

NO WRONG DOOR

YOUTH PROJECT

A Guide to Research
and Evaluation with
Sexually Exploited Youth



ROBERT J. JONES
Urban Research and
Outreach-Engagement Center

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This report was prepared by the UROC research team and the YMCA of the Greater Twin Cities. Youth from two youth advisory boards and a life-coaching young adult program contributed to and reviewed the content.

Lauren Martin (PhD), Principal Investigator
Christina Melander, UROC Research Fellow
Jenny Miller, Program Executive, YMCA of the Greater Twin Cities
Montana Filoteo, UROC Research Assistant
Sara Gomoll, UROC Research Assistant
Alex Subbaraman, UROC Research Assistant

YMCA of the Greater Twin Cities Foster Care Youth Advisory Board
YMCA of the Greater Twin Cities Juvenile Justice Youth Advisory Board
Youth from the “Enough” Program of the YMCA of the Greater Twin Cities

This guide is part of the No Wrong Door Youth Project, a needs assessment for the Hennepin County No Wrong Door Initiative. Here we provide lessons learned on engaging youth in research and evaluation. It is one of four deliverables due to Hennepin County as part of their grant to fund this needs assessment.

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Corresponding author:

Lauren Martin, Associate Professor, University of Minnesota, School of Nursing, mart2114@umn.edu

Introduction

Programs, policies and systems designed to prevent or intervene in commercial sexual exploitation should be held accountable to effectively work with the populations that they seek to serve. This means working toward shared outcomes that improve lives, reduce harm, promote equity and respect, and meet the stated needs and goals of the young people themselves. This is best achieved when youth who have experienced sexual exploitation or trafficking help shape the programs, policy and systems that are supposed to help them. Youth can be engaged through participatory research and evaluation. Engagement of sexually exploited youth and their perspectives requires careful planning and a trauma-informed approach to make sure that participants are valued, respected and safe.

This guide provides insights, lessons and recommendations on how to effectively engage young people in participatory research and evaluation. Information is based on what we learned from the No Wrong Door Youth Project, as well as wisdom from other projects we have done over the years. The No Wrong Door Youth Project was a needs assessment conducted with young people, non-profit agencies and County staff with the goal of improving Hennepin County's service delivery model for sexually exploited youth. This was a deeply collaborative and co-constructed project. This guide was produced in partnership with young people at the YMCA of the Greater Twin Cities. We also honor and highlight projects and people who taught and helped us.

Our Work with Youth

This guide grew out of a partnership between our research team, young people who helped create this project, social service agencies and County staff. Here we focus on what the young people and our experience has taught us. We also draw on lessons from past participatory projects with youth that our team has conducted as well as the literature on youth participatory action research (YPAR) and youth engagement.

The project is part of the Sex Trading, Trafficking and Community Wellbeing Initiative at the Robert J. Jones Urban Research Outreach-Engagement Center, led by Dr. Lauren Martin. Our team is comprised of people with a background in social work, public policy, and diverse experiences doing direct services with marginalized groups. All research staff are trained for research protocols in ways that are mindful of complex trauma, positive youth development, action research and systemic oppression.

No Wrong Door Youth Project: Methods and Strategies

This project was a needs assessment of the Hennepin County No Wrong Door Initiative, which is the county's protocols and practices to identify, coordinate and provide supportive services for sexually exploited youth. The Hennepin County No Wrong Door Initiative works in partnership and alongside a social service environment for sexually exploited youth managed by the Minnesota Department of Health called Safe Harbor.

This project sought to learn about barriers to accessing services for sexually exploited youth in Hennepin County, youth and systems strengths, and to make recommendations about how to improve services and supports. To do this, we used a **participatory action research** (PAR) approach with young people and adults. This approach focuses on collaborative ways of creating empirical knowledge in partnership with communities most affected by a particular social issue. The end goal of a PAR project is to catalyze organizational change, public policy, or social change, broadly speaking.

