

**Youth Participatory Action Research:  
Creating a Marketing Intervention for the Prevention of Sexual  
Exploitation among Youth Populations at High Risk for Trafficking**

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## Introduction

Five members of The Link's Survivor Advisory Committee and two researchers from the University of Minnesota were tasked with the challenge to create a research project that would inform a marketing campaign targeted towards the prevention and intervention of commercial sexual exploitation of youth who have had experiences that make them at-risk for being trafficked, such as runaway youth, youth experiencing homelessness or systems involved youth.

This project is a Youth Participatory Action Research undertaking whereby researchers through UROC at the University of Minnesota were partnered with youth community researchers who have personal expertise as survivors of commercial sexual exploitation creating our research team. Our research team identified the main research question as What do youth at-risk of sexual exploitation need to be empowered? Through a collaborative, equitable, and iterative process, the youth researchers developed a research protocol to explore the question. In discussing the problem of commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) as experienced by youth during the process of articulating and defining our research question, the youth researchers identified three key aspects that contribute to vulnerability and understanding CSE requiring further exploration:

1. **Language matters:** Youth use different language than adults; the youth researchers involved in this process had extensive personal experience and training in CSE and had the unique ability to translate between the language used by social workers, legislators and police and language used by youth on the street. We identified a need to explore more fully what language youth use to talk about CSE as that pertains to creating effective marketing.
2. **Knowledge of resources:** We feel like youth need to know what their resources are to be less vulnerable. Likewise, to exit the lifestyle and stay out of the lifestyle, resources are important. Resources are crucial at all parts of the experience: as part of prevention, as intervention, and during recovery. We wanted to know what resources youth knew about and if there were types of resources youth generally didn't know.
3. **What Manipulation looks like:** Lastly, we determined manipulation as a key component of CSE requiring further exploration. To avoid being exploited and to manage their own vulnerability, youth need the skills to spot when someone is manipulating them, including manipulation from friends, family, and romantic partners. For this reason, we wanted to explore how youth identified manipulation.

To create effective marketing that promotes prevention and early intervention and explores what youth need to be empowered, we decided to focus on understanding manipulation, identifying resources, and connecting with youth language about CSE from the perspective of vulnerable young adults. In addition to these specific concepts, we also wanted to give all young people participating in our research opportunities to

generally give their input on what youth need to be empowered and what would prevent CSE in the community.

## Our Manifesto

Early on in the process we decided to write a manifesto to help us articulate who we are, what we collectively believe about ourselves, each other and CSE, and what we are doing with this project. This manifesto was written by one of the youth researchers.

*We are survivors striving to thrive. We are professionals. We are somebody's sisters and brothers. Some of us are mothers. We are artists. We are advocates. We are voices that were silenced but now we speak. We are researchers. We are a team. A team that believes that vulnerability is a big part of sexual exploitation and that you can't address sexual exploitation without addressing other oppressions along lines of poverty, gender orientation, mental illness, racism, generation curses, single parenting, homelessness, and drug addiction. We believe these systemic oppressions all tie into why a person might be vulnerable enough to get pulled into the sex trade lifestyle. We believe that coercion is real and should be taken seriously. We believe that if you are given a choice and on both hands the choice is hardships there is really no choice at all. We believe that to be empowered you need to know your resources because to know your resources is to be less vulnerable.*

*We believe that you need to know what a positive friendship or relationship looks like so that you won't be a victim of coercion. We believe that if you know the problem you can address it and fix it. We believe that youth are experts in their own experiences so we let them lead. We also encourage other organizations to do the same because we believe that success is impossible without youth leadership. We believe that the world changes one person at a time and if you want change you have start with yourself.*

## YPAR Process

The Link selected five youth members of The Link's Survivor Advisory Committee for this project based on their level of experience, length of time working with The Link, skills and ability to commit to the project. The Link provided these youth researchers (as well as all youth survivors we work with) safe emergency shelter and/or housing, transportation, mobile case management, crisis support, emotional support, debriefing and support with questions about the research project, basic needs supplies, parenting support, mental health therapy, chemical dependency counseling, assistance with furthering their education and employment and leadership development skills. All young people deserve these things and need them in place in order to be able to participate effectively in a project such as a Youth Participatory Action Research Project.

