

Impacts of the Commercial Sex Industry on Black and African American Communities in Washington

Pursuant to Chapter 475, Laws of 2023 (SB 5187)

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Report to the Legislature

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Acknowledgments

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Executive summary

Overview

At the Legislature's request, the Department of Commerce's Office of Crime Victims' Advocacy (OCVA) contracted with Our Sisters' House, a Black-women-led community organization that has provided outreach, risk assessments, advocacy, resources, basic needs and financial support to Black and African American interpersonal violence victims and survivors since 1995. Our Sisters' House studied the ways in which female-identifying Black and African-American Washingtonians are impacted by the commercial sex industry.

The commercial sex industry includes various types of work in which individuals engage in sexual activities or perform sexually explicit acts in exchange for money, goods, or other forms of compensation, like providing basic survival necessities. This industry spans a broad spectrum, including but not limited to: sex-trafficking, prostitution, exotic dancing/stripping, pornography, and a host of online sexual conduct such as live camming¹, video streaming, or explicit photos.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CSE AND CSI?

CSE stands for commercial sexual exploitation. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act establishes that any minor is legally considered sexually exploited if they engage in any sex act on account of being given anything of value. Since minors involved in commercial sex are legally considered victims of exploitation, we reference them as CSE-impacted throughout this report.

CSI stands for commercial sex industry. Some adults who engage in the commercial sex industry identify as consenting participants, some as sex-trafficking victims/survivors, and others as commercially sexually exploited. To be as inclusive as possible with adults' varying identities, this report uses CSI to refer to commercial sex industry-impacted adults.

Per the legislative mandate, this study reviews the impacts of the commercial sex industry on Black and African American females and provides culturally informed and survivor-informed policy recommendations² for reducing sex trafficking and the sexual exploitation of Black and African American Washingtonians.

All women who participated in the study identified as Black, and it is important to note that African American women often use "Black" and "African American" interchangeably. No one under the age of 18 participated in the study. Although all CSI-impacted participants identified as Black, they also identified as coming from diverse backgrounds. For example, 57% of CSI-impacted participants specifically identified their ethnicity as African American, while 33% identified as multicultural with heritages including Indigenous, Latine and Asian. Although there are multiple cultures and ethnicities within the Black community, there are simultaneously

¹ Live camming is when a person performs sexual acts and fetishes of every variety for pay.

² Culturally informed and survivor-informed policy recommendations consider the cultural values, beliefs and experiences of the focus population. Researchers used secondary literature alongside participant feedback to ensure the recommendations are culturally relevant and practical for addressing the needs of CSI-impacted Black individuals.

shared life experiences in the systemic barriers they encounter due to their Black identity that are highlighted in this report. Further research is needed to explore the unique impacts across diverse Black backgrounds, but this study requires researchers to focus on the shared experiences of Black and African American female-identifying individuals in Washington.

Key drivers of commercial sexual exploitation

Black³ adult survivors of commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) who identify as female were interviewed for the study from all regions of the state. Survivors identified key interconnected and intersectional root causes that contribute to Black women and girls' commercial sexual exploitation, including:

- Traumatic childhood experiences
- Hypersexualization, or attributing sexual or erotic characteristics to someone to an extreme or inappropriate degree⁴
- Homelessness and housing instability
- Education disruption
- Physical health and substance use issues
- Mental health challenges
- Economic instability
- Loss of identity and self-worth
- Trust and relationship issues
- Systemic racism, colorism, stigma and discrimination
- Criminalization
- Exclusion from anti-trafficking research, outreach, service-work, and administration

In examining the needs of Black adult survivors of CSE, it became evident that prevention and early intervention are crucial for addressing the root causes of exploitation.

Survivors often described how systemic inequities – such as limited access to stable housing and supportive community services – contributed to their initial victimization.

Many Black adult survivors express that, had they received consistent and trauma-informed support during adolescence, their vulnerability to exploitation may have been significantly reduced. Therefore, a legislative focus on providing comprehensive support to reduce commercial sexual exploitation of children, particularly Black girls and young women, is essential.

Recommendations

Study participants provided invaluable insights that shaped cross-sector policy recommendations for reducing sex trafficking and sexual exploitation of Black and African American Washingtonians. Because children's needs differ from adults', the policy recommendations are separated by age. Further discussion is recommended to identify sector and/or programmatic leads and appropriate funding streams.

³ "Black" is a broader term that includes people from the African diaspora around the world, while "African American" specifically refers to individuals of African ancestry in the United States. The report will use Black to refer to people who self-identify as Black or African American.

⁴ Oxford English Dictionary, "[Hypersexualization](#)," (2024),

At-risk and CSE-impacted youth recommendations

1. Develop and provide culturally competent parenting programs.
2. Provide targeted community outreach and culturally-specific youth prevention programming.
3. Provide "Safe Harbor" implementation training for local law enforcement agencies.
4. Provide funding for local law enforcement agencies to hire staff who specialize in reaching out to and working with CSE youth.
5. Fund juvenile justice systems' Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC) screening costs.
6. Require juvenile justice systems to hire Black CSI-impacted adults to provide CSE-screening training.
7. Develop and fund emergency shelter and transitional housing alternatives for at-risk and CSE youth.

Adult recommendations

1. Prioritize essential services provided by service providers from the Black community who have lived experience or are representative of the community.
2. Establish and implement CSE-specific shelters that offer CSE-specific transitional living programs.
3. Promote broader culturally competent substance use treatment and behavioral health services access.
4. Expand CSE- and CSI-impacted individuals' eligibility for removing criminal convictions related to victimization.
5. Establish a survivor-advocate state policy and programming advisory committee.
6. Create and implement an "Ebony Alert."

Introduction

Authorizing legislation

In 2023 the Washington State Legislature directed the Department of Commerce (Commerce) to study how the commercial sex industry impacts Black and African American women and girls in Washington. The study was established by [Section 129\(66\), Chapter 475, Laws of 2023 \(SB 5187\)](#):

Sec. 129. (66) \$150,000 of the general fund—state appropriation for fiscal year 2024 and \$50,000 of the general fund—state appropriation for fiscal year 2025 are provided solely for the office of crime victims advocacy to contract for a study of the impacts of the commercial sex industry on Black and African American communities in Washington, with a focus on Black and African American persons who identify as female.

The office must contract with an organization that has expertise on the topic of the commercial sex industry and Black communities in Washington.

The study must include a review of the impacts of the commercial sex industry on Black and African American residents of Washington, and culturally informed and survivor informed policy recommendations for reducing sex trafficking and sexual exploitation of Black and African American Washingtonians. The department must submit a report of the study findings to the appropriate committees of the legislature by September 1, 2024.

The Office of Crime Victims' Advocacy, housed in Commerce, contracted with Our Sisters' House to complete the study. Our Sisters' House partnered with One Survivor to Another, a small, survivor-owned, anti-trafficking consulting business, led by Jasmine Conway, Master of Arts. Researchers of interpersonal violence, Dr. Carolyn West and Dr. Anita Bhattacharya, both of whom are academic professors at the University of Washington, additionally contributed research to this study. Collectively, Our Sisters' House and its partners conducted the study and prepared this report to meet the requirements of this proviso. In alignment with the legislative proviso, the study was managed, conducted and analyzed exclusively by women of color⁵, the majority of whom are Black. All are experts on the topics of the commercial sex industry and Black communities in Washington.

