

Using Research in Your Work

Addressing barriers for boys accessing care for sexual violence

About this Brief

This brief is based on an article published in the [Special Issue of Child Abuse and Neglect - Global Insights on the Sexual Exploitation of Boys](#). In this issue you can find a systematic scoping literature review, and six empirical studies, which portray survivor narratives, and insights from service providers. The research highlights the impact of gender norms, describes risk factors, and emphasizes the need for trauma-informed care. The goal of the Special Issue was to raise awareness and enhance responses to the sexual exploitation of boys. If the brief increases your curiosity, it is recommended that you read the full article available in Child Abuse and Neglect.

This brief describes data from the article "[A global systematic scoping review of literature on the sexual exploitation of boys](#)" by Corinne Moss and others. Citations are not used; however, all findings and conclusions are drawn from this article. This brief was written by Ante Cuvalo, McMaster University, with Dr. Christine Wekerle, McMaster University.

Child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) affects all children, but research on the experiences of boys, and their needs for support, is lacking. Support services for boys can be limited, and workers frequently lack specialized training to meet their specific needs. In this brief, we capture a small selection of key findings and provide suggestions for how to use this data in your work.

The article presents data from a global systematic scoping review. Quantitative (n=51) and qualitative (n=30) studies from 38 countries were included in the review of articles published between January 2000 and December 2022. A total of 254,744 boys are represented in the reviewed studies. The findings show that sexual exploitation and abuse of boys are associated with factors in interpersonal relationships (family dysfunction and child maltreatment, adolescent dating, and violence), factors in the community (community violence, technology), factors in society (cultural and societal beliefs), and with individual characteristics of victimized boys (age, sexual orientation, disability status).

1. The sexual exploitation of boys looks different in different settings.

Prevalence rates based on self-reporting range from 5% in safe and secure settings to upwards of 20% in high-risk settings like street contexts.

Use the Data in Your Work

- Research the prevalence of sexual exploitation in your practicing region; awareness of this victimization will tailor how you approach providing support and care.
- Train support service professionals on the signs of sexual exploitation, especially in high-risk areas. It is important to note that victims may not self-label these experiences as CSEA, especially if their family is reliant on the exploitation for financial gain.
- Approach conversations about sexual victimization with empathy and tolerance. Listen to their needs and ensure that the boy is safe.

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2. Poverty, combined with gender norms regarding masculinity and community-based minimization of boys' victimization, facilitates the sexual exploitation of boys.

Unhelpful gender norms include myths that boys cannot be victimized for sexual crimes or are not harmed if they are. In some communities and households, boys can be expected to financially contribute from a very young age – this can sometimes be a justification for their sexual exploitation. Sometimes gender or community norms can excuse particular abusive circumstances, for example, female perpetrated child sex offences are not perceived as harmful towards. It is important to keep in mind how socioeconomic imbalances and norms that we live by may influence how victimized boys experience the world, and how you, as a practitioner, responds.

Use the Data in Your Work

- Stopping further maltreatment is a priority; if a boy is suspected to be in danger, protect the child and coordinate appropriate medical and legal care.
- Learn how experiences of poverty may affect a child's circumstances and limit choices. This will work to shape your unconscious biases and thought patterns.
- Frontline professionals must learn about social determinants of health. Governing policies and laws, infrastructure, accessibility, can all impact an individual's health and wellbeing in ways they have no control over.
- Research and collaborate with local organizations and/or governmental agencies that work towards addressing youth-related health concerns.

3. Vulnerable boys are actively targeted by offenders for CSEA.

Boys with physical disabilities, boys with cognitive disabilities, and boys who were street-involved were almost always demonstrated in the literature to be at a far greater risk for victimization. Additionally, enabling substance use is a common way that offenders can facilitate access to boys for sexual abuse and exploitation. Boys with mental health challenges may also be at a greater risk for CSEA. Early experiences of child sexual abuse were indicated in many victimized boys, who later were targeted by offenders and reported exploitation experiences. It may be that young people become trapped in a trauma-based survival loop that promotes re-victimization. Supporting trauma-informed care, while providing surviving and thriving resources, is an important step towards improved health.

