenous methods for healing and wellbeing are beneficial, effective and available in many communities. They may be a preferred method of healing for Indigenous victim/survivors. Consider integrating these practices or programs in larger sex trafficking response. Reach out to knowledge keepers on appropriate ways to involve victim/survivors in culturally specific healing modalities.
- ▶ Indigenous people who are members of Federally Recognized Tribes have special rights and protections due to tribal sovereignty, which has been granted to Tribes by the federal government. Some of these protections include guidelines, including the Indian Child Welfare Act, but implementation has not always been consistent or beneficial for Indigenous people. Some Indigenous people in the United States may not be members of federally recognized tribes and may be further marginalized due to their status.
- ▶ Historical trauma, intergenerational and current traumas all impact Indigenous people in the United States. These traumas may appear in a variety of ways with Indigenous victim/survivors and may result in elevated rates of prosecution and incarceration for this population.

These collective experiences of systems harm have greatly impacted how Indigenous people choose to engage or disengage with these institutions.

BOYS AND MALES

BY Cristian Eduardo, Survivor Leader & Consultant

There is often a presumption that victims are female. There is a false perception that male victims are only trafficked for labor or that their involvement in commercial sex is always voluntary.

—Office for Victims of Crime, Training and Technical Assistance Center

A GROWING AND DIVERSE RESEARCH BODY HAS DEMONSTRATED THE PREVALENCE of trafficking in boys and men. The John Jay College and the Center for Court Innovation study The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in New York City in 2008 estimated that as high as 50% of the commercially sexually exploited children in the U.S. are boys. Globally, UNODC's 2022 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, released in January 2023 notes that males (including boys and men) account for 40 percent of all identified victims of human trafficking.

It is clear that boys and males are trafficked too.

BARRIERS TO IDENTIFICATION & SUPPORT

- ▶ Female-centric Services, Awareness Campaigns, and Outreach Materials
- ▶ Gender-Specific Anti-Trafficking programs
- ▶ Increased Criminalization of Male Victims
- ▶ Lack of training on Male Victimization
- ▶ Cultural & Gender Norms

FEMALE-CENTRIC SERVICES, AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS, AND OUTREACH MATERIAL

“Social and health services, as well as legal and advocacy frameworks, still predominantly focus on female victims of sexual exploitation,” according to the UNODC report.

Literature, service description and outreach material portray only female victims, creating a barrier for male survivors to reach out and seek support. Service providers oftentimes are reluctant to provide services to males due to the idea that they have never worked with male victims/survivors.

What can we do better? Programing and literature must include an inclusive/gender neutral approach, not only in writing, but when interacting with victims and survivors. Males and boys deserved to feel seen and be safe.

It is clear that boys and males are trafficked too.

GENDER-SPECIFIC ANTI-TRAFFICKING PROGRAMS

The majority of services across the country are tailored only to females, this includes, but is not limited to, housing, health, legal and employment services. Due to this lack of services, male & boys are often referred to non-specific victim services where they can experience re-traumatization and oversight of their exploitation.

What can we do better? The creation of male specific services, including emergency and long-term safe housing, is critical to ensuring appropriate services in response to trafficking and as a protective factor against future exploitation. Instilling trustworthiness and transparency into any program is a key element; importantly, when providing services do not dismiss males and boys from their experiences, and always highlight potential barriers when navigating services as males. And survivor inclusion and compensation are vital components when creating trafficking-specific services.

INCREASED CRIMINALIZATION OF MALE VICTIMS

“However, few cases of trafficking of men go to the courts and very few cases could be found in which men were awarded compensation. . . . Rather than receiving justice, many male victims of trafficking are charged with crimes committed while trafficked, especially for illegal border crossing or illegal stay in the destination country.”¹

It is often assumed that males are immune to sexual violence and that males can endure violence and abuse without any significant impact. The normalization of these ideas leads to the dismissal that trafficking victims are forced to commit crimes as part of their trafficking experience. As such, male survivors are often misidentified as criminal offenders and funneled to and through the criminal legal system.

What can we do better? Training on Victims Offender Intersectionality and language inclusive for policies and legislations.

LACK OF TRAINING ON MALE VICTIMIZATION

Males and boys are associated with perpetrating aggression. The lack of training on trauma responses and the association of males and boys always as perpetrators reduces the likelihood to access services.

Training must aim to provide an extensive and comprehensive understanding about trauma responses, and that its manifestations stemmed from individuals attempting to protect themselves.

¹ Tien, Michael T., “Human Trafficking: The Missing Male Victim”

Some trauma responses that can be perceived as aggression are yelling, cursing, social withdrawal or avoiding social interactions, overly defensive behavior, impulsive reactions and physical hostility.

What can we do better? Anyone interacting with victims and survivors must be trained on Trauma-Informed Care, Male Victimization, Trauma Responses and accept the fact that males and boys are being trafficked and that the trauma impact is real.

CULTURAL & GENDER NORMS

Being a survivor or victim is matched with being weak and defenseless, antagonizing the expectations surrounding masculinity: “Boys don’t cry,” “men must be strong,” “men and boys are not being trafficked.”

It is important to understand that there are cultural and gender norms embedded into service provision, law enforcement approaches, and victim identification often accompanied by shame and stigma towards male victims and survivors. Homophobia and hate have not only an impact on males and boys belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, but also impacting cis gender and heterosexual individuals.

What can we do better? Training on gender, sexuality and identity even when not providing services specifically for the LGBTQ+ community. Prevent assumptions of a person’s sexuality based on their exploitation, example: youth individuals being referred to LGBTQ center because during their exploitation they engaged in same sex sexual intercourse. Empowerment, Voice and Choice; always collaborate with those receiving services when doing referrals and addressing their needs. Care must be always a collaborative approach.

TO LEARN MORE:

- ▶ [Human Trafficking: The Missing Male Victim, Michael T. Tien](#)
- ▶ [How to Improve Services for Males Experiencing Trafficking, National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center](#)
- ▶ [Assisting Male Survivors of Human Trafficking, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Person](#)
- ▶ [The Legal Rights and Needs of Victims of Human Trafficking in the United States, OVC Fact Sheet](#)
- ▶ [Responding to Sex Trafficking Victim-Offender Intersectionality, Shared Hope International](#)