



Law Enforcement Agency Practices and Policies for the Investigation of Child Sex Trafficking: Are Agencies Using Victim-Centered Approaches?

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Abstract

Over the past decade, efforts have been made to reform the way in which law enforcement responds to child sex trafficking (CST). Law enforcement agencies are being urged or required to use victim-centered approaches that provide exploited youth with support and services. However, researchers have yet to empirically examine law enforcement's recognition of CST at the agency-level, their arrest practices, or the services that are being offered to CST victims. We have little information about the utilization and effectiveness of various law enforcement agency policies, practices and training programs related to CST. The National Law Enforcement Agency Child Sex Trafficking (LEA-CST) Study aimed to address these gaps through a national survey of law enforcement agencies around the U.S. The current study reports on mail survey data collected from a sample of 1,306 agencies that provided feedback on the use of up to nine victim-centered approaches to CST at their agency. Data were analyzed along with information about whether their agency investigated at least one case of CST in the year 2021. Almost all agencies (97.5%) said they used or had access to at least one victim-centered approach to CST investigations, with larger agencies reporting a greater number of approaches. Two policies were significantly related to a greater likelihood of investigating at least one case of CST in 2021: Access to a CST-specific task force and access to a CST-specific victim service agency. Findings document a growing orientation to these cases by law enforcement that recognizes youth victimization, with innovative approaches to identification and support. Community collaboration appears to be critical to helping to identify, support and provide justice to CST victims.

Research Summary This study examined law enforcement's recognition of CST at the agency-level, their arrest practices, and the services that are being offered to CST victims. Among 1,306 agencies across the United States, almost all (97.5%) said they used or had access to at least one victim-centered approach to CST investigations, with larger agencies reporting a greater number of approaches. Two

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policies were significantly related to a greater likelihood of investigating at least one CST case in 2021: Access to a CST-specific task force and access to a CST-specific victim service agency.

Policy Implications Findings from the current study underscore the importance of victim-centered approaches to CST that feature connections and collaborations across communities. These collaborations champion the wellness of youth who have experienced this unique and egregious form of sexual victimization while simultaneously allowing for criminal investigations to proceed, ideally with minimal re-traumatization of the victim.

Keywords Child sex trafficking · Victim-centered · Law enforcement · Response

Introduction

Over the past decade, efforts have been made by policy makers, criminal justice professionals, child advocates and practitioners working with exploited children to reform the way in which law enforcement responds to child sex trafficking (CST) (Farrell et al., 2008; International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2016). The goals have been to both reduce the number of these crimes and respond to involved juveniles as victims rather than as offenders. Law enforcement agencies are being urged or required to change their tactics so that they target the exploiters who sell and buy sex from minors, avoid arrests or harsh treatment that can alienate victims, and use victim-centered approaches that provide exploited youth with support and services (Clayton et al., 2014; President's Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2014; Rafferty, 2013). While a small number of agencies are known to have adopted this new perspective (Brown & Wilson, 2014; Gonzales & Collins, 2011), little information exists about how widespread adoption of strategies consistent with recent policy and legislative changes actually are.

Legislation Impacting LEA Responses to CST

The major legislative changes that impact the law enforcement response to CST began in the early 2000s and have accelerated in recent years. For example, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of, 2000 ("Trafficking Victims Protection Act of, 2000," 2000), which pertained to sex and labor trafficking of foreign nationals, was reauthorized in 2005 to include U.S. citizens and legal residents and to create grants to assist local and state LEAs (Polaris Project, 2020). All 50 states have passed anti-human trafficking laws, mostly in the past decade, and almost all have provisions that pertain to CST (Clayton et al., 2014; Polaris Project, 2014). While most of these laws apply to all forms of human trafficking, there is evidence that sex trafficking involving minors accounts for the largest proportion of trafficking cases investigated by agencies (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014). Since 2008, a number of states have passed Safe Harbor laws that provide specific protections to trafficked minors and often direct them away from the criminal justice system and into the child protection system for services (Clayton et al., 2014; Polaris Project, 2014). Much of this legislative activ-

ity impacts law enforcement by, for example, decriminalizing the actions of minors caught up in sex trafficking, providing for victim-centered approaches such as use of multi-disciplinary teams, or requiring that certain services be provided to CST victims. However, these legal changes vary from state to state such that their provisions are difficult to summarize or track (Clayton et al., 2014). In addition, laws against prostitution still apply to minors in most jurisdictions and are not obviated by legislation to protect CST victims (Clayton et al., 2014).