Our full research team met two times a week over the course of four months (mid July to early November) to complete this project. Youth researchers were paid to work at

maximum 20 hours a week and met with University staff two days a week for 8 hours in total each week. During the first month youth were trained in on basic research methods (types of data collection, qualitative versus quantitative, population sample, and biases), led through exercises to explore different ways of thinking about a problem, and explored examples of traditional research, YPAR, and creative data collection methods. Youth were given the opportunity to independently try out three different methods of data collection (photovoice, map making, and survey) during this phase. Once a clear research question was identified and methods were determined, youth received additional training on question writing, purpose statements, consent processes, focus group facilitation, ethics, and IRB processes, as the need arose. Throughout the process, youth were encouraged to do personal reflection as well as participate in group reflection processes. For a detailed description of our process, see *Appendix A: YPAR Process and Resources Used*.

## Methods

The youth researchers planned a mixed-methods approach incorporating focus group discussions, photovoice reflections, and a survey with their peer population.

### **Survey: Identifying Language and Resources (Key Aspects 1 & 2)**

A brief survey identifying language used by youth to identify roles in sexual exploitation, suggestions of best resources, and suggestions for intervention was distributed to youth under age 24. Our intended sample was highly at-risk or already sexually exploited youth under age 24 currently in the Twin Cities metro area including both youth who were and were not involved in services. Surveys were collected using a combination of non-random sampling methodologies including convenience and purposive sampling strategies. 45 surveys were collected in total via three similar sampling methodologies. The majority of responses were collected by youth researchers ( $n=20$ ) conducting peer-to-peer purposive outreach to their networks of people known to have experience in the lifestyle. These respondents represented a range of engagement with survival sex and the life, from active engagement to formerly involved but currently uninvolved, as well as youth not necessarily currently seeking services. Additionally, Daniela Chavez, The Link's Aftercare and Outreach Coordinator was especially helpful with regards to survey outreach. One component of her role is to engage street engaged youth and thus the young people she encountered in the course of her normal responsibilities were *de facto* eligible to take the survey. By employing this convenience sampling strategy, she collected a significant number of responses ( $n=15$ ).

The other methodology employed leveraged the network of the executive director of the youth service agency hosting the project. The ED reached out to her known network of other youth service organizations via email and provided a digital link to the online survey. Purposive sampling leveraging executive leadership staff as gatekeepers garnered fewer surveys ( $n=10$ ) but was critical in obtaining broader geographic and cultural representation among the sample respondents that was otherwise inaccessible to

the youth researchers themselves. Specifically, executive outreach garnered responses from young Native American girls as well as young girls in the east side of St. Paul.

Survey respondents received a \$10 gift card to a large retail store for their participation. Youth researchers were able to provide the incentive immediately with peer outreach. Those respondents from other organizations were delivered their incentives by the project staff. See attachment B for full survey language.

### **Focus Groups: Recognizing Manipulation (Key Aspect 3)**

Five focus groups exploring how youth identify manipulation in relationships with friends, family, and sexual/romantic partners as well as what youth needed to know to be empowered were conducted at nonprofit partnering agencies serving at-risk or sexually exploited youth in the Twin Cities metro area including Passageways Emergency Shelter and Housing Program (The Link), YouthLink, Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center (MIWRC) and Brittany's Place. Due to a high level of youth interest, two focus groups were conducted at YouthLink. One pilot and one practice focus group was conducted prior: the first led by UMN research staff with youth researchers in the role of participants and the second led by youth researchers with additional university staff as participants. The five data collecting focus groups were led by youth researchers in partnership with UMN research staff; staff from the hosting organization were present during the focus groups to provide emotional support and follow up resources to participants as needed. Any individual receiving services from the partnering agency was eligible to participate, ages up to 24. Participants were compensated with a \$15 gift card and food was provided. Overall, 31 youth participated in the focus groups, ranging in ages from 12 to 24. See attachment C for full focus group protocol.

Focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. The first round of coding separated content by main question being addressed (healthy relationship, manipulation, suggestions for action). Main ideas were then highlighted in all transcripts and content was sorted into emergent themes. See attachment D for examples.

### **Photovoice by Core Research Team: Youth Empowerment**

The core research team consisting of five youth researchers each engaged in a personal photovoice project where they collected and took photographs that communicated to them messages of empowerment or disempowerment. With each photo they wrote a short explanation of what the photo signified or meant to them and how it related to our research question. Three of the youth researchers shared their photovoice projects to the entire team for an extended discussion. While this information was not separately analyzed, this process informed our work throughout and influenced our project designs, data analysis, and final recommendations.

