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YOUTH ATTITUDES TOWARD COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND HELP-SEEKING: AN ANALYSIS OF DATA COLLECTED BY THE NOT A NUMBER TRAFFICKING PREVENTION PROGRAM

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This study involved secondary data analysis of baseline and post-program survey data collected from youth ages 10–21, who participated in in the *Not a Number* (NAN) trafficking prevention program across 24 states ($N = 10{,}915$). Analyses examined differences in baseline awareness of CSE dynamics and help-seeking intention across youth subgroups and measured changes pre- and post-program delivery. Older youth knew more about trafficking but reported less intention to seek help from different resources in exploitive situations. Gender minority youth reported lower rates of help-seeking intention compared to other youth. Post-program outcomes were significantly different from baseline across all outcomes.

Concerns about the commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) of children and youth have increased over the last decade as research has documented the significant harm it causes (Cole et al., 2016; J. Greenbaum, 2016; Palines et al., 2020). The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000) directed federal attention to the importance of reducing CSE and emphasized the need for the "development of educational curricula regarding the dangers of trafficking." In 2021, additional legislation was introduced to increase prevention funding (Human Trafficking and Exploitation Prevention Training Act, 2021). As prevention programs are developed and updated, it is important to gather better information about how youth understand the dynamics of CSE, and how they think about safety planning and help-seeking in relation to this type of victimization risk. The current paper provides results from a secondary data analysis of program monitoring surveys administered as part of the *Not a Number* (NAN) trafficking prevention program. Data were analyzed from over 10,000 surveys collected by NAN from across the United States to explore how attitudes about CSE and help-seeking vary across subgroups of youth at baseline and examine changes in survey responses before and after program delivery.

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In this paper, we use the term "youth" to describe the adolescent and young adult sample (10–21) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024).

COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF YOUTH

Commercial sexual exploitation (CSE), sometimes referred to as sex trafficking, is defined as the exchange of sex or sexual images for money, goods, services, drugs, or other items of value (2000). Unlike adult sex trafficking, force, fraud, and/or coercion do not need to be proven for cases of CSEC, as individuals under the age of 18 are unable to consent to commercial sex. CSE varies in dynamics and can include self-negotiated exchanges by youth for basic needs such as food or shelter and organized exchanges via a third-party pimp or exploiter. The exact prevalence and scope of CSE against children and youth is unknown, although there are estimates of varied rigor (Franchino-Olsen et al., 2020). However, an abundance of research has demonstrated that CSE is harmful, and disproportionately affects young people who experience other adversities (e.g. poverty, racism, sexism, out-of-home placement) (Martin et al., 2021; Williamson & Flood, 2021).

The negative impact of CSE and trafficking victimization for youth is significant. Youth victims of CSE have higher rates of posttraumatic stress, depression, and suicidality than their non-exploited peers (Cole et al., 2016). Some research suggests that mental health conditions such as bipolar disorder, ADHD, and/or psychosis may be more prevalent among youth CSE survivors (Palines et al., 2020). Survivors of CSE also may experience heightened levels of sexually transmitted infections, and unwanted pregnancy and abortion (J. Greenbaum, 2016; Lederer & Wetzel, 2014; Marcinkowski et al., 2022). In the aftermath of sexual exploitation, survivors also can experience problems obtaining medical and mental health care (Garg et al., 2020), which can further undermine their physical, psychological, and behavioral well-being. The serious negative health and mental health impact of CSE on youth support the critical need for improved prevention initiatives.

Helping Youth Respond to CSE Risks

Effective prevention of CSE will require that communities target key risk factors. While there are many structural risks for CSE (e.g., racism, poverty, substance use) that involve comprehensive and longer-term solutions, educating youth about CSE dynamics and improving help-seeking has the potential for decreasing risk for youth while communities work to address structural risks (J. O'Brien & Preble, 2023). Below we provide additional information on the value of raising awareness of CSE and improving help-seeking for youth.