Background

Sex trafficking is just one manifestation of commercial sexual exploitation. The [Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000](#) (TVPA) defines sex trafficking as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, soliciting or advertising of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act, in which the commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age.”⁶

This definition means that for minors, engaging in a commercial sex act is legally considered a form of sexual exploitation. However, for adults, the legal requirement for trafficking requires a mechanism of physical force/threats of violence, deception, or extensive psychological abuse. Some adults who engage in the commercial sex industry identify as consenting participants, some as sex-trafficking victims/survivors, and

⁵ Women of color is an intersectional term that acknowledges how women of different racial backgrounds experience oppression, civil rights, and social justice. While the term can be used collectively, it's important to recognize individuals may prefer more specific terms related to their unique ethnic or racial identity.

⁶ GovInfo, "[Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000](#)," (Oct. 28, 2000),

others as commercially sexually exploited. Socio-economic hardships and interpersonal violence disproportionately impact women of color, creating vulnerabilities that traffickers can easily take advantage of.

Individuals who identify as commercially sexually exploited encompass both survivors of sex trafficking as well as adults who engage in the commercial sex industry because of systemic barriers such as poverty, housing and economic instability. These conditions often blur the lines between choice and coercion, as exploiters seek to capitalize on the unmet needs of individuals.

Since minors involved in the commercial sex industry are victims of exploitation, we reference them as CSE-impacted. However, since neither the law nor all adults identify themselves as exploited, for the purposes of this report we refer to all adults with lived experience as CSI-impacted.

Black women and girls are disproportionately affected by commercial sexual exploitation, comprising 13.2% of the United States population but accounting for 40% of all confirmed victims of sex trafficking, according to a two-year study by the U.S. Department of Justice.⁷

The U.S. Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons recognizes that one type of sexual exploitation, human trafficking, has "patterns [that have] continued to reflect the living legacy of the systemic racism and colonization globalized during the transatlantic slave trade through chattel slavery."⁸

In Washington State, child sex trafficking survivors are disproportionately girls of color. "In King county, 52% of all child sex trafficking victims are Black and 84% of youth victims are female, while Black girls comprise 1.1% of the population."⁹

Despite these acknowledgments and findings, the disparities endured by Black women and girls remain, underscoring an urgent need for legislative action to dismantle these persistent systemic inequities, and protect this oft-marginalized demographic.

⁷ U.S. Department of Justice, "[Characteristics of Suspected Human Trafficking Incidents](#)," (2008-2010),

⁸ United States Department of State, "[Acknowledging Historical and Ongoing Harm: The Connections between Systemic Racism and Human Trafficking](#)," (2021),

⁹ Rights 4 Girls, "[Racial and Gender Disparities in the Sex Trade](#)," (2019),

Findings

Black women who participated in the study as directly-impacted individuals responded to several questions designed to gain insight into what their experiences were like growing up. Their responses to these questions are consistent with findings that exist in what little literature is currently available on Black women's involvement in the commercial sex industry.

CSE-impacted Black girls have differing needs from CSI-impacted Black women

During conversations with the adult survivors, it became clear that while there is overlap between the needs of commercially sexually exploited (CSE) Black children and commercial sex industry (CSI)-impacted Black women, there are also unique needs for each demographic. The proviso requires "culturally informed and survivor informed policy recommendations for reducing sex trafficking and sexual exploitation of Black and African American Washingtonians." In response, this study recommends a two-pronged approach: preventative efforts to reduce Black girls' vulnerability to sex trafficking or sexual exploitation in the first place, and how to reduce sex trafficking or sexual exploitation after a person has been impacted by either.

Most reported incidences of sex-trafficking of Black individuals in Washington begin in childhood, and most participants reported that this was true for themselves as well.¹⁰

According to [HB 1089](#) (2023), data from the national hotline shows that among likely sex trafficking victims in Washington who reported their age of entry into exploitation, **89% reported that they were children when first exploited.**

If we prevented the exploitation of Black girls, then the rate by which Black girls and women are sexually exploited or sex trafficked would be reduced. Accordingly, this study divides the recommendations into two parts by age. The first set of recommendations focus on youth and prevention efforts. The second set of recommendations focus on the needs of Black CSE- or CSI-adults and how they can best be supported to reduce sex trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Recommendations for both age categories (girls and women) were informed by the experiences of CSI-impacted individuals as well as the professional opinions of service providers and systems professionals, including individuals with lived experience and representative community service providers.

Researchers combined the recommendations made by CSI-impacted participants, service providers and systems professionals with extensive analysis of secondary sources to propose solutions that address the needs of Black survivors holistically.

¹⁰ Sherman, Francine, Juvenile Justice: Advancing Research Policy, and Practice, "[The system response to the commercial sexual exploitation of girls.](#)" (2011),

Traumatic childhood experiences, sexualization of young girls and substance use

Overwhelmingly, Black survivors described their childhoods as having been marred by neglect and various forms of abuse, most notably sexual, physical and emotional abuse. Several survivors mentioned that their parent(s) struggled with substance addiction or mental health challenges.

Most survivors spoke at length about the normalization of sex work in their childhood homes and in their surrounding communities. These survivors primarily talked about their mothers' and other female role models' involvement in the commercial sex industry, and to a lesser extent, their fathers and male role models as pimps.

Collectively, 61% of commercial sex industry-impacted Black women interviewed described elements of their childhood that are well-founded risk factors for commercial sexual exploitation,¹¹ substantiated by a comprehensive body of subject-matter research.¹² These factors include: intergenerational involvement in the commercial sex industry, caregiver substance addiction or distribution (oftentimes leading to association with CSI-involved individuals, supporting normalization), sexual abuse, and foster care.

Like many women involved in the commercial sex industry, many of the survivors participating in this study battle addiction-related challenges. Some of the substances most commonly discussed included fentanyl, crack/cocaine, meth, alcohol, and marijuana.

Substance use and addiction are deeply entangled with homelessness and sex trafficking, creating a vicious cycle that exploits women's vulnerabilities. Many exploiters intentionally introduce drugs to victims or exploit pre-existing addictions, using dependency as a means of control to keep individuals entrapped in exploitative situations. Others are already grappling with addiction when they enter the sex industry, where the dangers of withdrawal and a constant need to self-medicate further fuel the cycle of exploitation. For many women, however, substance use is a coping mechanism, a way to numb the psychological toll of sex work and block out trauma. Additionally, women who face homelessness sometimes turn to drugs to stay awake and vigilant at night, in efforts to protect themselves from violence, including rape and assault.¹³

Economic and housing instability

"Kincare" refers to informal caregiving arrangements in which a child is raised by relatives or family friends instead of their parents. These arrangements typically happen through private agreement in the family. Washington State Department of Social and Health Services offers a [Kinship Care](#) program. When a child cannot be raised by their parents, kinship placements are the preferred option because they can help to maintain family connections and cultural traditions and minimize the trauma of separation.¹⁴ Kinship care is a longstanding tradition in communities of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds that continues to prevail, according to the [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#).

¹¹ Epstein, R., Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, "[Girlhood interrupted: The erasure of Black girls' childhood](#)," (2017),

¹² Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, "[Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Sex Trafficking](#)," (2014),

¹³ Rand Health Quarterly, "[Sex Trafficking and Substance Use: Identifying High-Priority Needs Within the Criminal Justice System](#)," (2022),

¹⁴ Child Welfare Information Gateway, "[Kinship Care](#)," (Oct. 18, 2024),

Some of the CSI impacted Black women in this sample described the types of temporary living situations that their parents were able to work out for them, without any financial support, as being environments that further exposed them to sexual activity, sexual abuse, drugs, and violence. From the parents' perspectives, this was an attempt to preserve familial connections, and to avoid having their children placed into the custody of child protective services. However, most women interviewed reported that these environments only exacerbated their distress as children.

