

StreetWorks Youth Focus Group Report: What Youth Say

Pilot Edition July 2017



WALKING ALONGSIDE YOUNG PEOPLE
Acknowledging and Honoring their Individual Journeys



Developed by:

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The Real Experts -- Youth
Focus groups and individual interviews with youth who have been sexually exploited.

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WHAT YOUTH SAY SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose

StreetWorks, a program of Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota, conducted a series of focus groups and interviews with sexually exploited youth, to gain insight into their perceptions about Outreach Workers, current trends in exploitation, and knowledge about resources and Minnesota’s Safe Harbor Network of Services for at-risk and sexually exploited. Given the hidden nature of commercial sexual exploitation, it can be difficult to gain firsthand information. Yet, it is imperative to hear about experiences directly from youth to help understand key issues, to improve programming, and develop strategies for future outreach. In addition, we intentionally sought out the participation of underserved and underrepresented youth populations. We intend to use the information gained through this process to influence and inform all aspects of our work, including the StreetWorks training curriculum for new Outreach Workers.

Methodology

As part of this research, StreetWorks conducted two focus groups and one individual interview with eight youth who have been, or are still currently being, sexual exploited. All sessions were facilitated by Trudee Able-Peterson, Outreach and Sexually Exploited Youth Specialist. One focus group occurred in a rural city in greater Minnesota, and the other focus group, as well as the individual interview, were held in the Twin Cities metro area. This was intentional to gain the perspective of youth in both a rural and urban settings.

The age range of participants was 17-24 years. Self-identified genders included five females, two males (both of whom identified as gay) and one transgender female. The participants comprised of diverse racial/ethnic populations, including African American (2), Multi-racial (2), White (2) and Hispanic (1) and one who did not self-identify. See Table 1.

Table 1: Self-identified demographics

<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>
19	Female	Multi-racial
17	Female	White
24	Transgender female	Hispanic
19	Female	White
19	Male (gay)	African American
24	Male (gay)	African American
19	Female	Multi-racial
21	Female	Did not self-identify

Interview Questions

Each session used a common set of questions, with some conversations moving into additional issue areas. The general questions presented for discussion included:

- Prior interactions with an Outreach Worker (positive and negative)
- How an Outreach Worker can help
- Ways a youth can be sexually exploited
- Most likely places youth are recruited into sexually exploitive situations
- Role of technology in recruitment
- Terms that are used
- Knowledge about the Safe Harbor Law and programs
- Utilization of Safe Harbor Law and programs
- Other community resources – awareness and utilization
- Best approaches for Outreach Workers to connect with sexually exploited youth
- Why a youth might not exit a sexually exploitive situation
- Whether or not a baby would affect a youth’s sexually exploitive situation

Language and Terms

The following terms were brought up when youth were asked what terms are being used on the street or in sexual exploitation:

- Appointment: What contact with a client is called
- Cookies: Having an orgasm
- Donations: What the “date” pays
- Finesses: Gets a deal, may get money without having sex
- Get that work: Get drugs to get high
- Glass/Snow: Cocaine
- Green/Grissle: Marijuana
- Head: Oral sex
- Hitting a stain: Getting ready to work in prostitution or selling drugs
- Packing: Carrying a weapon
- Peep somebody: Figure out if a “date” is safe
- Poonanny: Sex
- Ran a train: Raped by multiple men
- Shorty: Gay hustler
- THOT (Thottie Body): That Ho Out There
- Thirsty: Asking for “boy pussy”
- Wet Wet: Oral sex

Terms used in the Twin Cities, but not as familiar in rural Minnesota:

- The Game/The Life: The subculture of prostitution, complete with rules, a hierarchy of authority, and language.
- “John”: An individual who pays for or trades something of value for sexual acts.
- Date: The exchange when prostitution takes place, or the activity of prostitution. A victim is said to be “with a date” or “dating.”
- Escort: An organization, operating chiefly via cell phone and the internet or local newspapers, which sends a victim to a buyer’s location.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES AND SAFE HARBOR

The participants were well aware of community resources available to them and all accessed resources for basic needs, but had mixed familiarity with the Safe Harbor Law and available programs and services.

Community Resources

All participants had prior contact with Outreach Workers or other social service providers. It is important to point out that one youth from the Twin Cities had been exploited through survival sex since age 13, and had been on a known street for prostitution activity and never met an Outreach Worker on the street.