### **IRB Process**

This project received IRB approval from the University of Minnesota.

## Key Findings

### Surveys: Identifying Resources, Language Used, and Suggestions for Prevention

#### *Where would you recommend a friend to find resources?*

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Youth seem to have a relatively good grasp on the housing services available, with particular attention to those that are best designed to serve their needs; the majority of respondents were able to name specific organizations that serve youth population. Likewise, the majority of respondents were able to identify a specific basic needs service supplier by name. Surprisingly, the second highest type of response (n=10) to the question of where would you recommend a friend to get basic needs was the suggestion of an informal support such as friends, family, or ‘my house’. This highlights the strength of youth to youth relationships and willingness to help each other.

While the most common response for suggestions for general health and mental health supports was also specific agencies, there was a much high number of general responses, such as ‘a clinic’. This may indicate that people are more likely to generally know they should visit ‘a clinic’ but might be less likely to know of a specific clinic. Similarly, for those who did name a specific health resource by name, they were most likely to suggest a wrap around service such as a drop in center, which may offer health resources but is not primarily a health-focused service. This could indicate that the wrap-around model is a successful way to bring health services to this population, as respondents knew those organizations also offered health services; conversely this may indicate that youth are less aware of organizations uniquely providing health services. Additionally, cultural specificity was mentioned as a characteristic of recommended health services, which may indicate that seeking health needs is unique (as compared to housing and basic needs) in the importance of services being culturally sensitive. Another characteristic mentioned repeatedly was health services being free or available without insurance. Only half of the responses included a specific mental health resource, indicating that youth are not well aware of specific resources to meet their mental health needs. The most common single response for a mental health resource was for a ‘hospital’ which may indicate that youth think of accessing mental health support most commonly in an emergency scenario, which may also indicate a lack of knowledge of the best way to meet their mental health needs.

#### *What language is used most commonly by youth to describe various aspects of being in the life?*

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Prostitute/Prostitution were by far the most common words used to describe selling sex. We were surprised by how frequently prostitute/prostitution was used. Our team feels like this word is highly loaded and is an insensitive word, however just because it is commonly used by young people does not necessarily mean it’s not insensitive or derogatory. Respondents used both the word Prostitute and Prostitution which made us wonder if there was a distinction made between the two to separate the person from the act. Perhaps “prostitution” might be a compromise for social service providers to use

more youth colloquialisms while also maintaining person-first language, i.e. a person engaged in prostitution.

Generally, the diversity of words used to describe police were derogatory in nature or conveyed mistrust. However, the most common single word used was ‘cops’ which has a more neutral connotation.

Only 57% of respondents conveyed that they had a clear understanding of the term sexual exploitation (n=25); within that, even less included an element of force or coercion in their definition (n=17). This indicates that sexual exploitation is probably not the most effective term to use to connect with youth who are engaging in prostitution.

### *What advice would you give and what do youth need to avoid CSE?*

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There was a substantial response that the life is in fact something that should be avoided, and so youth should be actively discouraged and made aware of the potential for harm. For those responding with messages to avoid involvement in the life all together it was more common to encourage telling youth the negative realities, and much less common to encourage positive productive actions that might help youth avoid involvement in the first place. Surprisingly, harm reduction responses represent the second most frequent response and suggest an acceptance that engaging in the life is inevitable for some respondents.

The emphasis on what youth need to avoid being in the life was placed on building external supports (such as supportive people and supportive institutions such as resources, housing and schools.) When further divided by people based and institution based supports, the vast majority of suggestions were about building people based supports: supportive role models, parents, and friends. This emphasizes the highly relational perspective of this population.

### *How do youth access information?*

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Youth identified the internet as the single most common way they access information, followed by the ‘phone’, ‘friends’, and social media. It was challenging to disentangle *who/what* people accessed information from and *how* they accessed that information. For example, we can probably assume that youth use their phone to talk with their friends, or to access social media and the internet. Likewise, the people they are connecting with on social media are most likely their friends. Less common responses including gaining information from physical sources (papers, flyers, magazines) or from institutions (counselors, etc.). This highlights the importance of the peer to peer network among this population in sharing information and knowledge.

A detailed summary of the survey responses by question including respondent demographics can be found in the appendix.