Conversely, some of the CSI-impacted Black women in this sample described how in adulthood, their family members relied on them as caregivers to other children in their families.

Increasing the low-barrier supports available to relatives and fictive kin¹⁵ serving as guardians can enhance their capacities as caregivers by giving easier access to child development and caregiving education, financial, food, health and childcare assistance, as well as strengthening their connection to support networks like peer caregivers, and kin care navigators to help problem-solve challenges that arise. Although kin care arrangements typically involve less formal oversight compared to foster care, expanding the availability of resources could incentivize participation and increase adult involvement and awareness for children facing difficult family circumstances.

Study participants who identified as CSI-impacted Black women who now serve as caregivers agreed that increasing these supports could help them to achieve financial stability and reduce the likelihood of resorting to selling sex to afford rent.

Alarmingly, for many CSI-impacted Black women, selling sex is a temporary means of escaping destitution. Sixty-six percent of CSI-impacted study participants reported suffering periods of homelessness or housing instability. Participants frequently shared that they engage(d) in sex work during bouts of homelessness or when struggling to meet basic needs, such as securing short-term lodging, paying inflated rents, or providing for their children.

Nearly all participants exploited by a third party reported multiple, concurrent vulnerabilities, ranging from the need for shelter, food, and clothing to gaining access to controlled substances or previously unattainable items, and fulfilling emotional needs such as love, family, and belonging.

Furthermore, the incomes of CSI-impacted Black women are not high enough to afford the high rent expenses that they are faced with. This is especially when many survivors lack advanced education and or job experience, which makes pursuing other economic opportunities inviable. Even when Black women work full-time, many may still find themselves forced to engage in sex work due to low paying jobs or wage disparities rooted in racially discriminatory practices.

“... being a single mom and having a prostitution charge on my record kept me from getting employment. So I had to go back into prostitution because the cost of living's too much; rent, food, bills, all that made it so even at one point in time I was homeless, living in my car, working a full time job and I was still having to engage in prostitution to try to get enough money to save, to be able to get housing.” - A statement from a CSI-impacted Black woman interview participant

"And so I think with Black women it's not just the trauma that they experience in 'the life.' It's the trauma they experience in their life as a Black woman being in this skin, growing up in this world that has no love that has hatred,

¹⁵ Fictive kin are people who are close to a family but are not related by blood or marriage.

that has oppression, and being a woman, not just a Black man, but being a woman in this world, a Black woman in this world, very challenging." - Statement made by a Black service provider interview participant

Collectively, these unmet needs are consistently leveraged by traffickers/pimps to coerce individuals into exploitative circumstances, underscoring how poverty compounds vulnerabilities to trafficking.

Mental health challenges, loss of identity and self-worth, and trust and relationship issues

Many Black survivors of commercial sexual exploitation grew up in environments where commercial sex industry involvement or other prevalent issues such as drug use or distribution, sexual or physical abuse was normalized. In these contexts, CSI-involvement can become a maladaptive behavior or coping mechanism, reflecting both learned behaviors from their surroundings and attempts to navigate the challenges of their upbringing.

"We have a lot of generational trauma in our Black families that we're working with. And that impacts their ability to feel like they can parent successfully and feel like they can hold a household together with their children. And that's something that we have to like work on - really empowering our Black families, making sure that we're coming alongside them. Make sure they have the resources they need, right? Because we know that the access is always going to be limited. So how can we open up the access? How can we make sure that they're in an area where they can get what they need, where they can get the support, where they can have some psycho-education about what it looks like to have hard conversations with their kids." - Statement made by a service provider interview participant regarding helping Black families

"I feel like it just weighs on your soul, and then it messes with your mental. And then you're just like, and then you're questioning your self-worth." - Statement made by a CSI-impacted Black woman study participant

Of the 21 CSI-impacted Black women interviewed, 16 participants talked about being sex trafficked by a third party. Of the 16 who self-identified as sex trafficked, a majority discussed having been continuously exploited by several different traffickers over the course of their involvement in the commercial sex industry. These women described how their exploiters used coercive control and significant physical violence to reinforce their control of the women.

CSI-impacted women described countless situations in which they were mentally, emotionally, and physically abused by caregivers, traffickers, customers, and other CSI-impacted individuals. Remarkably, participants also frequently recounted scenarios of racial discrimination and other systemic hurdles, which were seemingly equally mentally tolling and exacerbated their trauma.

Systemic racism

Engaging CSI-impacted adults to build rapport and help access services is largely hampered by historical tension between CSI-impacted individuals and law enforcement. Stereotyping and racial discrimination within local communities and supportive services networks further marginalizes Black CSI-impacted women.

Systemic racism is also reflected in the media's disparate coverage of missing people. According to the study "Missing White Woman Syndrome: An Empirical Analysis of Race and Gender Disparities in Online News Coverage of Missing Persons," Black people were "significantly underrepresented in the population of missing persons who received coverage," even though missing people of color make up nearly 40% of all missing

persons' cases. The analysis also found white women were overrepresented in news coverage, accounting for more than half of missing persons' coverage when they make up 30% of missing persons' cases.¹⁶

Education and criminalization

Many survivors in this sample identified that they dropped out of school in or around the 10th grade. Black girls face significant systemic barriers that hinder academic engagement and contribute to higher dropout rates, including:

- socioeconomic challenges;
- underfunded schools often lacking the necessary resources to support their academic success;
- pervasive gendered and racial stereotypes that result in lower expectations from teachers; and
- racism and discrimination in the forms of harsh disciplinary practices.¹⁷

The Institute for Women's Policy Research finds that, "Black girls are suspended or expelled from public schools at much higher rates than other girls, with punishment often leading directly to imprisonment.... The school-to-prison pipeline leads them to miss out on vital education and has long-term harrowing educational, economic, and political consequences."¹⁸

Exclusion from anti-trafficking research, outreach, service-work and administration

Historically marginalized communities are and have been excluded from scholarly research, outreach, service-work and administration. Black CSE victims and survivors are no different, and study participants report that being excluded from service work, administration or outreach has negative impacts on them and their healing.

"I feel like being a Black woman out here is, you know, it's an issue within itself, because, you know, like there's always those stereotypes. There's always the systemic racism, the bias, like, you know, you can't go somewhere without someone already, like assuming your character, who you are. And so I feel like every day you have to prove yourself and be like, 'Okay, no, I'm not who you think I am,' or, 'I'm not this, and I'm not that again.' It gets tiring, you know what I mean? Especially the kind of people that'll say something, and they don't know the ignorance of what they're saying." - Statement from a Black, CSI-impacted survivor participant explaining how the lack of representation makes her feel

Recent research conducted by Boston University affirms the exclusion that study participants reported feeling in their interviews for this study. In the report titled, "Racism, Sexism and the Crisis of Black Women's Health," Boston University finds that, "Despite their disproportionate health burdens, Black women historically have largely been excluded from clinical research."¹⁹

"When we talk about Black women and barriers that we have, it almost feels like they know that they exist, and they still don't care, and that's the part. Where does this change when we live in a racist society? And it does cause depression and anxiety 'cause you feel oppressed, and when you're feeling oppressed it becomes a lot to try to navigate through." – Statement from a Black CSI-impacted survivor articulating the need for systemic change

¹⁶ Sommers, Zach, The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology, "[Missing White Woman Syndrome: An Empirical Analysis of Race and Gender Disparities in Online News Coverage of Missing Persons](#)," (2017),

¹⁷ The White House, "[Executive Order on White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Black Americans](#)," (2021),

¹⁸ The Institute for Women's Policy Research, "[Increasing Black Women's Access to Education and Economic Power](#)," (2022),

¹⁹ McKoy, Jillian, Boston University, "[Racism, Sexism and the Crisis of Black Women's Health](#)," (2023),

CSE-impacted Black women need to be included in research, service design, and service delivery, and to see others who look like them in these fields. They need to be included among people who share their experiences and have a method to meaningfully contribute to the creating a more equitable and inclusive Washington by advising and sharing the laws that govern our state.