The Movement Towards a Victim-Centered Approach to CST

Researchers have yet to evaluate how legal mandates at the federal and state levels have affected law enforcement's recognition of CST at the agency-level, their arrest practices, or the services that are being offered to CST victims. In fact, virtually nothing is known about the utilization and effectiveness of various law enforcement agency policies, practices and training programs related to CST, resulting in an absence of research-based information to guide agency efforts. Indeed, research indicates that the police identification of trafficking victims remains low (Barrick et al., 2021; Farrell et al., 2010), and that overwhelmingly agencies believe this crime is absent in their jurisdictions (Busch-Armendariz et al., 2017; Farrell et al., 2014). This limited awareness, coupled with the reluctance of many CST victims to self-identify (Ottisova et al., 2018), has made victim-centered law enforcement agency protocols difficult to develop. Accordingly, many of the protocols being utilized by agencies for CST victims have been repurposed from extant protocols for child sexual abuse, and have not been specifically developed and tailored to CST (Busch-Armendariz et al., 2017). Therefore, it is difficult to know if the agency protocols being offered to CST victims are helpful at reducing revictimization, alleviating the mental and physical health consequences for these survivors, or ultimately do more harm than good.

Current Study

The current study aims to address some of these gaps in knowledge by reporting on law enforcement agency-level practices and policies surrounding CST investigations from a large sample of law enforcement agencies across the US. Specifically, this paper aims to: (1) report how many agencies endorse individual victim-centered approaches to CST, and the overall number endorsed by agency size; (2) understand how different victim centered approaches correlate with one another; (3) examine how the number and type of victim-centered approaches to cases involving CST is related to an agency's report of any CST case in 2021; and (4) examine relationships between individual victim-centered approaches and report of any CST case after adjusting for agency size.

Methods

National Law Enforcement Agency Child Sex Trafficking Study

The National Law Enforcement Agency Child Sex Trafficking (LEA-CST) Study aimed to collect information from a national sample of law enforcement agencies about the characteristics of crimes involving child sex trafficking investigated during a 1-year period – 2021. The goals of the methodology were to construct a national sample of law enforcement agencies that would provide an overall picture of the law enforcement response to these crimes in the United States and understand how these cases emerged and were handled in a diverse group of agencies. This study was conducted with the approval of the [masked for review] Institutional Review Board. The current paper utilizes data from the agency-level mail survey sent to all agencies randomly selected into the sample which is described in more detail below.

Participants

A national sample of 3,564 state, county, and local law enforcement agencies was surveyed by mail asking them whether they had investigated cases involving child sex trafficking in 2021. The sample was drawn using a database available through the National Directory of Criminal Justice Data (National Public Safety Information Bureau, 2021). This data set included an annually updated census of local, county, and state law enforcement agencies in the United States and was designed to provide geographic and other identifying information for each record included in either the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports files or the Bureau of Justice Statistic's Directory of Law Enforcement Agencies. We constructed a stratified national sample of state, county, and local law enforcement agencies, dividing law enforcement agencies into four sampling frames based on the number of full-time sworn officers in each agency.

The first frame consisted of 85 agencies, including agencies in the United States with 1,000 or more full-time sworn officers plus seven additional agencies not originally captured which were included with certainty due to their participation in a qualitative component of the larger study. This frame represented agencies from all major cities (e.g., New York City, Boston, Miami, Los Angeles) and counties (e.g., Orange County, CA; Miami-Dade County, FL; Nassau County, NY) defined as having 1000+ full-time sworn officers. We did not sample from this frame; we included all agencies, given that CST cases were expected to cluster in these largest agencies.

The second frame consisted of State Police and State Bureau of Investigation agencies ($n=103$) and we included them all with certainty. The third frame consisted of law enforcement agencies with 50–999 full-time sworn officers. A total of 2,244 agencies fell into this category. Of these, 38% were randomly selected to participate in the study ($n=859$). The fourth frame consisted of law enforcement agencies with 1–49 full-time sworn officers. A total of 12,701 agencies fell into this category. Of these, 20% were randomly selected to participate in the study ($n=2,544$). The percentage of cases sampled from the third and fourth frames was chosen based on the population within each frame, the likelihood of identifying cases that met our criteria,

the resources of the study, and modeling this methodology off of prior successful research using these guidelines.

Of these agencies in the sample ($n=3,591$), 245 agencies were not eligible because they had no jurisdiction over CST investigations ($n=151$), were duplicates of other agencies in the sample ($n=52$), or no longer existed ($n=42$), resulting in 3,346 eligible agencies. 39% ($n=1,306$) of the eligible agencies responded to the mail surveys and answered additional questions about their agency's practices and policies around CST cases. These agencies represent the analytic sample for the current paper.