## Focus Groups: Recognizing Manipulation

The focus groups explored what youth think a good friend looks like, how to recognize manipulation, and what can be done to support youth empowerment.

*What does a good friend look like?*

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Youth described good friends as people who were genuine, loyal, respectful and who help motivate you to do better. Additionally, in discussing what it felt like to have a good friend, they emphasized the need for other youth to trust their gut and their own instincts of feeling safe. Lastly, they highlighted that in relationships with a good friend, you still retain your personal control. Below is each of these themes in more detail and with examples.

- **Maintain your personal control**, including you can hang out with other people without someone calling all the time. Good friends let you have other friends and you're still in control of you.
- **Trust your gut; you feel safe.** You can trust your gut when it comes to knowing if a friend is good for you or not. This includes not feeling scared when you are with them, or feeling worried. You don't dread being with them.
- **Good friends are genuine and let you be genuine also.** Good friends can tell you when you're wrong and give you constructive criticism, yet you can be yourself around them and you can be real. They don't turn against you, compare you to others, and they are non-judgmental. You can also agree to disagree; you can be real in disagreement.

"I also think a good friend is someone you can be yourself around. Like you don't have to fake who you is to be they friend you don't have to act a certain type of way around that person because of the certain type of people they hang out with or a certain type of people they be with. I know everybody is different but I feel like when I'm around (...) I don't have to be preppy and stuff. I can be exactly who I am. When you can be free to be weird."

- **Good friends are loyal.** They support you when you are doing good but also when you're doing bad, they defend you, don't leave you when you're struggling and they forgive you.

"I need somebody that aint scary. That's gonna defend me."

- **Good friends respect you.** They don't call you names, put you down or insult you, they don't out your business to other people and they respect your decisions.

“But also somebody who respects your decision, who will support you and when you do do something wrong will speak up and try to show you a different way but not try to make you feel bad.”

- **Good friends motivate you to do better in life.** They want to see you succeed, they are positive themselves and good leaders, and they don't engage with you in the negative things.

“I think a real friend is somebody that pushes you to do better in life somebody that want to achieve something other than doing the same old kicking it. My kind of friend is a friend that wants to change in a positive way I want a friend that's a leader. Someone that stands out and is happy to stand out. I don't want a friend that's a class clown type of person. One of those chill laid back. I want somebody that's going to work. Somebody that supports me. If you aint gonna support me why you with me.”

#### *How do youth identify manipulation?*

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Youth gave examples of manipulation experienced through sexual/romantic partners, friends, and family relationships, although the majority of the conversation about manipulation was centered on sexual/romantic relationships.

#### *Tactics/Styles of Manipulation by sexual or romantic partners:*

- **Guilt-Tripping and Shame.** Partners use shame to make you feel bad about something you did previously, or they use guilt trips by telling you to ‘take one for the team’, and say if you loved me, you would do this.
- **Direct Tight Control.** Partners control your time and your money. They control what you do, how long you can be out, and you need to respond to them in a specific time frame (such as texting them back within a certain amount of time). They need to know where you are and who you are with. They take your money and your stuff including your clothes and your identification.
- **Obligation.** Partners say things such as ‘you owe me’, ‘you have to help take care of me’, or they make you feel like it's assumed that you will have sex because you're in a relationship. ‘You have to give me sex because you are dating me.’
- **Violence and Love going hand and hand.** We mistake violence against us as someone loving us in certain situations, like if he hits you it's because he's jealous. Or a partner will say that he loves you while at the same time be physically hurting you.
- **Isolation.** Partners can isolate you from friends and family, making you think that the only person you need is him, like it's just the two of you against the

world. An example of this is when your partner tries to make drama between you and your friends, or tells you that your family doesn't love you.

- **Put downs.** They are looking for insecurities in you; they point out your flaws and make you feel like no one else wants you.
- **“Do this, get this”.** They know there is something that you want or that you need and you can get it, but you need to first do whatever it is want you to do. Everything is transactional; everything is an exchange. “Team work makes the dream work”: it may feel like a team effort, that there are a lot of women working and one manager. For example, if I have \$500 and you have \$500 we can put it together and get a fancy car to drive in, nice places to stay. But it is an illusion because now really you don't even have your first \$500.
- **Trying to get something out of you.** If you look at your relationship and you realize that how he interacts with you is not about the relationship itself: they don't really want you as you, they want what you can get them or what you have.
- **“The American Dream”.** The American Dream for us is the same as the traditional American Dream with the nice family and the nice house, but we want that without the jobs- easy money, powerful, nice car, everybody wants what we have. Our life is their entertainment. The illusion of being part of the power couple, that everyone wants your life because you're with him and he's with you. You will be taken care of. The promise of more than what it really is.