In the rural group, all five participants had contact with a Lutheran Social Service's Outreach Worker, and were uniformly positive about their interactions with her. They each described helpful actions she had taken on their behalf, such as providing assistance with housing, education, jobs, paying bills, transportation, and getting accepted into a Safe Harbor housing program. They said they also appreciated help in the form of food, water, socks and other practical items.

One rural participant had a negative experience with a local advocacy agency, noting that this organization would contact law enforcement and the participant didn't want that involvement. In other comments, the participants were particularly negative about their local police. There were multiple comments calling area police officers untrustworthy and condescending. Several comments noted that Outreach Workers should avoid forcing any contact with law enforcement on youth they meet. Another set of comments noted that an unnamed program in the area offered poor quality food in inadequate quantities to youth in need.

Among the Twin Cities participants, two of the three participants had been in contact with an Outreach Worker, and two participants had a good relationship with an Outreach Worker from a local service agency. All three said they accessed community resources, and providers were generally considered helpful, with the exception of a few places they would not return for services. Participants liked the practical assistance available from providers that did respond, including food and hygiene products, and practical advice, such as STI screening information.

Safe Harbor

Most of the focus group/interview participants were unaware of the Safe Harbor Law and the available programs and services. Two of the rural participants had heard about Safe Harbor because they had previously been placed at two separate Safe Harbor housing programs, while only one of the three Twin Cities participants had heard of Safe Harbor, and none had used its programs.

Two rural participants admitted that they did not reveal their history of sexual exploitation to staff at the Safe Harbor housing program and, in general, were good at hiding that information from everyone. At the same time, they said the staff there needed training to better help youth. As one youth survivor put it, "People who haven't been in the life have no right to tell me any of it." One noted that the "survivor staff was actually helpful." In general, the group thought that survivors would be the most helpful resource: "Survivors should be working in this...they would be the best to help us."

OUTREACH WORKERS' APPROACH

Participants had very clear advice about best approaches that Outreach Workers need to use to be most effective. Their comments were consistent about the need for Outreach Workers to be genuinely caring, honest and non-judgmental. The youth said they could assess these attributes quickly, but that it takes time for Outreach Workers to build trust and credibility among those served.

According to the participants, the best initial approach from Outreach Workers should involve practical assistance with food, water, snacks, hygiene supplies and connections to resources. Approaches to avoid include direct questions about exploitation, touching and lecturing. The groups said the best time for outreach is during the middle of the night into the early morning hours (one said 1:30 a.m., others said 4:00-5:00 a.m.).

Selected comments from the focus groups/interviews:

- An outreach worker should pull me to the side, say are you okay, are you safe, here's my number. Should not be judgmental, be honest, up-front.
- Make the youth feel comfortable, trusting, friendly, open.
- Outreach Worker is fun, she is all gangster with us, she has a cool vibe.
- Just tell them, "We are here for you."
- Don't just tell the person what to do.
- Just give options.
- Don't ask if you're okay! I hate that.
- Ask: "Would you want to talk?"
- Say, "You can stop in any time." (In reference to telling a youth about drop-in center services.) Don't have to put the person on the spot.
- Youth are not going to trust people right away. Trust takes time.
- Offer hygiene products without any judgment.
- Say, "Here is what I have in my bag, do you want anything?"
- Don't ask, "Have you been exploited?"
- Make sure the person knows that the Outreach Worker might be helpful for them to know, if they wanted to escape.
- Don't walk up really fast.
- Don't ask a million personal questions at first.
- Make sure they [youth] are comfortable. Watch body language and facial expressions, fidgeting, or twirling their hair means they are uncomfortable.
- If they say, "I don't want to talk about it," quit making them talk about it.
- Don't be all professional about it.
- Talk to them like they are a human being.
- Don't talk like a student and teacher, talk like you are a friend – Not like you're an adult and I'm not.
- I'll shut down fast if you try to show your power issues.
- Build a serious [good] relationship first.
- The best way is to say, "Hi, do you need help with anything?" Tell me you're an Outreach Worker. It's in the way you talk to me.