The findings demonstrate that including a variety of prevention techniques is crucial for addressing the root causes of sexual exploitation. Therefore, the study recommendations focus on identifying and mitigating the vulnerabilities that make individuals susceptible to sexual exploitation before it ever occurs in addition to enhancing post-exploitation support.

Recommendations

Recommendations are divided into two sets. The first set of recommendations are for at-risk and CSE-impacted youth. The second set is for adults with lived CSE experience. Targeted prevention measures create a framework that better protects future generations from sex trafficking and sexual exploitation while supporting the healing of adult survivors.

This is a comprehensive set of cross-sector recommendations that apply to state and local governments, nonprofit service providers, and other organizations. Further discussion is recommended to identify appropriate funding streams and programs.

Recommendations part 1: At-risk and CSE-impacted youth

1. Develop and provide culturally competent parenting programs

To reduce sex trafficking and sexual exploitation of Black and African American Washingtonians, this study recommends that the outreach programs:

- Provide culturally competent and linguistically appropriate education to parents and caregivers about identifying trafficking risks and potential indicators of exploitation.
- Partner with schools, faith-based organizations, and local nonprofits to build trust within vulnerable communities and offer workshops, and resources tailored to their specific needs.
- Develop specialized programming for parents and caregivers to strengthen family protective factors, which have been shown to reduce the likelihood of trafficking involvement.
- Develop and provide Black American culturally competent parenting programs:
 - These programs should be specifically designed for parents from minority or marginalized communities.
 - They should address culturally specific challenges, such as language barriers or distrust in public systems, and teach strategies for strengthening family bonds and protecting children in ways that resonate with their cultural values.

2. Provide targeted community outreach and culturally-specific prevention programming designed for youth

Establish and provide culturally specific afterschool programming aimed at reducing the risk of the commercial sexual exploitation of Black girls by promoting their positive development, specifically through the use of participatory culturally-specific intervention models.

The study recommends that school districts collaborate with community-based organizations to develop and implement after-school programs that:

- Promote the positive development of Black girls from underserved communities.
- Provide education on healthy relationships and interpersonal violence, focusing on the vulnerabilities specific to Black girls.

- Include mentorship opportunities, skill-building workshops, and resources for personal safety and empowerment.
- Foster partnerships with local service providers to create a comprehensive support network for participants.
- Provide culturally-grounded online safety and digital exploitation prevention.

“Almost all of the children that I’ve served have been recruited or solicited online almost exclusively- like I can think of in the last year every single one has been an online solicitation.” – Statement from a study participant speaking to the frequency of online solicitation

Survivors are increasingly being groomed and recruited via internet technology. The recommended after-school programs would empower them to identify potential online threats, develop healthy online relationships, navigate social media environments safely, and challenge and reframe narratives around sexual objectification in media.

“The risk for sexual exploitation increases exponentially for women and girls affected by interpersonal victimization, mental health problems, substance use disorders, and residential instability, including relocation and homelessness.”²⁰

Black girls need access to after-school and community-based programming focused on promoting positive development and commercial sexual exploitation prevention and awareness. Recognizing this need, the study recommends that the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) seek funding opportunities to support these after-school programs, with an emphasis on grants and community partnerships aimed at reducing barriers for Black girls facing systemic challenges.

To measure program effectiveness, this study also recommends that the programs have annual evaluation and reporting requirements, including:

- a program evaluation component to assess effectiveness in reaching at-risk populations and their impact on participants' awareness and prevention of trafficking.
- a required annual report submitted to the Legislature detailing participation rates, demographic information, and program outcomes.

This amendment would align with existing research highlighting the importance of targeted interventions for at-risk youth, especially Black girls, since expanding educational programs beyond the classroom can provide critical support systems, resources, and skills that empower young girls and mitigate risks associated with trafficking.

3. Provide Safe Harbor implementation training to local law enforcement agencies

The Legislature passed [Chapter 331, Laws of 2020](#) (HB 1775), which is also known as the Safe Harbor law. The law decriminalized prostitution-related offenses for minors under the age of 18 in favor of referring minors to specialized, CSE-impacted-youth-specific services.

²⁰ Polaris, “[Analysis of 2021 Data from the National Human Trafficking Hotline](#),” (2021),

While study participants recognize that a multitude of positive outcomes have resulted from Safe Harbor, there may be a notable unintended consequence: fewer CSE-impacted youth have been identified and connected with services since the bill was implemented.²¹

Study participants identified a potential gap revealed once the Safe Harbor bill was implemented, and that is a training gap. Prior to Safe Harbor's implementation, officers could detain a minor to intervene, which led some youth to engage with services. However, now that Safe Harbor has been implemented, law enforcement officers are expected to engage with youth to divert them to community services, but they have not been equipped with the training to do so.²²

To better understand why CSI-impacted Black women and girls may be hesitant to engage with law enforcement, current and historical context is necessary. Data demonstrates that CSI-impacted Black women and girls are disproportionately impacted by the justice system and over-policing, or “confrontational and combative policing tactics for even minor offenses or transgressions that can often lead to violent outcomes.”²³

According to a scholarly article from ARC Journal of Addiction, women’s incarceration rates have increased dramatically over recent years with Black women’s rates disproportionately and significantly higher than other races.²⁴ For example, Black people account for approximately 37% of adult prostitution arrests – more than any other racial group,²⁵ and Black children account for nearly 53% of all juvenile prostitution arrests – also more than any other racial group.²⁶ Data shows that Black girls are often more likely to be charged for offenses linked to their victimization, including selling sex or running away.²⁷ Consequently, Black women and girls can be resistant to engaging with law enforcement to connect with services.

If law enforcement officers receive CSE-specific youth engagement training, CSI-impacted Black women and girls may be more inclined to connect with services.

Routing Black women and girls toward services rather than criminalization corrects past imbalances by recognizing them as victims of systemic inequities rather than perpetrators. This approach also aligns with trauma-informed and restorative justice principles, offering these girls a path to healing and recovery instead of punishment.

It is imperative that sufficient funding be allocated for law enforcement to be adequately trained on how to effectively implement Safe Harbor, identify CSE-impacted Black girls and refer them to services. Given the disproportionate CSI impacts that Black women and girls are facing in Washington, equity demands recognizing that Black girls often come from under-resourced communities with limited access to social services, healthcare, and educational opportunities, which increases their risk of commercial sexual exploitation.

²¹ Washington State Department of Children, Youth and Families, "[House Bill 1775 Implementation Update](#)," (2022),

²² Washington State Department of Children, Youth and Families, "[House Bill 1775 Implementation Update](#)," (2022),

²³ Hession, Margaret, Bridgewater State University, "[Over-Policing and Under-Protecting in American Cities](#)," (Dec. 28, 2022),

²⁴ Walt, Lisa, ARC Journal of Addiction, "[Predicting Pathways into Criminal Behavior: The Intersection of Race, Gender, Poverty, Psychological Factors](#)," (2017),

²⁵ Federal Bureau of Investigation, "[Crime in the United States: Table 43C](#)," (2017),

²⁶ Federal Bureau of Investigation, "[Crime in the United States: Table 43B](#)," (2017),

²⁷ Killeen, Erin, Georgetown Journal on Poverty, Law and Policy, "[The Increased Criminalization of African American Girls](#)," (April 17, 2019),

Providing CSE-impacted Black girls with tailored services not only addresses the immediate crisis of exploitation but also contributes to long-term systemic change. It gives these girls access to resources and support systems they have historically been denied, offering them a better chance at recovery and success.