*Manipulation through friends* was described predominately through isolation and the use of compliments.

- **Isolation.** Friends can force you to take sides, cause unnecessary drama or get jealous of you having other friends; all of this leads to isolation.
- **Compliments.** Friends can manipulate you by buttering you up and giving you false compliments; the slickness is manipulation.

“put in the position to where they compliment you they tell you, you so pretty Ima have your back no matter, you know I got you, you like my cousin... Trying to make it seem like it's a relationship there, friend relation, family relationship or they will buy you things then tell you you can get it on your own just because your pretty. Just telling you that you aint really gotta work much. It's not always about sexually doing something. They just want to pay you just for your time that's how I feel you can be manipulated too just by falling into the trap.”

*Manipulation through family* was described as obligation, misplaced family roles, and learned behaviors around what is normal.

- **Obligation.** Youth talked about how you were obligated to do things because it's your family. Family can say things like, you owe me and that you have to do this to help me out. Youth felt sometimes obligated to do what parents or family members tell you to do.

“Telling you they need something all the time because they know you gonna go out and get it for them cause you feel obligated cause we are family.”

- **Misplaced family roles.** Youth having to take the role of the parent including bringing money and food into the household or being put in the role of providing for young siblings and even the parents.

“I think there is when it comes to like family cause then its like intimately, its different you're going to want to please but family wise my mom manipulates me a lot to start putting more money in the house or do a lot of things other people don't want to do but I have to do and she say if I don't I can get out then I feel obligated. Feeling obligated is manipulation.”

- **Learned behavior.** Generations where a negative behavior (such as selling drugs/prostitution/sexual abuse) is passed down within the family and is experienced as normalized in the family.

*What do youth need to know to be empowered and what can we do about this?*

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**Build on the power of youth relationships through peer to peer support:**

- Older teens can have a more powerful effect than adults.
- Encourage youth to call each other out when they're doing things they shouldn't in a way that is nonjudgmental, honest, but still supportive.
- Encourage youth to tell each other when they think they are being manipulated or in a bad situation.
- Some youth don't care about other people; focus on youth who are willing to help other youth.
- Encourage youth to be a good friend to each other.
- “Each One Teach One”: build a network of youth who want to help other youth.
- Make space for youth to share their experiences of those who have been through it.
- Use social media or Facebook, and give people an opportunity to **SHOW** how manipulation works and share stories.

**Realize people need to experience things on their own.** Acknowledge that people may figure things out on their own time line. It may help to **SHOW** people others' experiences with real stories. Just telling people not to do it isn't enough.

**At some point, people get sick and tired of the life.** When that happens, they need to have positive people around them to help them support their decisions and they need to know how to access resources.

**Use Creative ways to get your message across.** Share real life stories, use poetry, spoken word, music/songwriting and other creative ways to relate with youth.

**Teach youth on what a good romantic relationship looks like.**

- Just because you're in a dating relationship doesn't mean you have to have sex.
- Be suspicious of relationships with a big age difference (ie. 15 year old girl and a 20 year old guy).

**Do you. Live for you.**

- Support youth's self esteem and sense of self; encourage youth to define themselves, don't let someone else define you.
- Be proud of yourself; do things that make you feel proud.
- Give self affirmations.
- Surround yourself with positive people and good role models who make you feel good about yourself.
- Find/highlight positive adults to talk to when there is a problem.
- Share positive stories of people who have gone through it..

**Tell the truth: use real stories.**

- Break down the myth told in music videos or in glamorous lives where there are no negative consequences for people.
- Show people real life stories of what this life is like.

**More youth resources.**

- We need more youth jobs, youth shelters.
- Encourage youth to pursue education.

**In addition to teaching youth to recognize the themes about manipulation previously mentioned, youth also suggested teaching other youth to look for the following clues of manipulation:**

- Trust your gut.
- Notice when you and your friends stop being shocked or surprised by acts of violence.
- Notice who is controlling your money or using your money and who is actually earning the money.
- Notice when in a relationship your feelings and what you want stops mattering to the other person.
- Notice when someone is trying to talk you into something; when it's repetitious. If it's something you actually want to do, you don't need to be talked into it and you don't need a reward.
- Notice when you are exchanging something to get something else.
- Notice when you are making excuses for someone about their actions that are hurting you.