In December 2018 we convened an Action Research Team (AR team) to help guide and co-design the research protocols. The AR team consisted of non-profit youth providers, culturally-specific non-profit staff, and county front-line workers. The AR team provided guidance and feedback throughout the project on research protocols, interpretation of preliminary findings, and outreach and engagement with youth. Starting in January 2019 and throughout the project, our team met with several youth advisory boards sponsored through the YMCA of the Greater Twin Cities and The Link. Many of these youth have lived experience with sexual exploitation and County systems, and are well-placed as experts to guide this project. These youth guided the data collection methodology, including format for data collection, questions and wording, recruitment material and outreach locations. All youth were paid hourly for their participation as part of these advisory groups, and we compensated them an additional \$10 per meeting.

This project used purposeful sampling and a sequential design to explore barriers, needs, assets and recommendations for the Hennepin County No Wrong Door Initiative. The first phase of this project consisted of interviews with 30 systems professionals who work inside this service ecosystem. This included front line workers who work directly with sexually exploited youth, as well as supervisors and program managers.

Phase two consisted of individual and group interviews and an online anonymous survey with youth between ages 16 and 24 who have either lived or received services in Hennepin County, and who self-identify as being knowledgeable about “the life.”^{1 2} The project created multiple ways for youth to contribute their perspectives, and paid youth to do outreach whenever they were interested and available. Our team worked with youth service providers for referrals and to schedule interviews in safe, comfortable and accessible locations.

Recruitment materials and the consent form asked if youth were “knowledgeable about *the life*” and included definitions about sexual exploitation and trafficking. We did not ask youth to disclose their survivor-status or lived experience with selling/trading sex as a precondition for participating. This reduced the effect of youth being “called out” or feeling stigmatized for participating. In addition, interview questions and surveys were designed not to probe into youth’s personal histories, but rather ask their perspectives as experts. Interviews had participatory and creative note-taking with youth; for example, youth could create their own landscape map of services or draw out trajectories. Snacks were offered in the majority of interviews. Youth were compensated with a \$20 gift card for an interview and \$10 for an online survey. Finally, our team compiled a list of community resources in Hennepin County for a variety of youth’s needs and offered these voluntarily at the end of interviews.

We conducted in-person individual and group interviews with 41 youth and 33 youth completed the survey. Youth could participate in both an interview and an online survey. Because the online survey was anonymous, we did not track if survey respondents had also completed an interview.

This guide is a reflection about the process of developing our research methods and approach. The full report for the No Wrong Door Youth Project contains additional information about methodology, who participated and the project’s findings.

¹ “The life” is a phrase widely used by youth involved in selling or trading sex, including those who are being trafficked. Sexual exploitation of minors occurs whenever a minor is involved in trading sex or sexual contact for anything of value. Sex trafficking occurs when a third-party is involved in facilitating or profiting from the minor’s commercial sexual activity, or when a third-party uses force, fraud, or coercion with an adult’s involvement in commercial sex.

² While the Hennepin County No Wrong Door Initiative is focused on youth up to age 18, our team recognized that there are specific hurdles to obtaining parental consent for minors within this population - many of whom are wards of the state, in foster care, in shelter, or experiencing housing instability. Because of this, we sought perspectives from youth ages 16-24.

Ethical Considerations and Approach

There are several foundational ethical considerations in doing research and program evaluation with youth who have experienced sexual exploitation and trafficking. The nature of sexual exploitation and trafficking is hidden and stigmatized, making it challenging to openly discuss. Sexual exploitation is also interwoven with complex trauma, racism, gender inequality, poverty and other forms of oppression and lived realities. This type of project requires sensitivity and deep knowledge around and embedding of trauma-informed approaches throughout. Below we describe topics for ethical approaches to research and evaluation practice with sexually exploited youth. These include: trauma-informed; shame-free and judgement-free; privacy, disclosure and trust; and age and developmentally-appropriate.