Procedures

We conducted a mail survey of the law enforcement agencies in the aforementioned sample. In the mail survey, we asked agencies whether in the 2021 calendar year they had investigated cases involving child sex trafficking. Eligible cases were defined as cases "where children or adolescents under the age of 18 were involved in child sex trafficking. These could be cases where juveniles—either boys or girls—exchanged sex acts for money (or something else of monetary value) or cases that involved pimps, organized crime, or other situations where one person made money or gained financially in other ways from selling a child or adolescent for sex." Agency heads were given the option of returning the mail survey or completing the survey via a secure online link.

Measures

The agency-level mail survey was a multipage booklet, formatted so that respondents could follow it easily. It included a "Frequently Asked Questions" section and a glossary of study terms, along with a toll-free telephone number so that respondents could contact the researchers if they had questions. Participants were asked to think of the following types of cases involving child sex trafficking:

- Minors involved in survival sex or sex for drugs.
- Minors acting on their own who exchanged sex to receive money, goods, food, shelter, etc. – boys or girls, LGBTQ.
- Traffickers (pimps) with minors involved in commercial sex.
- Businesses or other places fronting for sex trafficking (e.g., massage parlors, escort services).
- Organized crime or gang-related child sex trafficking.
- Sexual abuse where minors were trafficked by family members or acquaintances.
- International trafficking of minors for sexual purposes (victims came from or went to other countries).
- Sex tourism (a US citizen traveling internationally to have sex with a minor in a foreign country).
- Images, videos or live performances by minors from which someone was receiving money.

Then, they were asked to answer the following two questions: (1) In the calendar year 2021, did your agency investigate any crimes involving child sex trafficking (e.g., traffickers, pimps, facilitators of child sex trafficking, customers, minors working alone, etc.)? *This can include both confirmed and attempted child sex trafficking.* And (2) In calendar year 2021, did your agency investigate any crimes where someone produced or sold child sexual abuse material for monetary gain (or something of monetary value)? *The payment could have been to the minor or to someone else. This can include both confirmed and attempted selling for monetary gain.*

If respondents answered “Yes” to either of these questions, we asked them to indicate a total number of cases and then also list the case number, or other reference, and the name and contact information of the key investigating officer (or most knowledgeable person) for each case they reported. We emphasized that agencies should return surveys, even if they had no cases to report.

The mail surveys also included 11 additional questions about the agency and community level practices surrounding CST. These questions were developed by the authors for the purpose of the current study and are the focus of the current paper.

Questions covered access to a court system that specializes in child sex trafficking cases as well as an assigned prosecutor with this specialty. Response options for both were yes/no/not sure. Questions also queried whether their agency (1) participated in or had access to a multidisciplinary team (MDT) that works with victims of child sex trafficking, (2) whether their community has a victim service agency that focuses on helping victims of CST, (3) if their agency partnered with a child welfare agency around CST cases, (4) if they have access to task force that specializes in CST, and (5) if they have access to victim advocates that could help in cases involving CST.

We asked whether officers/investigators in their agency received training on the investigation of child sex trafficking cases (yes/no/not sure) and, if yes how recent the last training was: in the past year, 1–2 years ago, 2–3 years ago, 3–4 years ago, and 5 or more years ago. If their agency received training, we also asked how regularly the officers/investigators receive training on this topic: monthly, 2–3 times a year, once a year, and less frequently. We also asked whether several different topics were covered in these trainings with the ability to mark all that apply: (1) types of child sex trafficking, (2) risk factors, (3) physical and behavioral indicators, (4) use of child sex trafficking screening tools, (5) impact of trauma, (6) de-escalation strategies, (7) youth engagement, (8) safety planning, (9) multidisciplinary efforts to prevent revictimization, (10) culturally competent responses to victims, (11) victim rights, and (12) evidence informed practices and/or interventions. Finally, we asked if their agency participated in the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS) and whether they have an offense code for CST in their records system.

Data Analysis

Chi-square crosstabulations were conducted to compare victim-centered approaches across the four frames of the study (defined by agency size). Mean number of victim-centered approaches were also compared by study frame using ANOVA. Next, pairwise correlations were conducted between the different victim-centered approaches. Each victim-centered approach was then analyzed in relation to whether the agency

reported investigating any CST cases in Year 2021 using chi-square Statistics. Four Poisson regression analyses were conducted to explore relationships between victim-centered approaches, agency size and report of any CST investigation. Specifically, we explored models that examined individual victim-centered approaches and report of any CST investigation both without and then with adjustment of agency size. Then we examined how the count of number of victim-centered approaches (instead of individual ones) was related to report of any CST investigation both without and then with adjustment of agency size.