4. Provide funding for CSE-impacted youth specialists in local law enforcement agencies

As a solution to the gap in identification, engagement, and diversion of CSE-impacted youth, particularly Black girls, and in efforts to strengthen integrated multidisciplinary anti-trafficking solutions, we recommend investments in peer support CSE-impacted intervention specialists in police departments with historically high counts of cases involving CSEC.

The study strongly recommends that lived experience be a mandatory requirement for the staff positions below with an emphasis on BIPOC applicants. According to the U.S. Department of Justice Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's report, "Advancing Diversity in Law Enforcement," a key recommendation for "building trust and legitimacy" in community-police relations is the need to ensure law enforcement agencies better reflect the diversity of the communities they serve. The report notes it is a "critically important tool to build trust with communities." The report also emphasizes important characteristics to reflect, including: race, gender, language, background and experience.²⁸ Because sex trade survivors are disproportionately girls and women of color²⁹, and because representative law enforcement is key to building trust with communities, BIPOC applicants with lived experience are recommended for the staff positions below. Recommended staff positions include:

Outreach specialist:

This role would accompany law enforcement patrolling areas with high CSEC activity, and be responsible for identifying and engaging CSE youth to build rapport and provide generalized advocacy including referral and/or accompaniment to community supportive services.

Policy specialist:

This role would collaborate with law enforcement to create policies and procedures regarding the complexities of implementing existing legislation related to CSE youth, such as Safe Harbor.

Subject matter expert and training specialist:

This role would train law enforcement on practical application of trauma-informed CSEC engagement, referral and diversion.

This role would also:

- partner with CSE-specific and culturally-specific service providers to coordinate ongoing training offerings for law enforcement and other systems professionals; and
- partner with and provide supplemental support to police department employees with aligned responsibilities such as high risk victims sections advocates.

²⁸ U.S. Department of Justice Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, "[Advancing Diversity in Law Enforcement](#)," (2016),

²⁹ Rights 4 Girls, "[Racial and Gender Disparities in the Sex Trade](#)," (2019),

5. Fund juvenile justice systems' Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC) screening costs

Washington's [Chapter 298, Laws of 2024](#) (HB 6006) will go into effect July 1, 2025. Among other improvements to better serve youth victims of sex trafficking and sexual abuse, the law will require juvenile justice systems to screen for youth who are potentially impacted by CSE. According to the law's language "juvenile justice agency" means any of the following: Law enforcement; diversion units; juvenile courts; detention centers; and persons or public or private agencies having children committed to their custody. Many of these juvenile justice agencies are already understaffed and under-resourced before adding the new requirement to screen. (For example, some law enforcement agencies that previously had anti-trafficking detectives or units, no longer have dedicated anti-trafficking staff due to lower staffing levels.)

Although the Department of Children, Youth and Families received funding for implementation, juvenile justice systems professionals who participated in this study directly identified this law as well intentioned but potentially problematic to implement, because no funding was provided to the juvenile justice systems to perform the law's required screening. Study participants expressed concerns that the law will not be implemented properly, or it will not be implemented at all due to the lack of funding to support the work.

Juvenile justice systems professionals reported that despite the decriminalization of CSE youth for prostitution-related offenses, they're still encountering a significant number of youths impacted by commercial sexual exploitation entering their systems, detained for unrelated charges, like assault. This finding makes it imperative that the juvenile justice systems receive funding for training to effectively identify and engage with CSE youth, as well as additional resources to ensure sufficient personnel for these efforts.

To provide screenings, juvenile justice systems should hire trainers who can teach the system staff how to screen for potential victims of CSE, and how to best assist potential victims. Then, additional staff time will be required to implement the screening practices.

Professionals who participated in this study's interviews indicated that to implement best practices while providing screenings, juvenile justice systems should hire CSI-impacted subject matter experts as trainers who can teach the systems how to screen for potential CSE youth, and how to best address their needs.

6. Require juvenile justice systems to hire Black CSI-impacted adults to provide CSEC-screening training

One of the most important ways the juvenile justice system and its partners learn to provide CSEC screenings is by hiring CSI-impacted people to conduct survivor-led systems professionals' training sessions, on topics such as how to screen for potential victims of CSE, and how to best assist those victims.

Black survivors, in particular, offer relevant and essential information on how to recognize and assist Black CSEC victims more effectively. Moreover, Black survivors impart valuable insights that are critical to addressing historical harms and promoting resilience in disproportionately victimized CSEC-impacted Black youth.

Survivor-led screening trainings are both effective and economically empower Black CSI survivors who lead those trainings by paying survivors for their valuable expertise. However, since funding was not provided to juvenile justice systems to implement CSEC screenings required by Chapter 298, Laws of 2024, juvenile justice systems may be impeded from moving forward to hire and compensate survivors for sharing their knowledge and experience. As a result, Black CSE-impacted youth victims may not receive the most effective assistance, harming both Black youth and adult CSE victims and survivors.

Given the unique insights and supports that only Black CSE-impacted experts can provide, it is imperative that the Legislature adequately fund juvenile justice systems for the full cost of providing the screening that Chapter 298, Laws of 2024 requires. Funding the required screening will ensure Black CSE-impacted youth are receiving the most effective screenings and supports possible while ensuring that Black CSE survivors are economically empowered by receiving compensation for the essential, valuable insights that only they can provide.

7. Develop and fund emergency shelter and transitional housing alternatives for at-risk and CSE youth

The final recommendation identified to enhance youth protections from commercial sexual exploitation is to recognize and address a notable gap in sheltering unhoused youth.

Providing shelter to unhoused youth is a critical need. It is often complicated by legal requirements related to parental consent, implicating child welfare involvement, and differing jurisdictional responsibilities between child protective services, law enforcement, and shelters. These policies, though designed to protect minors, can inadvertently limit access to immediate and transitional safe shelter options for this vulnerable age group, leaving service providers with limited flexibility to act quickly in crisis situations.

The gap in housing for unsheltered youth produces instability that leads to greater vulnerability to exploitation. Specifically, youth ages 15 and younger have few alternatives in Washington beyond temporary stays and shelter hopping. Without stable housing options, these young people often lack access to consistent support services, guidance and a safe environment. This situation exacerbates their risk of exposure to individuals who may prey on their need for security and stability.

Establishing transitional housing specifically tailored to youth aged 12 to 15, combined with family reunification resources, education, counseling, and life skills training, could significantly mitigate their susceptibility to exploitation and provide them with a foundation for a safer, more secure future. Washington's 2018 Health Assessment states that "getting homeless people and families into any permanent housing will have long-lasting benefits to their health."³⁰ By recommending enhanced housing stability and educational resources targeted at young people, the Legislature can help prevent cycles of exploitation from persisting into adulthood.

These early interventions can build resilience, promote healing, and ultimately reduce the disproportionate impact of CSE on Black communities. The study offers these recommendations for CSE-impacted youth to the Legislature both as necessary measures for addressing the immediate needs of vulnerable young people, and as a pathway toward achieving lasting equity.