Trauma-Informed

Youth who have experienced sexual exploitation or trafficking are also trauma survivors; not solely from the experience of sexual exploitation, but because many of these youth have prior and on-going traumatization. Youth with these experiences may already be involved in county systems, such as through child protection, foster care, or the juvenile justice system. Youth are often still vulnerable to sexual exploitation or trafficking, experiencing housing instability, or other types of unsafe situations where their basic needs are not being met. A trauma-informed approach means having the requisite knowledge around the impacts of trauma on the brain, development, and building a system to help support young people navigate this development process.

Research should take a *do no harm* approach. One potential harm to participating in research for trauma survivors is the potential for retriggering traumatic experiences. Probing questions about sensitive, painful experiences can precipitate retriggering these emotions. Every research project is different, and there can be projects that seek to understand youth's experiences of trauma in ways that reduce the risk for retraumatization. However, we believe that while youth are still at-risk, vulnerable, or otherwise still in the process of healing from trauma, that these probing questions are inappropriate. Youth can still speak as experts about systems and services without recounting what they have gone through. Per standard informed consent processes, youth should be informed about the types of questions and encouraged to only share what they want to share.

This approach also prioritizes and centers youth *choice* for participation in the project: from which format to use (survey or in-person interview), to location and time of interview, to which questions they'd like to engage with, and if to participate at all. There are many aspects of an interview process that can embody choice for youth participants. The voluntary nature of the questions should be emphasized.

Shame-Free and Judgement-Free

Because of "victim-blaming" language and culture, involvement in selling or trading sex is often associated with negative, shameful or stigmatizing connotations. Youth may feel embarrassed or judged for being associated with commercial sex, blaming themselves for their circumstances, and they may be working through their own understanding of these experiences. Youth may use terms like survival sex, hustling, the game, the life, sex work and more to describe selling or trading sex. Youth may or may not identify as a victim or survivor. Additionally, there is still a lack of clarity and understanding about what is sex trafficking. Research processes should avoid language that associates an identity category with the activity or behavior of transactional sex. Youth can be engaged in defining terms they prefer and are most familiar with. The terms one youth uses may be inaccurate or offensive to another youth, so it is important to give every youth the option to identify and define terms for themselves. Using person-centered

language is preferred; for example, youth who have experienced sexual exploitation, or youth who are involved in selling/trading sex.

Youth may also disclose personal experiences, such as homelessness, drug use, selling sex, sexual assault, sexual partners, trafficking, and more. It is imperative that researchers are trained to validate youth's experiences and react in non-judgmental ways.

Anti-Oppression

Research indicates that a disproportionate number of youth of color, indigenous youth and LGBTQ youth are victims of sexual exploitation and trafficking. This issue often sits at the heart of the intersection between racism, poverty, gender inequality, other forms of oppression, and adverse childhood experiences. Ethical research on this topic therefore must take an anti-oppression and anti-racist approach. In practice this means critiquing and naming the ways in which white supremacy and other forms of oppression have negatively impacted our society, including research, social service systems and criminal justice.

There are numerous ways that research and evaluation practice can work towards anti-oppression, such as hiring people of color and indigenous people, hiring people with lived experience in transactional sex when possible, creating opportunities for youth to lead, and doing intersectional data analyses to examine how race, gender, class, disability, and more impact the data.

Privacy, Disclosure and Trust

There are a number of logistical and ethical challenges associated with asking youth to self-identify and disclose their victim/survivor status as a precondition for participating in research. There are many youth who have experiences selling/trading sex or being trafficked that may not use or be familiar with the terms "victim of sexual exploitation or trafficking." From a research methods perspective, using terminology for inclusion criteria that a portion of your target population are not familiar with has the potential to exclude a large number of potentially eligible individuals, thus limiting the data. There is also the ethical hurdle of asking youth to disclose an experience that may be associated with trauma, shame or stigma to a researcher who may be a stranger to them. Many youth, naturally, would not feel comfortable with this disclosure. In essence, it may not be necessary (and for some, harmful) to ask youth to disclose sexual exploitation or trafficking as a precondition for participating.

