Children and Youth Experiencing Commercial Sexual Exploitation in California: Characteristics and Response Efforts by Child Welfare Agencies

Ivy Hammond, MSW[1] and Joseph Magruder, PhD[1]

BACKGROUND

Following the passage of Safe Harbor laws, which decriminalize the involvement of minors in commercial exchanges of sexual acts, many states have tasked child welfare (CW) authorities with the responsibility of preventing, protecting and providing services to children that have experienced commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) (Barnert et al., 2016). Administrative data may be used to evaluate CW responses to allegations of CSE over time at the population-level. Moreover, these data offer client-level historical information about known CSE risk factors, including prior CW system involvement (Franchino-Olsen, 2019). The few existing evaluations offer preliminary evidence of jurisdictional differences in policies, definitions of CSE-related child maltreatment, and data collection (Reid et al., 2017). To date, this is the first empirical analyses to assess CW system responses to allegations of CSE-related exploitation at the state level.

METHODS

This analysis includes all children in California with at least one documented allegation of exploitation between 2014-2018, at least one CSE indicator in their records and known sex at birth (N=3,711). Demographic data and child welfare system involvement indicators were also incorporated. These administrative records were obtained as part of an ongoing data sharing agreement and research partnership between the California Child Welfare Indicators Project and the California Department of Social Services.

Table 1. Child Characteristics and CSE Referral Outcomes

Demographics	Total N	%	Ever Investigated N	%	Ever Substantiated N	%
Sex at Birth			*p = 0.351*		*p <.0001*	
Female	3394	91.5	2801	82.5	1007	29.7
Male	317	8.5	255	80.4	50	15.8
Total	3711	100.0	3056	82.3	1057	28.5
Age at First Referral			*p = 0.001*		*p <.0001*	
Under 10	175	4.7	156	89.1	28	16.0
Ages 10-12	218	5.9	186	85.3	35	16.1
Ages 13-15	1489	40.1	1252	84.1	434	29.1
Ages 16-17	1829	49.3	1462	79.9	560	30.6
Total	3711	100.0	3056	82.3	1057	28.5
Primary Language			*p = 0.459*		*p <.0001*	
English	3219	86.7	2645	82.2	967	30.0
Other	492	13.3	411	83.5	90	18.3
Total	3711	100.0	3056	82.3	1057	28.5
Ethnoracial Identity			*p = 0.059*		*p <.0001*	
Black	1139	30.7	957	84.0	450	39.5
White	753	20.3	599	79.5	186	24.7
Hispanic	1530	41.2	1274	83.3	349	22.8
Asian/Pacific Islander	98	2.6	77	78.6	26	26.5
Native American	34	0.9	26	76.5	***	***
Missing	157	4.2	123	78.3	***	***
Total	3711	100.0	3056	82.3	1057	28.5

Note: Chi-squared p-values are presented
Cell sizes < 11 masked along with the values for the corresponding values from Missing (***)

Table 2. Child Welfare Involvement

Demographics	Total N	%	Referral History N	%	Case History N	%	Placement History N	%	Open CW Case N	%	Open CW Placement N	%
Age at First Referral			*p <.0001*		*p <.0001*		*p <.0001*		*p <.0001*		*p = 0.053*	
Under 10	175	4.7	117	66.9	40	22.9	25	14.3	24	13.7	13	7.4
Ages 10-12	218	5.9	171	78.4	74	33.9	58	26.6	47	21.6	31	14.2
Ages 13-15	1489	40.1	1330	89.3	701	47.1	591	39.7	410	27.5	223	15.0
Ages 16-17	1829	49.3	1586	86.7	799	43.7	757	41.4	429	23.5	249	13.6
Total	3711	100.0	3204	86.3	1614	43.5	1431	38.6	910	24.5	516	13.9
Ethnoracial Identity			*p <.0001*		*p <.0001*		*p <.0001*		*p <.0001*		p = 0.012	
Black	1139	30.7	1030	90.4	582	51.1	535	47.0	319	28.0	161	14.1
White	753	20.3	640	85.0	311	41.3	273	36.3	178	23.6	115	15.3
Hispanic	1530	41.2	1358	88.8	646	42.2	553	36.1	365	23.9	210	13.7
Asian/Pacific Islander	98	2.6	81	82.7	36	36.7	33	33.7	17	17.3	12	12.2
Native American	34	0.9	30	88.2	17	50.0	17	50.0	13	38.2	***	***
Missing	157	4.2	65	41.4	22	14.0	20	12.7	18	11.5	***	***
Total	3711	100.0	3204	86.3	1614	43.5	1431	38.6	910	24.5	516	13.9

Note: Chi-squared p-values are presented
Cell sizes < 11 masked along with the values for the corresponding values from Missing (***)

RESULTS

- The majority of youth reported for CSE receive an investigation (82.3%)
- Female youth are more likely than males to be substantiated (29.7 vs 15.8%)
- Black youth are more likely than all other ethnoracial groups to be substantiated
- Youth ages 13 and older are more likely to be substantiated than children under 10 years
- Overall, most youth had at least one referral prior to the first CSE referral (86.3%)
- Less than half had a CW case prior to the first CSE referral (43.5%)
- Over a third had been in a CW placement prior to the first CSE referral (38.6%)
- Less than a quarter were in an open case at the time of the first CSE referral (24.5%)
- Fewer still had an open placement at the time of the first CSE referral (13.9%)

DISCUSSION

Ethnoracial and sex disparities emerged within the findings on substantiated CSE referrals. It remains unclear whether these results reflect the true experiences of the CSE-involved population or speak more to the decision-making and data entry practices of child welfare workers. The large portion of youth reported for CSE without a prior CW case underscores the need for further research on the mechanisms by which CW involvement contributes to a child's vulnerability to CSE.

REFERENCES

Barnert, E. S., Abrams, S., Azzi, V. F., Ryan, G., Brook, R., & Chung, P. J. (2016). Identifying best practices for "Safe Harbor" legislation to protect child sex trafficking victims: Decriminalization alone is not sufficient. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 51, 249-262.

Franchino-Olsen, H. (2019). Vulnerabilities relevant for commercial sexual exploitation of children/domestic minor sex trafficking: a systematic review of risk factors. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 1524838018821956.

Reid, J. A., Baglivio, M. T., Piquero, A. R., Greenwald, M. A., & Epps, N. (2017). Human trafficking of minors and childhood adversity in Florida. *American Journal of Public Health*, 107(2), 306-311.

AFFILIATIONS

[1]California Child Welfare Indicators Project, School of Social Welfare, University of California at Berkeley, California

CONTACT INFORMATION

Ivy_Hammond@Berkeley.edu
JoeMagruder@Berkeley.edu