## Discussion

We were generally not surprised by the examples of manipulation that youth brought up. Most of these themes reflect the ideas that The Link includes in CSEC 101 training; while it's not surprising, it is good to get additional evidence that what we share in the CSEC 101 training on manipulation is true for the youth in this area. Guilt tripping/shame, the 'American Dream', and the use of Put-Downs is not currently in the CSEC 101 training under Pimp Tactics, but could be included.

We were however excited by how both the survey results and the focus groups supported the idea of building the capacity of youth to help other youth. One member of our research team advocates for 'Each One Teach One'. The idea is that many of the youth involved in the life became really good at recruiting other people to get involved in the life; they have skills at reading people and persuading people. The same skills can now be used to help recruit youth out of the life. If we give youth the skills and encouragement to reach out to their peers proactively by recognizing manipulation and supporting healthy relationships that will help with prevention, and that same strength of youth to youth connection can also help others currently involved exit the life.

Exploring manipulation was very important to us. To be able to prevent or intervene, you need to understand how your mind is being altered. Manipulation is THE KEY that keeps people in the life without the guerrilla pimp that people portray in the movies. So, it is crucial that people understand the tactics being used by exploiters so they can see it in their friends and in their own life. There is an opportunity to help teach youth what a good friend looks like, so people know how to recognize when they have a good friend and also support them in being a good friend to others. Relationships can help us in prevention and exiting, but they also are the thing that leads to exploitation. Watch out for the loyalty; understand that loyalty should be to you as a friend, not as a 'ride or die', not loyalty to the street life or the dream but loyalty to you as a person.

## Recommendations

The research team recommends that marketing message show what a good relationship looks like with a partner or just a friendship. We recommend that messages show how to recognize manipulation within the family, friendships, and relationships using the suggestions we gave above. Efforts should be taken to encourage youth to empower other youth to take action in their lives. We recommend focusing on survivor leadership such as people sharing their stories including the success stories and the struggle of being in the life style: show what it takes to get out of the life style and show the positive person they have become. Encourage survivor mentorship. Someone who has been through it and is ready to support exiting youth who are sick of being in the lifestyle but need to be shown a better way out. We also recommend that messages show the real nitty gritty of the lifestyle like the mental effects it can have on you in the long term, the drug abuse, what it really looks like to go in the room with a trick/client, and ways that being involved in the lifestyle can affect you. We recommend messages that use language that both the population we are trying to reach can comprehend and also law enforcement and service providers will understand. For example, instead of using

prostitute because it's derogatory or using sexual exploitation because it's a term that most youth who have not received services don't understand, use words that describe the action like being paid for sex or a person engaged in prostitution because all sides will understand what that means.

*Help youth recognize the tactics of manipulation and encourage them to positively support their friends.*

Most importantly, we recommend using messages to help youth recognize when they are being manipulated by sharing the specific tactics used by friends, family members and sexual/romantic partners. While manipulation does happen by friends and family members, we suggest focusing on manipulation that happens by romantic and sexual partners as that was the most common type of manipulation discussed in our focus groups. Messaging should be geared towards both helping youth see when they are being manipulated but also when it is happening to their friends and family. Efforts should be taken to mobilize youth as informal peer outreach workers, encourage youth to talk to their friends when they see manipulation happening. Youth connect best with other youth: share real stories of the experiences of youth being in the life and the real experience of being manipulated, but also share real youth stories about youth loving themselves, being positive friends, and trusting their gut. Highlight the ability youth have to positively support each other as well as to love and trust themselves. Use messages and tools that build on real stories and real youth- social media campaigns, videos, spoken word or other creative medias. Help people realize these warning signs before they're in it too deep. Help youth recognize these warning signs happening to their friends and give them tools to intervene. We all need to recognize manipulation as the gateway, the shackles, the cuffs and the chains. It is all throughout sexual exploitation; it happens at the beginning but it is also the tool that keeps people trapped. We need to expose the tactics used to manipulate us and our peers.

*Use counter narratives about what a good romantic/sexual relationships looks like to expose the lies that support Commercial Sexual Exploitation.*

Below are some of the themes from manipulation we heard and examples of counter messages to help refute those ideas.