³⁰ Washington State Department of Health, "[Washington State Health Assessment](#)," (2018),

Recommendations Part 2: Adults with CSI experience

1. Prioritize essential services provided by people with CSI experience and representative service providers from the Black community

To help dismantle systemic barriers and counteract the stigmatization facing Black survivors of the commercial sex industry and commercial sexual exploitation, funders and programs should increase support for the provision of services provided by CSI-impacted service providers and representative services from the Black community.

To build trust and most effectively create accessible pathways to services, service providers should reflect the communities they serve. When serving Black survivors of the commercial sex industry or commercial sexual exploitation, the ideal service provider is a Black woman with experience in sex work.

“They kinda like minimize her a little bit. Partially because she’s a black woman. I still feel to this day that sometimes I just have a real thing about, I don’t feel heard. You know, you can be in a meeting, and you make a statement or something. It’s like they don’t even hear you. But then a white woman stands up and says the same thing, and then all of a sudden, ‘Oh, I get it now,’ and it’s like, I just said that. How did they not understand what I said?” - Study participant highlighting how Black voices are minimized in formulating solutions.

Many supportive programs focus on survivors’ immediate needs like housing or health services but do not always address the deeper, systemic issues like racism, poverty, or gender inequality. Survivors and service providers, however, note that effective outreach requires culturally sensitive, trauma-informed approaches that resonate with the unique experiences of Black women.

Black service providers should use intentional, community-driven engagement strategies tailored to meet the specific needs of the local Black community. These uniquely-tailored responses can require unrestricted funding so that Black service providers may implement holistic approaches and interventions. Additionally, strengthening partnerships with Black service providers can help dismantle barriers and counteract the stigmatization facing Black survivors of the commercial sex industry and commercial sexual exploitation.

Seventy-one percent of CSI-impacted participants identified key benefits to lived experience support services including nonjudgement, trust, validation, credibility and hope, suggesting that peer-led interventions foster a uniquely structured healing environment. Research investigating the effectiveness of psychoeducational programs facilitated by CSI-impacted individuals with lived experience³¹ is limited but promising. A study published in 2021, with a sample of 37% CSI-impacted Black women participants demonstrated that supportive programming, instructed by and with CSI-individuals with lived experience had marked reception by participants; decreased inclination toward risky behaviors, increased ability to recognize “red flags,” or coercive tactics, and increased confidence in post-exploitation community reintegration.³²

³¹ For this study, “lived experience” specifically indicates that the individual has personally been involved in sex work, emphasizing that their perspective is informed by personal, direct involvement rather than observational or professional knowledge. Using this phrase is important to accurately reflect the unique insights and authority that come from firsthand experience.

³² Usacheva, Maria et al., Women and Criminal Justice, “[Ending the Game@: A New Psychoeducational Curriculum for Victims of Commercial Sexual Exploitation](#),” (2021),

"Funding Black-led or Black-founded organizations should be its own separate initiative because resources are not equitably distributed, and it is the Black and brown organizations that have the greatest impact." – Statement from a lived experience advocate participant

Lived experience leaders and Black service providers understand that vulnerability to exploitation is often linked to these systemic factors, and can tailor outreach to both provide resources and build pathways to empowerment and long-term resilience.

2. Establish and implement CSE-specific shelters that offer CSE-specific transitional living programs

Homeless and domestic violence shelters provide critical temporary support for adults with lived experience of sex trafficking but are not always equipped to address the specific needs of trafficking survivors, particularly Black women. CSE-specific shelters can offer tailored, trauma-informed care, and enhanced safety protocols necessary to stabilize CSI-impacted Black women in the short term by focusing on developing personalized safety plans, providing legal advocacy, facilitating access to behavioral health services, and providing housing referrals.

"Nobody taught me how to do nothing. I got taught how to ho! That's what I got told. That was my life skill." – Statement from a Black CSI-impacted woman commenting on how she was never taught independent living skills

Black women benefit from programs that understand and respect their cultural background and lived experiences. Expanding culturally responsive two-year transitional living program offerings with intensive self-management training can provide Black women with independent living skills, education, and economic empowerment coaching that promote long-term self-sufficiency and economic independence.

Accordingly, we recommend the establishment of CSE-specific shelters that offer CSE-specific transitional living programs for victims and survivors of commercial sexual exploitation and commercial sex industry-impacted individuals.

Expanding transitional living programs can help reduce recidivism rates among survivors of CSE by providing stable housing and support for them and their children, which aligns with Washington's goals for improving outcomes for marginalized populations.

Additionally, we recommend the creation of affordable housing options by funding more rental assistance programs such as housing vouchers or emergency rental assistance funds, implementing rent stabilization, or promoting public-private partnerships to increase cheaper housing availability.

3. Promote broader culturally competent substance use treatment and behavioral health services access

Historically, Washington has ranked among the top states in Medicaid spending, demonstrating a commitment to ensuring access to essential healthcare services for underserved populations. However, several factors such as inadequate funding, provider shortages, limited facility capacity, high demand, and inequities in access contribute to the ongoing presence of waitlists for Medicaid services. The demand for behavioral health and substance use services has risen, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated mental

health issues and substance use disorders.³³ This circumstance is especially problematic for individuals seeking in-patient chemical dependency treatment and mental health support for whom access to services is acute, requiring immediate attention.

“That’s why we need more programs that are strictly for ‘street walkers,’ or, strictly for people that are in that situation. Everybody’s not on drugs, but a lot of them are today, and I think they keep them like that, so they don’t have to feel, but they can just do.” – A study participant speaking to the need for substance use support

The Health Care Authority (HCA) oversees Medicaid in Washington and has implemented various initiatives to enhance access to mental health services, including those specifically targeting marginalized communities. While these initiatives promote telehealth broadly, they do not necessarily specify funding exclusively for Black providers.

“My frustration is not seeing the access play out the same way for Black and white women or brown and white women. And then also, you know, just the idea of really being offered more in-depth types of services like treatment, mental health – shared by a Black survivor advocate.” – Study participant speaking to need for Black advocates and providers

Since there is a shortage of Black mental health providers in Washington state, CSI-impacted Black women have managed to get limited online access to networks of Black women counselors, but many study participants noted that it is not enough.

“I prefer someone that’s Black, you know? I don’t need no white woman trying to talk to me about anything or me talking to her about anything, you know?” – Survivor participant speaking to the need for a Black counselor

Additionally, when a Black CSE-impacted survivor was asked whom they feel the most comfortable talking with about painful or difficult situations, the study participant responded:

“Someone that has been down the same road that I’ve been down or is going down that same road. I feel comfortable, yes. People of color.”

To enhance access to networks of Black women counselors, study participants recommend that Washington:

- bolster financial support of Medicaid reimbursement;
- increase incentives for Black mental health providers;
- include grants or earmarked Medicaid dollars to support culturally specific therapy, group counseling, and community-based mental health initiatives such as Black counselors, peer supporters/navigators or Black wellness circles.

4. Expand CSE- and CSI-impacted individuals' eligibility for removing criminal convictions related to victimization

Law enforcement and the justice system has a legacy of criminalizing Black women with lived experience of sex trafficking for crimes that occurred as a result of their victimization, which have lasting impacts on survivors.

For example, when people apply for employment or housing, a background check is often run, which may include a criminal background check. Washington State Patrol’s Criminal History Report will report “all adult

³³ American Psychological Association, "[Increased need for mental health care strains capacity](#)," (2022),

and juvenile convictions in Washington courts, no matter how old the conviction is."³⁴ Many study participants shared that they accumulated criminal records while being sexually exploited, and they also shared that they had been denied employment and housing as a result of the criminal records they accumulated while exploited.