Results

Victim-Centered Approaches to Cases Involving CST

Almost all agencies (97.5%) said they used or had access to at least one victim-centered approach to CST investigations – 12.4% had 1–2 types, 30.7% 3–4 types, 35.3% 5–6 types, and 19.1% 7–9 types. Overall, the victim-centered approach most commonly endorsed was access to victim advocates to help in cases involving CST, reported by 89.7% of all agencies (See Table 1). Almost all large agencies (97.1%) reported access to victim advocates, compared to 88% of the smallest agencies. The victim-centered approach least likely to be endorsed across all agencies was having an MDT that specializes in CST. Less than 10% (9.3%) of all agencies reported having an MDT, with the largest agencies being most likely to have one (52.9%). Comparatively, only 6.3% of the smallest agencies had an MDT in their community specializing in CST.

Across all agencies, the mean number of victim-centered approaches reported by agencies was 4.65 (SD=2.01). The largest agencies endorsed the most victim-centered approaches (M=6.56, SD=1.83). State police followed closely with 5.79 (SD = 2.04) approaches, on average. Finally, the smallest agencies in the sample endorsed the lowest number of victim-centered approaches (M=4.31, SD=1.99).

The largest agencies in the study, those with 1000+ sworn officers, were significantly more likely than smaller agencies to report having access to almost all victim-centered approaches (Table 1). Almost 22% of all agencies reported having access to a court system that specializes in CST. The largest agencies were significantly more likely to report having access, whereas the smallest agencies (less than 50 officers) were least likely to report having access to such a court system (18.1%). About one third of all agencies (33.5%) had a prosecutor that specializes in CST, with the largest agencies most likely to endorse this (64.7%).

State police were significantly more likely than other agencies to say investigators received training on CST (94.7%) compared to 88.2% of the largest agencies, 79.5%, of agencies with 50–999 sworn officers and 64.2% of agencies with 1–49 sworn officers ($p < .001$). A similar pattern emerged regarding having an offense code for CST in records systems, however, this difference was not statistically significant. Over half of state police (57.9%) reported having an offense code, whereas 50% of the largest agencies reported having one.

Table 1 Victim-centered approaches to cases involving child sex trafficking

Victim-centered approach	All agencies (<i>N</i> = 1306) <i>n</i> (%)	1000+ officers (<i>n</i> = 34) <i>n</i> (%)	State police (<i>n</i> = 19) <i>n</i> (%)	50–999 officers (<i>n</i> = 381) <i>n</i> (%)	1–49 officers (<i>n</i> = 872) <i>n</i> (%)	<i>P</i> value
Court-system that specializes in CST	283 (21.7)	11 (32.3)	4 (21.1)	110 (28.9)	158 (18.1)	<0.001
Prosecutor that specializes in CST	437 (33.5)	22 (64.7)	11 (57.9)	167 (43.8)	237 (27.2)	<0.001
Investigators receive training on CST	911 (69.7)	30 (88.2)	18 (94.7)	303 (79.5)	560 (64.2)	<0.001
Victim service agency that focuses on helping victim of CST	685 (52.5)	32 (94.1)	14 (73.7)	235 (61.7)	404 (46.3)	<0.001
Offense code for CST in records system	703 (53.8)	17 (50.0)	11 (57.9)	204 (53.5)	471 (54.0)	0.95
Partners with child welfare agency around CST	924 (70.7)	30 (88.2)	14 (73.7)	286 (75.1)	594 (68.1)	0.01
Access to task force that specializes in CST	833 (63.8)	30 (88.2)	15 (78.9)	280 (73.5)	508 (58.3)	<0.001
Access to victim advocates to help in cases involving CST	1172 (89.7)	33 (97.1)	17 (89.5)	355 (93.2)	767 (88.0)	0.02
Community has MDT that specializes in CST	122 (9.3)	18 (52.9)	6 (31.6)	43 (11.3)	55 (6.3)	<0.001
Mean number of victim-centered approaches (SD)	4.65 (2.01)	6.56 (1.83)	5.79 (2.04)	5.20 (1.84)	4.31 (1.99)	<0.001
Any CST cases reported	218 (16.7)	29 (85.3)	10 (52.6)	124 (32.5)	55 (6.3)	<0.001

Overall, 16.7% of agencies in the sample investigated at least one CST case in 2021, with the largest agencies significantly more likely to investigate a CST case (85.3%) compared to 6.3% of the smallest agencies in the sample.