Our team resolved this conflict through two ways. First, we partnered with youth service providers to ask for client referrals for youth who had lived experience. This referral process by-passed the research team asking youth to self-identify or disclose. Second, we used soft language in the recruitment materials that did not immediately call-out potential participants as having lived experience, but limited those without lived experience from participating. Our recruitment tag-line and inclusion criteria said, "Are you knowledgeable about *the life*?" Below that on our flyers we included, "You might call it the game, hustling, survival sex, trading sex for basic needs, prostitution, sex work, sexual exploitation, or sex trafficking."

Age and Developmentally Appropriate

Research has demonstrated that trauma experienced during adolescence can slow the emotional development of youth, among other long-term health impacts. Someone experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may have limited executive functioning. Therefore, it is imperative that research and evaluation practice with sexually exploited youth use age and developmentally appropriate language

and terminology. Researchers should use non-technical language whenever possible, and define necessary technical terms in an accessible manner.

Many youth do not identify as “victims of sexual exploitation.” In our research process, we defined sexual exploitation and sex trafficking using lay terms (i.e. not legal terms). We then asked youth which terms or words they were most familiar with for selling and trading sex. We received feedback from youth that these definitions were helpful for them.

Our Guide for Researchers and Evaluators

We believe this information is important for Hennepin County and others doing research and evaluation with sexually exploited youth. Here we share our top lessons learned from youth as a how-to guide.

Reduce barriers and center comfort and accessibility.

Host meetings and interviews in spaces where youth are already gathering, feel safe, and are accessible. Spend the time going to where youth are. Ensure that these spaces are low-barrier; for example, near public transit or provide rides. Allow parenting youth to bring their children. Bring snacks and food whenever possible.

Provide multiple ways for youth to contribute and participate. Emphasize ongoing, informed consent.

Provide multiple opportunities for youth to participate in co-designing the research protocols as well as choice in when, how and where to participate. Use ongoing, informed consent to emphasize choice and agency in contributing and participating.

Recognize youth as experts: compensate them.

Compensate youth for their time as research co-contributors and participants.

Work with trusted adults through partnership.

Build authentic partnership with adult professionals who have trusted relationships with youth. Always allow an advocate or supportive adult to be present in an interview if the participant requests it.

Research protocols and youth engagement should be age and developmentally-appropriate.

Use language and terms that youth understand, taking age, development, disability, and literacy into account. Avoid stigmatizing language around trading or selling sex; at the same time, be clear about definitions of sexual exploitation and trafficking. Follow an interview with the terms that youth know and are familiar with.

Be creative with data collection.

Provide a variety of ways for youth to share through diverse data collection methods. Include arts and crafts into the data collection process. Let youth explore diagramming or drawing their ideas. Let youth be their own note-taker if they want to.

Be authentic and non-judgmental.

Bring your whole self to working with youth. If your heart isn't in the work, youth will know. Youth deserve to work with professionals who care about them and who do not judge them or their lived experiences.

Offer resources to youth.

Provide information about resources to youth on a voluntary and non-judgmental basis. You might say, "Maybe you have a friend that could benefit from these," or "This could be helpful for safety planning in the future."

Do not ask youth to disclose their survivor-identity or their personal experiences.

Use soft opt-in language that allows youth to decide if they want to participate in the project without feeling "called out" or being forced to disclose by participating. Researchers should not ask youth to recount or tell their personal experiences as this could be retraumatizing for youth. They can speak as experts about systems without having to share their story. At the same time, never shame a youth who decides to share a personal experience.

Be honest about harms experienced through systems-involvement.

While police, juvenile probation officers, child protection and foster care provide vital resources for youth and families, some youth have trauma associated with these experiences. Acknowledge that harm has been done and validate negative experiences.