Many CSE-impacted women reported that they were forced by their trafficker to commit other crimes, not a unique experience. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime notes, "...Traffickers not only earn a profit by sexually exploiting the victims, but then make them commit crimes so they can escape liability and prosecution....They deliberately use them in low-level roles that were more exposed to law enforcement authorities – meaning they are more likely to get caught."³⁵ The same article refers to this situation as "double exploitation and victimization of the women and girls." Accordingly, sexually exploited victims may develop criminal records as a direct result of their exploitation.

Washington recognizes that some crimes are committed due to being sexually exploited and has a legal process in place to change the plea on a person's criminal conviction record from guilty to not guilty. This process is called vacating the victim's record, or criminal record relief. Though some records can be vacated, not all crimes that are committed as a result of a person's victimization are allowed to be vacated under Washington's laws.³⁶ In these cases, when crimes fall outside of prostitution-related offenses, such as larceny, drug possession or drug distribution, survivors typically cannot have those crimes vacated from their record.

In 2019, a leading commercial sexual exploitation research entity, Polaris, published "State Report Cards: Grading Criminal Record Relief Laws for Survivors of Human Trafficking," a report grading each state on the impacts of their criminal record relief laws for adult survivors of sex and labor trafficking.³⁷ Subsequently, in 2021, Polaris compared existing state laws to criteria defined by itself and the Survivor Reentry Project. Washington was graded "C," or needing improvement, pointing to some of these factors:

- Limitations on the offenses that are eligible for removal. (In general, a conviction of promoting prostitution, violent crimes, felony drug crimes, and crimes involving weapons are ineligible, even if these crimes occurred as a result of an individual's victimization).
- Requirements that an individual have no open cases other than prostitution, in any state before the record can be removed.
- An individual cannot actively work on criminal record relief in another state at the same time.
- Any restitution ordered has to be paid before relief can be approved.
- A period of 5 years with no new charges has elapsed since conviction of a class C felony, or 10 years for a class B felony.
- Pay up to \$500 for a crime victim penalty assessment, and any legal representation fees.³⁸

³⁴ American Civil Liberties Union of Washington, "[Guide to Criminal Records and Employment in Washington State](#)," (2013),

³⁵ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "[Exploited and Prosecuted: When Victims of Human Trafficking Commit Crimes](#)," (2020),

³⁶ RCW 9.94A.640 states (1) Every offender who has been discharged under RCW 9.94A.637 may apply to the sentencing court for a vacation of the offender's record of conviction. If the court finds the offender meets the tests prescribed in subsection (2) of this section, the court may clear the record of conviction. (3) If the applicant is a victim of sex trafficking, prostitution, or commercial sexual abuse of a minor; sexual assault; or domestic violence as defined in RCW 9.94A.030, the victim or the prosecutor of the county in which the victim was sentenced may apply to the sentencing court or the sentencing court's successor to vacate the victim's record of conviction for a class B or class C felony offense using the process in RCW 9.94A.648.

³⁷ Polaris, "[State Report Cards: Grading Criminal Record Relief Laws for Survivors of Human Trafficking](#)," (2019),

³⁸ Polaris, "[State Report Cards: Grading Criminal Record Relief Laws for Survivors of Human Trafficking](#)," (2019),

Many study participants with experience of sex exploitation shared that they had been denied employment and housing as a result of the criminal records they accumulated while exploited. Study participants also uncovered that crimes that Black survivors are convicted of committing as a result of their victimization do not always fall neatly into categories of crimes that are considered eligible for removal.

Because crimes committed by CSI- and CSE-impacted women and girls are often committed as a result of victimization, the state should expand vacating related crimes for CSE- and CSI-victims by broadening the language of the laws for CSI- and CSE-impacted individuals. This would align with the state's ongoing work and commitment towards restorative justice efforts.

In the context of this report, restorative justice aims to:

- repair the harms caused to individuals with lived experience by their involvement in the commercial sex industry;
- incorporate trauma-informed care; and
- focus on healing the psychological and emotional harm victims experience.

In addition to expanding CSE and CSI individual's eligibility for criminal record relief, this study recommends that the state also provide sustaining funding for no-cost legal advocacy and representation services, as study participants reported that the legal process to vacate a criminal record is long, complex and expensive.

"It's the hardest process... It's obstacle after obstacle. You have to do this, or it has to be this amount of time that you can't get in trouble. Just a bunch of stuff." - CSI-impacted study participant sharing frustration with the legal process to vacate a criminal record

Providing no-cost legal advocacy and representation services for CSE- and CSI-impacted women, and expanding CSE and CSI vacature eligibility for vacating other crimes would address and help repair the significant disproportionate racial, social and economic disparities that Black CSE- and CSI-impacted women and girls face due to being prosecuted for crimes that were committed as a result of being an exploited victim. By providing free legal advocacy services and expanding this vacature eligibility for CSE- and CSI-impacted women, more Black survivors will be able to access and be eligible for vacature legal relief. When these factors are addressed, the state will be removing barriers that are currently preventing CSE- and CSI-impacted Black women from securing housing and employment.

5. Establish a survivor-advocate state policy and programming advisory committee

Endorse survivor-informed policy planning by establishing a statewide survivor-advocate policy and programming advisory committee. CSI-impacted individuals from overburdened communities³⁹ would review proposed legislation for equity, engaging with their communities to gather insights and feedback as well as to identify gaps in services, and to make recommendations on policies and resource development.

A statewide survivor-informed policy planning committee should be composed of CSI-impacted individuals from communities with unique risk factors. The committee would be tasked with:

³⁹ RCW 70A.02.010 defines overburdened community as "a geographic area where vulnerable populations face combined, multiple environmental harms and health impacts, and includes, but is not limited to, highly impacted communities as defined in RCW 19.405.020.

- reviewing proposed legislation for equity;
- engaging with their communities to gather insights and feedback;
- identifying gaps in services;
- initiating targeted research studies to uncover the needs of Black survivors and align interventions; and
- making recommendations on resource development.

Establishing a statewide survivor-advocate policy planning advisory committee will elevate the voices of adults with lived experience in commercial sexual exploitation and from communities with unique risk factors. The outcomes of the committee's work would provide policies and programs that resonate more with the lived experiences of Black survivors, potentially leading to greater engagement without compromising survivors' safety or community ties.

6. Create and implement an “Ebony Alert”

Study participants noted a publicity gap when Black girls or women go missing. National Public Radio affirmed the publicity gap in 2023 by emphasizing that “people of color who disappear seldom get the same amount of media attention devoted to white people who go missing - especially white women and children.”⁴⁰ The “Neglected Epidemic of Missing BIPOC Women and Girls,” a federal report, also brought to light that “Black women and girls make up just 13% of the female population in the country but accounted for fully 35% of all missing women in 2020.”⁴¹ To increase public awareness, study participants suggested that Washington create an “Ebony Alert.”

Washington's Amber Alert Program is “a voluntary partnership between law-enforcement agencies, broadcasters, transportation agencies, and the wireless industry, to activate an urgent bulletin in the most serious child-abduction cases.”

Similar to the Amber Program, California enacted an Ebony Alert in 2024. More specifically, “The California Statewide Ebony Alert Program was introduced through Senate Bill 673 and became law in 2024 by adding Section 8594.14 to the California Government Code. An Ebony Alert is a resource available to law enforcement agencies investigating the suspicious or unexplainable disappearance of a Black woman or Black person. The Ebony Alert will provide immediate information to the public to aid in the swift recovery of missing Black persons.”