**Guilt tripping and Shame:** Your partner should never make you hate yourself. If you're with someone and it's right, deep down it should make you feel good. If it's not, that's a red flag.

**Obligation:** Teach people their rights and power within dating relationships. Just because you're dating someone doesn't mean you have to have sex. Sex isn't assumed just because you agreed to be with someone.

**Violence and Love going hand and hand in:** Create messages that separate violence and love. There should be no violence in love.

**Do this/get this.** Freak me but don't want to be with me? I don't want to be an option, I want to be the choice. Does this guy really respect me and want to be with me as a person?

*Increase youth awareness of specific resources that can support them.*

Youth learn about resources through other youth, social media, and the internet; use these avenues to spread the word about specific resources. Advertise the specific resources that youth recommended.

*Using the phrase sexual exploitation doesn't connect with youth, but prostitution does.*

Messaging should include words that make sense to youth; however the word prostitute contributes to stigma and has a negative connotation. We recommend using phrases like a person involved in prostitution or being paid for sex, which has a more neutral connotation and describes an action, not a person. While it's important to recognize that sexual exploitation often involves manipulation and violence, youth don't necessary recognize themselves as having been manipulated, so the first step is to use neutral terms and help them recognize the influence of manipulation on their lives.

## Limitations

The focus group sample was limited to youth already involved in services and included only female identifying youth. Additionally our sample did not include enough variety with respect to location as we only talked with youth currently in the metro area. While our focus groups did include a range of ages, we noticed the older youth did most of the talking in groups. The sensitiveness of the topic also made people reluctant to open up and talk really freely about it. Some of the questions didn't work or were not understood.

## Opportunities for Further Research

Youth identified the following ideas as areas for future research:

- Focus groups with adults in the community and other groups about what they see as their role in this issue and what they could do to take action.
- Additional emphasis on male youth about the role they play in relationships and how they feel about manipulation, as only female identifying youth participated in our focus groups.
- Research with pimps and recruiters on what they look for in a person they are targeting, and what led them to that lifestyle, as often they are also victims and we think this area needs to be further explored.



## One Youth's Reflections

It surprised us that not too many actually knew what sexually exploitation means, and that a lot of people thought that in order to be involved in the life style you had to be a certain ethnicity or lived in a certain area when in all actuality sexual exploitation does not discriminate. It also surprised us how many people are out there fighting, advocating to make a better way for youth. While we have a long way to go, we are headed the right way. The fact that we even have a committee where the main focus is on CSEC is beautiful and lets the world know that it's wrong, and the victims are not bad or dirty people, and are actually trying to give them their life back.

Over the whole project it was very emotional for us; we had to be faced with a lot of our own demons and also be strong enough to help the young people we encountered acknowledge their own. For some, this project was very life changing and something we will never forget. We learned so much during this project, about the lifestyle – like about victims that come from different backgrounds and different gender orientations, and what they experienced was a lot of the same. We learned how the community views CSEC and how other youth do too.

If we had to go back and change anything to be honest we wouldn't change much of anything. We learned from everything. What we did was research and the beauty in that is its always evolving. We had a very small piece in such a big problem and we put a lot of ourselves into this.

## Role of The Link & University Research Staff

In undertaking a YPAR project with youth survivors of sexual exploitation, the role of the Link is critical. The Link serves as the base support organization for which the youth researchers could fall back on; there was a history of relationship, trust, and mutual respect. Researchers from the university were able to build relationships more quickly with the young people because the Link facilitated that connection. In turn, throughout the project, if the youth researchers needed additional support, they could access a number of services and relationships through the Link. The Link provided emergency shelter, housing, crisis intervention assistance and support, connections to legal services, basic needs supplies, emotional support, positive youth development activities, transportation, and assistance with education and additional employment. Participating in the YPAR project was just one facet of the young people's lives: while undertaking this project they were also balancing parenthood, recovery, housing instability, enrolling in school, and medical issues. The Link staff and services supported youth researchers in many ways to be successful in their roles on this project.

Research staff on this project also come from a unique background. The senior researcher on this project has extensive experience both in participatory community work as well as content expertise in commercial sexual exploitation. Direct research staff both had additional research experience and came from a social work and youth work background, familiar with positive youth development practices, strength based work, and trauma informed work with adolescents. This perspective allowed direct research

staff to train youth in research practices as well as implement a quality youth-adult partnership project.