Relationships Between Different Victim-Centered Approaches to Cases Involving CST

As shown in Table 2, most victim-centered approach were significantly correlated with one another. The largest correlation was between having a prosecutor specializing in CST and a court-system that specializes in CST ($r=.54$). Partnering with child welfare agency around CST and having access to a victim service agency that focused on helping victims of CST were also significantly correlated ($r=.32$). The relationship between having a prosecutor specializing in CST and having a victim service agency that focuses on helping victims of CST were also significantly correlated ($r=.30$).

The only pairwise correlations that showed no statistical significance were related to having an offense code for CST in the agency's records system. This victim-centered approach showed no significant relationship with having a court-system specializing in CST, a prosecutor that specializes in CST, or having an MDT specializing in CST. Although having an offense code for CST in the agency's records system had significantly positive correlations with the other victim-centered approaches, the relationships tended to be weaker in comparison to most other pairwise correlations included in our analyses.

Relationships Between Different Victim-Centered Approaches and Report of Any CST Investigation in Year 2021

We also analyzed differences between number and type of victim-centered approaches and whether or not an agency reported that they had investigated CST cases in 2021 (Fig. 1). Agencies who had investigated CST cases in 2021 were significantly more likely to use almost all victim-centered approaches except for having an offense code for CST in their records system. Agencies who investigated CST cases in 2021 generally used more victim-centered approaches, with an average of 5.65 ($SD=1.85$) in those with cases versus an average of 4.45 ($sd=1.85$) approaches in agencies who did not investigate CST cases in 2021.

There was only one victim-centered approach which had no significant difference in use between agencies who investigated CST cases in 2021 and those who did not. About 55% (54.7%) of agencies who did not investigate CST cases in 2021 reported having an offense code in their records system for CST, compared to 49.5% of agencies who investigated CST cases in 2021. While the relationship was not statistically significant, the direction of the relationship was opposite to the rest of the victim-centered approaches, showing a departure from the typical pattern of the relationship between having investigated CST cases and the types of approaches used.

Table 2 Pairwise correlations between different victim-centered approaches

Victim-centered approach	Court	Prosecutor	Training	Victim service	Offense code	Child welfare	Task force	Victim advocate	MDT
Court-system that specializes in CST	1.0	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Prosecutor that specializes in CST	0.54***	1.0	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Investigators receive training on CST	0.08**	0.16***	1.0	---	---	---	---	---	---
Victim service agency that focuses on helping victim of CST	0.22***	0.30***	0.21***	1.0	---	---	---	---	---
Offense code for CST in records system	0.04	0.03	0.11***	0.10***	1.0	---	---	---	---
Partners with child welfare agency around CST	0.13***	0.20***	0.20***	0.32***	0.16***	1.0	---	---	---
Access to task force that specializes in CST	0.17***	0.21***	0.19***	0.26***	0.08**	0.20***	1.0	---	---
Access to victim advocates to help in cases involving CST	0.09***	0.15***	0.22***	0.24***	0.11***	0.25***	0.23***	1.0	---
Community has MDT that specializes in CST	0.16***	0.16***	0.10***	0.16***	0.03	0.08**	0.18***	0.07**	1.0

** p ≤ .01; *** p ≤ .001

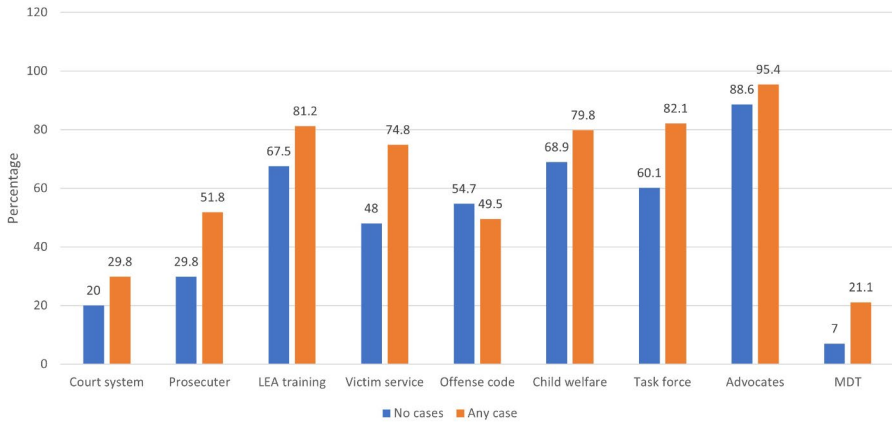


Fig. 1 Number and type of victim-centered approaches to cases involving child sex trafficking by report of any cases in 2021. Note. All significantly different except having an offense code. Mean count=4.45 (SD=1.98) for no cases; mean count=5.65 (SD=1.85) for cases