Black CSI-impacted women who participated in the study agreed that establishing an Ebony Alert based off of the Amber Alert program would aid in the identification and recovery of missing Black women, many of whom are likely to be commercially sexually exploited.

“It's always having to go through these spaces. And now I'm preparing to be triggered immensely in this space Even when we're talking about getting this ebony alert, and how the difference is our girls are runaways ... blah blah blah! Really, they're being trafficked! Really, they're not running away! It becomes a lot to try to navigate through.” - Study participant sharing frustration at the lack of media attention that missing Black girls and women receive

⁴⁰ National Public Radio, “[Missing White Woman Syndrome: The Media Bias Against Missing People of Color](#),” (2023),

⁴¹ U.S. Government Publishing Office for the Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties of the Committee on Oversight and Reform: House of Representatives, “[The Neglected Epidemic of Missing BIPOC Women and Girls](#),” (2022),

Conclusion

With Washington's commitment to equity, restorative justice and supporting Black, CSI-impacted women and girls, a better world is possible. Victims and survivors bravely shared their experiences and recommendations to reduce sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation in Washington. With the support of state leaders, these recommendations will lead to a more supportive, safer Washington for all.

Methodology

Rapid ethnographic assessment

Researchers determined that a rapid ethnographic assessment (REA) was the most appropriate research method for this short-term project. An REA is a type of qualitative study designed to quickly gather in-depth insights into a specific cultural or social context, within a limited timeframe, by using interviews, focus groups, and participant and environmental observations to collect data.

The goal is to understand participants' experiences, behaviors, and perceptions in their natural settings, allowing researchers to identify themes and patterns that might not emerge in quantitative studies. REAs are especially useful in situations that require timely information for decision-making, such as public health crises or evaluations of community needs.

The project team sought to thoroughly interview CSI-impacted Black women, service providers, and interdisciplinary systems professionals to answer questions such as:

- What services and resources do CSI-impacted Black women need?
- What are the barriers preventing CSI-impacted Black women from accessing essential services?
- How can communities and service providers best support CSI-impacted Black women?

Washington State Institutional Review Board approval

Because the research involved human subjects, the research plan was submitted to the Washington State Institutional Review Board (WSIRB) for approval. The WSIRB reviews research to ensure that the:

- rights and welfare of human subjects are adequately protected;
- risks to human subjects are minimized, are not unreasonable, and are outweighed by the potential benefits to them or by the knowledge gained; and
- proposed study design and methods are adequate and appropriate in light of the stated research objectives.⁴²

The research team received Washington State Institutional Review Board approval to conduct a rapid ethnographic assessment to meet the requirements of the proviso.

Participant recruitment

After receiving WSIRB approval, participant recruitment began via targeted email, phone, and in-person outreach. Efforts were concentrated in the nine counties that the Washington State Commission on African American Affairs determined to have some of the highest populations of Black individuals residing in them. These counties include: King, Pierce, Snohomish, Whatcom, Clark, Yakima, Benton, Franklin and Spokane. The researchers were able to correspond with a number of systems professionals through the varied outreach methods, which greatly contributed to our overall understanding of several factors that potentially impede the ability of Black women to access supportive services.

⁴² Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, "[Human Research Review Section](#)," (Oct. 18, 2024),

Geographic challenges

Of the nine counties that the Washington State Commission on African American Affairs determined to have some of the highest populations of Black individuals residing in them, almost half (four of nine) of the counties are in Central or Eastern Washington. Additionally, evidence suggests that CSI-impacted Black women pass through the Central and Eastern regions of the state while moving in commercial sexual exploitation circuits.⁴³ Yet, Central and Eastside service providers contacted for this study indicate that they serve few, if any, CSI-impacted Black women. The gap between CSI-impacted Black women and accessing services underscores the critical need for further research in Central and Eastern Washington. Understanding commercial sexual exploitation circuit patterns and help-seeking behaviors of disproportionately impacted populations is crucial for addressing the unique challenges faced by this population.

While Central and Eastern Washington service providers contacted for this study⁴⁴ generally confirmed that CSI-impacted Black women are eligible for their services, many providers in Eastern or Central Washington declined to participate in the study citing a lack of knowledge about CSI-impacted Black women. This suggests there is a need to expand trauma-informed care, antiracism, and implicit bias trainings in Eastern Washington to help service providers and systems professionals better understand and effectively address the unique experiences of CSI-impacted Black women.

Moreover, study participants were only aware of one culturally-specific service provider in Eastern Washington. This highlights a critical gap in culturally responsive care.

Further research in Central and Eastern Washington is essential to comprehensively explore the impacts of the commercial sex industry on Black women in these regions.

Participant recruitment challenges

The stigmatization, discrimination, and criminalization that CSE youth and CSI-impacted adults endure often results in reluctance to openly discuss their experiences in the sex industry or the challenging circumstances that precede or perpetuate their involvement. These factors are especially problematic for Black women and girls, who feel the disproportionate impacts of racism and compounded systemic barriers that prevent them from being perceived as worthy of help.

It is this visceral fear of judgment that generally prevents CSI-impacted Black women from coming forward, opening up about their experiences, and asking for support. Even when these courageous women confront the systemic obstacles in their paths, micro-aggressions and more overtly discriminatory practices don't necessarily afford them the same level of access to the services and resources they need to improve their lives as their non-Black counterparts. The cumulative effect of these adversities can foster deep-seated distrust in research institutions and social service systems, making participation in studies feel like an unsafe or futile endeavor.

⁴³ The research team accessed online platforms where individuals whom appeared to be Black women advertised commercial sex services in the region. To prioritize CSI-impacted women's safety, the online platforms and number of women selling sex who appear to be Black will not be disclosed in this report.

⁴⁴ Organizations in the following counties were contacted for this study: Benton, Franklin, Kennewick, Pasco, Richland, Spokane, and Yakima.

To counteract these trepidations, the researchers engaged in the intentional cultivation of rapport with prospective participants and not merely transactional encounters.

Interviews

Researchers Jasmine Conway, Dr. Carolyn West and Dr. Anindita Bhattacharya interviewed multiple stakeholders and subject matter experts, most of whom were Black women, who are or have been involved in the commercial sex industry, to understand its impacts in their lives.

Researchers also interviewed and corresponded with social services providers, with an intentional emphasis on advocates, peer support specialists, and interdisciplinary systems professionals such as healthcare, law enforcement and justice professionals to understand which social barriers would need to be redressed to reduce the trauma, violence, and disproportionate impact of sex trafficking on Black women.

Interview participants

A total of 22 Black women who self-identified as having had involvement in the commercial sex industry (CSI) were individually interviewed. Twenty-one of those interviews were included in this study. Demographic information regarding the Black CSI-impacted women interviewed for this study include:

- age range from early 20s to mid-60s
- mixture of inactive to currently active in the commercial sex industry
- approximately 65% entered the commercial sex industry between the ages of 12-17 years old
- approximately 25% were between the ages of 18-20 when they entered the commercial sex industry

Several CSI-impacted women were also identified as being supportive services advocates and or activists, and their dual identities were explored for their personal and professional expertise regarding meeting the needs of CSI-impacted Black women. Twelve systems professionals participated via a combination of one-to-one interviews and focus groups.

Participants graciously permitted extensive interviewing, averaging two hours. Researchers made the decision that for the purposes of this study, affording all participants confidentiality irrespective of their identities would elicit the most transparency and forthcoming responses. The insights and approaches in this report have been formulated as a result of these activities and in response to the requirements of the proviso.