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Rethinking research on sexual exploitation of boys: Methodological challenges and recommendations to optimize future knowledge generation

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ABSTRACT

Research and policies on child and adolescent sexual exploitation frequently focus on the sexual exploitation of girls and fail to recognize the experiences of sexually exploited boys, including their potentially unique health care and social support needs. This oversight limits the ability of health care and social service providers to offer both targeted and evidence informed care to sexually exploited boys. As a first step in a larger grant to understand the experiences of sexually exploited boys and to develop interventions for this specific population, we conducted a systematic review to address the question, “What is the state of the research on sexually exploited boys internationally?” As we undertook this review, we faced a number of significant challenges that made the process more difficult than anticipated. In this paper we discuss four key methodological challenges we encountered: lack of a consistent definition of child and adolescent sexual exploitation, difficulties in differentiating sexual exploitation as a specific concept within child sexual abuse, failure to disaggregate data usefully across multiple variables, and limited epidemiological studies to inform prevalence. We reflect on how these challenges limited our ability to systematically analyze, synthesize, and interpret the available research. We conclude by making recommendations to improve the state of the research regarding sexually exploited boys with the aim of better informing future policy and practice.

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1. Introduction

Child and adolescent sexual exploitation is a human rights violation that has serious immediate and long-term physical, mental, emotional, and social health consequences for children of all genders (Edwards, Iritani, & Hallfors, 2006; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2010; Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2013). Sexually exploited youth, as compared to non-sexually exploited youth, report increased rates of sexually transmitted infections, depression, and homelessness (Edwards et al., 2006; Mitchell et al., 2010). Research and policies on this topic, however, often focus on the sexual exploitation of girls alone (Cockbain, Brayley, & Ashby, 2014). This is problematic because it fails to recognize how the experiences, as well

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as health care and social support needs of sexually exploited boys may differ from those of girls. Ultimately, such oversights limit the ability of health care and social service providers to offer both targeted and evidence informed care to sexually exploited boys.

Of the research that has addressed sexual exploitation of both boys and girls, similar rates of exploitation have been reported amongst these two populations. For example, a Canadian study found similar rates of sexual exploitation amongst boys and girls, where more than 1 in 3 street-involved boys aged 19 and under reported sexual exploitation (Saewyc, MacKay, Anderson, & Drozda, 2008). Likewise, Homma, Nicholson, and Saewyc (2012) found that 2% of boys and 3% of girls living in rural British Columbia, Canada reported sexual exploitation in a school-based population health survey. Comparable rates have also been reported in studies conducted with high school students in both Norway and Sweden. In an Oslo study, 2.1% of boys and 0.6% of girls reported selling sex; likewise, 1.8% of boys and 1.0% of girls from a nationally representative Swedish sample reported selling sex for payment (Pedersen & Hegna, 2003; Svedin & Priebe, 2007).

As a first step in a larger grant to understand the experiences of and to develop interventions for sexually exploited boys, we performed a systematic review to address the question, “What is the state of the research on sexually exploited boys internationally?” In conducting this study, we immediately encountered a series of challenges related to the way concepts were defined, and how studies were performed that resulted in a much more extensive and complex systematic review process than was anticipated. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to identify and describe the key methodological challenges in the literature, in order to inform researchers and clinicians of the limits in the existing research about the sexual exploitation of boys.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) is the seminal international agreement on the definition of child and adolescent sexual exploitation. Article 1 of the UN CRC defines child as “every human being below the age of 18 years” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989). The UN CRC has three optional protocols, one being *On the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography*, which further specifies child prostitution as “the use of a child in sexual activities for remuneration or any other form of consideration” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2000b, Article 2). The optional protocol has been adopted by 173 state parties and is binding in these states (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2016). Another nine states are signatories to the treaty, meaning they have preliminarily endorsed it, are examining it domestically, and are considering its full endorsement. Sixteen states have taken no action.

This paper recognizes that there is a complex relationship between different legal and governmental definitions of sexual exploitation. The UN CRC definition of child sexual exploitation intersects with other definitions of sexual exploitation such as human trafficking, sex trafficking, and the commercial sexual exploitation of children. An example of this overlap is found in the primary United Nations document that defines human trafficking, the Palermo Protocol, which defines ‘trafficking in persons’ as:

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power, or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2000a, Article 3)

Our systematic review focused on child and adolescent sexual exploitation. The authors recognize that some older adolescents (18 and over) and young adults experience sexual exploitation, such as those who are involved in sex trafficking. Additionally, some individuals aged 18 and older first experienced exploitation before their 18th birthday. While this paper will not take a position on older adolescent and young adult sexual exploitation, there is value for researchers to study both child and adolescent and older adolescent and young adult populations separately.

2. Methods

2.1. Operational definition

Based on the CRC and its Optional Protocol, in this study we defined child and adolescent sexual exploitation as sexual abuse through trading or exchanging sex or sexual activities (i.e. stripping, exotic dancing, pornographic videoing), for drugs, food, shelter, protection, or other basics of life, and/or for money.

2.2. Search selection

We searched for any published peer-reviewed research that included information about sexually exploited boys. A review protocol was developed and agreed upon by the authors before the review began and was used to guide the review. Studies were included if they met the following inclusion criteria: (a) provided information about child and adolescent sexual exploitation as defined by this study, (b) had male participants, (c) majority of participants were <18 years old, and (d) were published in English. We were interested in research that had been conducted anywhere in the world about this issue, and as a result, there were no geographic limits in our criteria.

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