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- Boy-specific, therapeutic services are lacking; educate yourself on the different trauma-informed care approaches briefly described below. Remember, the first goal of disclosure support is establishing immediate safety and stability, as this promotes trust and leads towards open communication.
- Adopt boy-specific, trauma-informed approaches that are centered around building a safe space for engagement and sharing. Begin conversations with non-threatening, "ice-breaker" questions, such as "what would you like to learn more about?" before talking about difficult and painful experiences. Try always to let the young person lead in choosing the direction for discussions.
- Establish a method of communication that works for the boy in front of you, either by directly asking them or through using your body language to test out a few ways of interacting.
- Ensure that your response to their victimization is non-judgmental and comes from a place of empathy and awareness. This is highlighted in the language you use; the way you use physical space to ensure privacy, safety, and warmth; by using open-ended questions; by using summarizing techniques and clarifying statements rather than questions; and paying attention to the verbal and nonverbal cues of the boy you are talking to. Match your language to his.

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4. Professionals can sustain harmful attitudes surrounding the victimization of boys.

Harmful attitudes include that boys cannot be raped or sexually assaulted, that sexual violence against boys is less impactful than against girls, or that boys are to blame as they should have defended themselves. Oftentimes, the conversations between practitioners and boys are rooted in our own internalized (and sometimes not conscious) beliefs of what being a “boy” or “man” means.

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- In conversations relating to victimization, try to establish a reflective practice that challenges your assumptions. This can be done by asking yourself “how did I get to this conclusion?” and “what are my biases?” Acknowledging these answers will guide your conversations and subsequently build a more sensitive and supportive environment.
- Recognize that gender-based assumptions can be harmful to your clients. Where appropriate, ask for preferred pronouns. Keep the language inclusive and avoid labels.
- The language used can oftentimes be an indication of the societal and familial norms of which you, or the victim, were raised in. As such, using gender-neutral, developmentally appropriate language, and allowing the child to speak and ask questions without interruptions, is paramount.
- The conversation may become stagnant if the child fears legal and societal repercussions. Sensitivity to protecting young people from ramifications associated with their victimization is vital in establishing a safe, supportive environments for care.

Summary

The global review of the literature highlighted that we do know some key things about boys’ experiences of CSEA from around the world. The data reminds us that social stigmatization and professional attitudes (including those we might not be conscious of) persist in support services, judicial systems, and health systems. On a practitioner level, it is important to keep in mind the role that you play in preventing, supporting, and comforting exploited boys. Through training, providing resources, lobbying for governmental and/or organizational change, challenging social norms and misconceptions, and raising awareness of the key findings in this document, you actively contribute to a safer environment for victimized boys.

For more information concerning training and education on the topics presented in this brief, please see the resources described below.

[Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy](#) has shown significant results in helping child and adolescent survivors of abuse and remains a vital tool in supporting victims of sexual exploitation. The following points can be used to supplement the evidence-to-practice tips described above in supporting victims of abuse.

1. Provide information about physical and emotional trauma responses, and connect these to the boy’s experiences.
2. Suggest relaxation strategies and encourage their use on a regular basis.
3. Develop a toolkit of skills with the boy such as journaling, reading, etc. to promote comfortability in expressing emotions.
4. Segment sessions into themes, or chapters of their life. Always build on strengths and resilience skills.
5. Try reflective questioning and role playing about healing processes to gain a deeper understanding of the trauma, and the feelings associated with the experience.
6. Establish a safety plan that addresses all elements in the child’s situation i.e., potential substance use/abuse, housing, violence, exploitative connections, etc.

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Useful Resources

1. [Canadian Centre for Child Protection](#): is providing educational resources that addresses child sexual abuse, self/peer exploitation, online abuse and bullying, and more.
2. [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#): is a hub of information, funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, that offers child-centered training resources on multiple topics such as sexual abuse, commercial exploitation, substance abuse, emotional regulation, racial equity, online safety, and more.
3. [Harvard University](#): is offering a 16-week long course that teaches individuals how to protect children from neglect, violence, sexual abuse, and exploitation through learning about international legal frameworks and child-centered care approaches.
4. [Little Warriors](#): provides evidence-based educational workshops that educates adults in preventing and responding to child sexual abuse. An Indigenous version of the workshop has recently been released.
5. [The Violence Evidence Guidance Action \(VEGA\) Project](#): is an organization, funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada, that provides educational resources on family violence, including child maltreatment, intimate partner violence, and children's exposure to intimate partner violence.