

Serving Survivors of Commercial Sexual Exploitation

Key takeaway:

Agencies and organizations that provide services to survivors of commercial sexual exploitation work to meet their needs across multiple domains, including safety, housing, education, employment, and relationships. These factors are key social determinants of health and thus, such agencies and organizations also impact survivors' health. However, less common in service delivery is assistance connecting survivors to healthcare professionals who are specifically trained and equipped to provide needed care.

Methodology of study:

Two main sources of data were collected to understand the physical and psychological health concerns, behaviors related to accessing care, and challenges to meeting the healthcare needs of young people experiencing commercial sexual exploitation. Quantitative survey data from a large sample of 534 young people from across the US between the ages of 13-24 who experienced minor sex trafficking or who are at high risk for experiencing sex trafficking provide information about the health needs and conditions, health care utilization, and health care experiences for this population. Qualitative data gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews of 35 adult survivors of minor sex trafficking provided survivor narratives of their experiences seeking healthcare and meeting their healthcare needs across multiple stages of survivorship.²

Challenges identified in the study:

- CSE survivors have numerous serious long-term health concerns that may have been caused or exacerbated by exploitation experiences.
 - Notably, the most common chronic physical ailment reported being frequent or severe headaches (**51%, n=258**), while the most common health condition was reported to be insomnia (**47%, n=239**).
 - Of the serious health conditions measured, asthma was most common within the sample (**25%, n=128**). A smaller proportion of the sample reported having any type of STD (**10%, n=55**) or HIV (**2%, n=11**).
 - Examining our interviews, we found that survivors' post exploitation revealed significant struggles with both physical and mental health, such as chronic pain, untreated injuries, Hepatitis C, ulcers, depression, and PTSD.
- CSE survivors report primarily negative experiences with healthcare providers that decrease trust and willingness to seek healthcare to meet ongoing medical needs and to provide preventive care.
 - Individuals who have experienced CSE had a **616%** significantly higher likelihood of experiencing others acting afraid compared to those who did not disclose.
- Self-reporting CSE survivorship was associated with an **189%** increased likelihood of receiving poor service.
- Survivors, those who have transitioned out of commercial sex work or situations of exploitation, struggle to find medical professionals who understand their experiences and have specialized training in exploitation and other comorbid challenges such as substance abuse.
 - For example, one survivor felt it was hard to trust doctors, stating "I guess just because of the doctors that I had had encounters with previously, it just deterred me from wanting to go get help for anything." (Interview #15)
 - However, once finding a doctor for their pregnancy seeking healthcare changed:



I trusted [doctor]. He delivered my baby. He was very kind. I saw a therapist through that hospital too. Literally, the best freaking healthcare I've ever received in my life, but it is because of the area. I'm completely convinced it was because of the area." (Interview 15)

Recommendations

Agencies and organizations that provide services to survivors of commercial sexual exploitation should integrate healthcare navigation into their practices. Healthcare navigation, often led by Patient Navigators, is commonly utilized by health-care systems to support patients in instrumental and emotional ways as they navigate complex health-care needs and to reduce health disparities. Such services are generally less available to individuals in public health insurance systems or without top-quality insurance, or through employee assistance programs. In the context of CSE survivors, navigation strategies would strengthen connections to care for survivors to providers who have experience serving clients with CSE history or

vulnerability, provide emotional support in navigating complex systems, and reduce health disparities experienced by CSE survivors. The navigators could support clients in getting referrals for specialized care and help clients advocate for care services that are specially tailored to meet their needs. Understanding the critical role that survivor peers or mentors play in the transitions that young people undertake to remove themselves from situations of exploitation, it is important to explore the possibility of engaging trained survivor mentors as Patient Navigators who could serve as a critical source of information and support in healthcare navigation.