In one group, the facilitator asked the follow-up question of “What should I do if I saw you about to turn a trick?” Responses included:

- Help with getting out of a bad situation – [Outreach Worker] would pull us out of the situation.
- Calling cops puts up a red flag, it puts up a trust issue, so don’t call the cops.
- Wait until the pimp is gone, if they want help, they could help get them the right resources.

In the facilitator’s notes regarding the Twin Cities focus group, she noted:

“The participants were both incredibly forthcoming about their experiences and it’s very clear they have a good relationship with their Outreach Worker, and the other workers in that program. One young woman “let something slip” during a conversation and the worker “read between the lines.” This is a critical listening skill.” - Trudee Able-Peterson

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Recruitment

The Twin Cities youth said they were recruited into exploitation by someone they knew (mom, cousin, friend). They said exploitation can happen through the lack of a family protector, rape, stripping, music videos, phone sex, web cam porn, nude photos, and drugs. Their exploitation continued primarily through technology/social media and personal contacts.

The Twin Cities youth listed the following internet sites and other media used for recruitment:

- Facebook
- Meet Me
- Tumblr
- Plenty of Fish (POF)
- Snapchat
- Tagged
- Instagram
- Craigslist
- City Pages ads (sometimes under “girlfriend experience or massage,”)
- P411 (Preferred411).

The rural focus group listed the following recruitment places and media:

- Mostly on apps: Grinder, Meet Me, Tinder, Plenty of Fish, Facebook, Snapchat.
- Only one youth had heard of Backpage.
- Direct messaging
- Schools
- Fast food restaurants
- Bigger cities population of about 20,000 people.

The Twin Cities female participants said they “didn’t walk the streets, that’s not classy, we mostly had set-up visits.” Twin Cities recruitment locations listed by the participants include downtown Minneapolis and St. Paul, malls (Mall of America, Southdale, Rosedale), Lake Street, Bloomington hotels, and any Motel 6.

The rural focus group demonstrated a broad understanding of exploitation and listed a wide range of ways youth might be exploited:

- Sexting/Nudes (sending and receiving nude images)
 - Phone sex
 - “People I do know, and people I don’t know, ask all the time to do phone sex” and “Old men ALWAYS ask for phone sex.”
- Older men: “Above 25 year old prey on kids” and in hunting season, “older men come out and prey on little children.”
- Trafficking
- “Like I was never held hostage, but he [her pimp] was going to send me out of the state.”
- “I went to CA, and he kind of made me do meth, then I got addicted.”
- Survival sex – having sex with someone to survive.
- “I ran away from home, had to have sex to survive, so I had sex, but I had to have drugs to do those things.”
- “I could walk around the house, had everything I needed, like a shower, free marijuana, so I didn’t really need to leave.”
- “To get a ride somewhere.”

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS/OBSERVATIONS

1. Facilitator asked if youth thought stripping was sexual exploitation and the participants thought if the person wanted to be doing stripping, it wasn't really exploitation.
2. In response to questions about why a youth would continue in an exploitive situation, the primary response from both groups was the money.
 - "The money is fast, not easy, but fast. I don't take pride in it."
 - "One person I know would rather get \$200 an hour than \$10 an hour at Burger King."
3. The rural participants also noted a youth might not try and escape exploitation because of threats, fear of change and not recognizing they are being exploited.
 - One participant said, "I got out because I was fed up and caught diseases."
 - "I left because it wasn't helping me, it was just hurting me more and more. It wasn't safe – it's harder to get out the longer you have been in it."
4. Participants were split on whether having a baby would keep people in exploitive situations or it would help them leave.
5. Outreach programs utilizing this material should carefully consider the time of day they're doing outreach in order to meet sexually exploited youth who don't go to work until midnight.

CLOSING WORDS FROM FACILITATOR

Young people want to tell their story, but they need to be safe and comfortable with you to do that. Never ask them to share their story if you can't build trust and rapport with them. When that happens, they can reclaim and regain some power that was stolen from them in their childhoods. Listen.

Each face of each young person in the Focus Groups lingers in my mind. Each story is now a part of who I am. I thank all of them for their willingness to teach us their realities so we can better reach them to serve them.

How fortunate we are when a young person allows us into the hard places they've been. I am grateful to Lutheran Social Service/StreetWorks and its partner agencies to have been entrusted to facilitate these Focus Groups with young people, thank you.

Trudee Able-Peterson