Links Between Individual and Total Number of Victim-Centered Approaches and Report of Any CST Investigation in Year 2021 Both With and Without Adjusting for Agency Size

Table 3 shows the relationships between individual victim-centered approaches and report of any CST cases, both with and without adjusting for agency size. Without adjusting for agency size, there were significantly higher odds of investigating a CST case for almost all victim-centered approaches, with the exception of having a court-system that specializes in CST, partnering with a child welfare agency around CST, and having access to victim advocates to help in cases involving CST. Odds of investigating a CST case were higher in communities with access to MDTs specializing in CST (OR=2.4, $p < .001$), agencies with access to victim service agencies focusing on helping victims of CST (OR=2.1, $p < .001$), and agencies with access to a task force specializing in CST (OR=2.0, $p = .001$). When adjusting for agency size, the significant relationships remained, aside from two approaches: having a prosecutor that specializes in CST (OR=1.4, $p = .11$), and having access to an MDT that specializes in CST (OR=1.5, $p = .09$).

Finally, the second analysis in Table 3 shows that overall, odds of investigating at least one CST case in 2021 increased with each additional victim-centered approaches endorse (OR=1.4, $p < .001$). This relationship remained when adjusting for agency size, although the odds were slightly attenuated compared to the model which did not adjust for agency size (OR=1.2, $p < .001$).

Table 3 Links between individual victim-centered approaches and report of any CST cases adjusting for agency size

	Individual victim-centered approaches		+ agency size	
	OR (95% CI)	<i>P</i> value	OR (95% CI)	<i>P</i> value
Analysis 1				
Victim-centered approach				
Court-system that specializes in CST	0.8 (0.5, 1.2)	0.27	0.8 (0.5, 1.3)	0.39
Prosecutor that specializes in CST	1.7 (1.2, 2.5)	0.003	1.4 (0.9, 2.1)	0.11
Investigators receive training on CST	1.4 (1.0, 2.1)	0.07	1.1 (0.7, 1.6)	0.73
Victim service agency that focuses on helping victim of CST	2.1 (1.5, 3.1)	<0.001	1.8 (1.2, 2.7)	0.004
Offense code for CST in records system	0.7 (0.5, 0.9)	0.01	0.7 (0.5, 1.1)	0.05
Partners with child welfare agency around CST	1.0 (0.7, 1.5)	0.86	1.0 (0.7, 1.6)	0.83
Access to task force that specializes in CST	2.0 (1.3, 2.9)	0.001	1.8 (1.2, 2.7)	0.008
Access to victim advocates to help in cases involving CST	1.3 (0.6, 2.6)	0.47	1.2 (0.6, 2.6)	0.59
Community has MDT that specializes in CST	2.4 (1.5, 3.6)	<0.001	1.5 (0.9, 2.6)	0.09
Agency size				
1–49 officers (ref)	---	---	1.0	---
50–999 officers	---	---	6.0 (4.2, 8.6)	<0.001
State Police	---	---	11.5 (4.2, 30.9)	<0.001
1000+ officers	---	---	47.5 (17.0, 132.5)	<0.001
Analysis 2				
Count of number of victim-centered approaches	1.4 (1.3, 1.5)	<0.001	1.2 (1.1, 1.3)	<0.001
Agency size				
1–49 officers (ref)	---	---	1.0	---
50–999 officers	---	---	6.2 (4.4, 8.9)	<0.001
State	---	---	13.1 (5.0, 34.2)	<0.001
1000+ officers	---	---	61.2 (22.4, 167.0)	<0.001

Discussion

This study examined data from a national sample of law enforcement agencies across the United States, aiming to understand the types of victim-centered approaches used in CST investigations, as well as the relationships these approaches had with agency characteristics such as size (number of full-time sworn officers) and whether the agency had investigated a CST case in the focal year of data collection, 2021. Findings inform future development of law enforcement investigative protocols that target the unique challenges inherent in CST cases. In particular, even after controlling for agency size, agencies that collaborated with a victim-service agency focused on CST and had access to a task force specializing in CST were more likely to report investigating at least one CST case in 2021. Increasing victim-centered approaches could aid law enforcement agencies in reducing revictimization of children involved in these types of crimes by connecting them with services in the community, rather

than labeling them as offenders or delinquents, which has been common practice in the past (Mitchell et al., 2010).

The response from agencies participating in the survey found that virtually all were using at least one victim-centered approach to CST investigations, regardless of agency size. This is a promising finding because it reflects an awareness of the unique needs of CST victims. This suggests a change in police perspectives on CST from 20 years ago when law enforcement agencies often still treated these juveniles as delinquents rather than victims (Mitchell et al., 2010). Awareness of the importance of a victim-centered response to child sexual abuse more generally has been in place since the mid-1980's when Child Advocacy Centers (CAC) were established to better respond to cases of child maltreatment and address problems associated with uncoordinated community responses in cases of sexual abuse (Elmquist et al., 2015). CACs utilize a coordinated community response model which has become the gold standard and incorporates a combination of multidisciplinary teams, joint investigations, and services to child sexual abuse victims and their families (Cross et al., 2008). There are currently 961 CACs in the U.S. that are part of the National Children's Alliance (National Children's Alliance, 2024), which is the organization that supports these centers; virtually all have law enforcement representation on their multidisciplinary teams (Cross et al., 2022). The most common approaches used by agencies in the current sample included access to resources in the community to aid in CST investigations and victim services, such as victim advocates, child welfare agencies, and specialized task forces. Furthermore, over half of the agencies reported that they provided training to investigators on CST. This is encouraging, particularly given that previous research has shown that in the past, law enforcement have been largely unaware of CST and/or were reticent to screen for CST even when it is suspected (Farrell et al., 2010, 2019; Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014).

Another aim of the current study was to better understand the relationships between an agency's size and the number and types of victim-centered approaches used. A minority of agencies in this sample (16.7%) reported investigating at least one CST case in 2021. Analyses indicate that the larger the agency, the more likely they were to have investigated CST cases in 2021. This finding may indicate that larger agencies serve larger populations, therefore, they simply have greater opportunity to have CST occurring in their jurisdiction. However, the finding may also suggest that larger agencies have greater access to resources such as training and multi-disciplinary engagement within the community, which work together to promote the use of victim-centered approaches in their jurisdictions. This phenomenon is well represented in the extant literature around awareness and identification protocols across a number of social issues (Mounteney et al., 2010; Trabold, 2007). Specifically, once made aware of an issue, individuals are better able to screen for and identify potential occurrences. This leads to an increase in problem identification, though not necessarily an increase in scope (e.g., prevalence and/or incidence of the problem). In support of this explanation, the data revealed that all victim-centered approaches, except one which is discussed in more detail below, were related to increased likelihood of having a CST investigation. It remains unclear whether there are actually more cases of CST in areas where larger agencies are situated.

Interestingly, agencies with an offense code for CST were significantly *less* likely to report a CST case in 2021. Having a CST offense code in an agencies' records system was also significantly correlated with investigator training on CST. It may be that at agencies that have a CST offense code, there is a certainty in using the code that prevents law enforcement from classifying cases as involving CST unless they are certain such an offense could be prosecuted. Unfortunately, CST cases are notoriously challenging to work and prosecute. These challenges are related to several factors, including the lack of clear protocol to address CST specifically (separate from other types of child victimization), and victims' reluctance to self-identify and cooperate with law enforcement (Greenbaum, 2014). Further, extant research suggests that most sex trafficking survivors are uninterested in pressing charges against their traffickers, preferring instead to simply "move on" with their lives (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014). Given this, it may be that a CST offense code is largely unused as an extension of a victim-centered approach, rather than in spite of it.

It is also of interest that some additional victim-centered approaches were not related to the investigation of CST cases. For example, analyses did not find a significant relationship between CST training and case identification. This suggests a need for better development of CST training programs and evaluation of outcome on investigation procedures. Some training approaches might be more effective at helping law enforcement identify markers of CST victimization than others. Collaboration with child welfare agencies on identifying CST cases was also not related to reporting a CST investigation. Again, there might be differences in quality of partnerships with child welfare agencies that distinguish better case identification.

Overall, we found that agency size was a factor in access to different community resources, and thus important to consider regarding victim-centered approaches to CST. Not surprisingly, the largest agencies in this sample utilized the most victim-centered approaches. However, agency size did not fully account for significant relationships between individual approaches and having at least one CST case in 2021. Approaches significantly related to CST investigation included having a prosecutor that specializes in CST in their jurisdiction, having a victim-service agency that focuses on helping victims of CST, having access to a task force that specializes in CST, and having a community MDT that specializes in CST. All these relationships remained significant after taking into account agency size, with the exception of having a prosecutor and MDT that specializes in CST cases.

Finally, we found that the more victim-centered approaches used by an agency, the more likely the agency was to report investigating a CST case in 2021. The relationship remained significant after controlling for agency size, again suggesting that the agency's size is not the main factor that determines their odds of having investigated CST cases. Perhaps agencies who endorse victim-centered approaches can better recognize CST cases, therefore increasing their odds of having investigated such cases. Conversely, it is possible that prevalence of CST in a jurisdiction may motivate agencies to adopt different protocols for handling investigations and connecting victims to resources. Future research should examine this relationship further to better understand the processes used by law enforcement agencies to implement victim-centered approaches, or other factors that help agencies identify CST cases within their jurisdiction.

Implications

The passage of state-level Safe Harbor legislation across the US was aimed at eliminating the criminalization of youth victimization. Under these laws, law enforcement agencies may not arrest a youth for prostitution and must instead provide alternative supports to children and youth that are engaged in commercial sex. Given that youth who experience CST victimization often come in contact with the criminal justice system, it is important that law enforcement be familiar with warning signs of CST, and familiar with available supports for these survivors in their communities. Improved and effective law enforcement training is an important first step toward service provision and the prevention of CST [re]victimization (Todres, 2010).

However, collaborations between law enforcement and service providers has not always been easy to facilitate or maintain, to the detriment of CST victims and survivors (Cole & Sprang, 2015). Findings from the current study underscore the importance of victim-centered approaches that feature connections and collaborations across communities. These collaborations champion the wellness of youth who have experienced this unique and egregious form of sexual victimization while simultaneously allowing for criminal investigations to proceed, ideally with minimal re-traumatization of the victim.

While the implementation of victim-centered approaches for sex trafficking victims is far from unique, the current study uniquely offers evidence that these approaches not only serve the purpose of connecting CST victims and survivors to services, but also increases identification. This bidirectional relationship has strong implications for law enforcement and service providers alike - with better identification, we have better prevalence estimates and with better prevalence estimates we have more federal funds allocated for trainings and services. Holistically, the implications for ongoing community collaborations are transformative.

However, this also brings important implications for further research and service evaluation. Specifically, it will be important to explore CST victim and survivor experiences within these collaborative systems, as well as their short- and long- term outcomes following referral. It is an unfortunate truism that the majority of CST victims and survivors report that they have only participated in services following a mandate from either the juvenile justice and/or child welfare system (Busch-Armendariz et al., 2017; Franchino-Olsen et al., 2022). Accordingly, it is unclear whether greater collaborations across systems change their participation in services or their perceptions of the services' usefulness. In addition, it would be interesting to explore the differential impact of one victim-centered approach over another in terms of important criminal and individual outcomes such as successful prosecution, youth's placement permanency, mental health outcomes, and further involvement in the criminal justice system.

Limitations

Findings from the current study must be considered in light of their limitations. First, this was a survey mailed to law enforcement agencies, asking them to report information on their victim-centered approaches. It is possible that the agency personnel com-

pleting the survey had a limited knowledge of their agency's CST-related protocols and therefore over- or under-stated their agency's use of victim-centered approaches. Furthermore, it could be that while law enforcement felt that these collaborations were useful and strong, other community agencies (and/or the CST victims and survivors themselves) felt differently. Additionally, the survey collected only brief yes/no information in response to questions about agency policies and practices. We were not able to distinguish differences in quality or extent of implementation. Finally, this study was cross-sectional in nature and focused exclusively on one year- 2021- wherein the United States was collectively just exiting the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, changes and policies may have been in a state of flux that would be difficult to uncover given the nature of the data. Despite these limitations, the current study offers important information about law enforcement agency's use and implementation of victim-centered approaches.

Conclusions

It is encouraging to see the widespread use of one or more victim-centered approaches in the overwhelming majority of the agencies surveyed. Findings document a growing orientation to these cases by law enforcement that recognizes youth victimization, with innovative approaches to identification and support. There is still room for improvement: for moderate-sized agencies, serving communities that undoubtedly experience CST activity, only one-third reported even one investigation of this type of crime in 2021 and many lacked important victim-centered policies. Study findings highlight, in particular, the value of CST-focused taskforces and victim service agencies in identifying CST in communities and engaging law enforcement in combatting these crimes. Community collaboration appears to be critical to helping to identify, support and provide justice to CST victims.

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Data availability In accordance with DOJ protocols, de-identified data used for the current manuscript will be archived upon the completion of the grant period (2025).

Declarations

Competing interest The authors have no competing interests to disclose.

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