Improving Youth Understanding of CSE Dynamics

Researchers have a limited understanding of youth awareness of CSE risk factors and dynamics. Preliminary research suggests that the information youth have about CSE is reflective of sensationalized media and movies that highlight case examples rarely seen by law enforcement and are disparate from more common stories shared by survivors (Hornor et al., 2020). Furthermore, there are long-held misunderstandings and confusion about whether

and how CSE of children and youth is different from prostitution and/or other forms of sex work (Gerassi, 2015). Extant definitions highlight the importance of agency over age, noting that force, fraud, or coercion must be present for sex trafficking to occur. While this is true for adult CSE victims, such evidence is legally unnecessary for minors, as individuals under the age of 18 are deemed unable to legally consent to commercial sex. Popular media further muddies these waters by glamorizing commercial sex and glorifying exploiters (a.k.a., "pimps;" Merodio et al., 2020). Accordingly, youth may have a limited or otherwise incomplete understanding of CSE, and the legal recourse inherent to the crime.

Increasing Help-Seeking Intentions for CSE-Related Risks

Improving help-seeking is a critical goal for prevention education and first requires that youth are able to identify exploitation and see it as a problem for which they could receive help (Cauce et al., 2002). While some youth impacted by CSE may recognize their experiences as a form of victimization, many may not self-identify as victims (V. J. Greenbaum, 2014; Prior et al., 2023; Williamson & Flood, 2021). Youth experiencing CSE may instead describe their experiences as extensions of circumstance (e.g., homelessness, addiction) or choice (Footer et al., 2020). Previous research has found that for one sample of youth, almost all were unaware of local resources that could help teens who trade sex (Hornor et al., 2020).

Improving help-seeking for youth involves helping youth with: 1) problem identification and 2) service selection/receipt (Cauce et al., 2002; Pescosolido & Levy, 2002; Srebnik et al., 1996). Given the stigma of CSE, youth are likely to be reluctant to self-identify as victims, fearing shaming responses (Fukushima et al., 2020). The decision to seek help is also influenced by personal, social, and structural factors including self-efficacy, knowledge of resources, and availability of formal and informal support providers. Children and youth of color, sexual and gender minority youth, and youth living in poverty are also affected by heterosexism, racism, generational trauma, and political oppression (Martin et al., 2021; Schwarz & Grizzell, 2020; Williamson & Flood, 2021). To increase help-seeking, it would benefit youth to be provided with the wide array of formal and informal helping resources that are available to them, give them better information about how to access them, and increase their trust that the resources will be available to help.

CSE Prevention Education

There are calls to provide youth in the U.S. with more CSE prevention education (Rizo et al., 2019). Prevention education already addresses social issues like substance use, dating violence, and sexual abuse, and prevention in these areas has a burgeoning evidence-base, showing that they can increase children's awareness of these social problems and give participants more confidence that they can ask for help (Mujal et al., 2021). The U.S. Department of Education (2015) developed a tiered approach to trafficking prevention and recommends education programming specific to CSE of youth that acknowledges both the complexity of the issue and the high likelihood of co-occurring hardships. Similarly, adult survivors have reflected that education about CSE,

particularly within educational settings, would have been meaningful in their own survivorship journeys (Hurst, 2021).

Prevention education for CSE typically provides youth with information on victimization dynamics, healthy relationships, risks related to victimization, and information on how to seek help (Murphy et al., 2016; Rizo et al., 2019). These prevention programs can take a variety of forms, including traditional classroom instruction (Rizo et al., 2019), educational websites (Murphy et al., 2016), and trainings for professionals (Rajaram et al., 2022). Evaluation research on CSE-specific prevention programs for youth is scant and largely descriptive rather than evaluative. In a recent systematic review, Rizo et al. (2019) noted that only 5 of the 13 articles found related to CSE prevention programs included empirical data, and only 1 of these 5 included longitudinal data to examine program impact. As more prevention initiatives develop, it is important to clarify the goals of CSE prevention programing and define how program content is expected to help reduce the risk of CSE for youth participants. Rigorous evaluation will be needed to identify whether programs are working as they intended and help prevent trafficking. Meanwhile, evidence on impact can be gathered from program data like that collected by the NAN trafficking prevention program.

The Not a Number (NAN) Trafficking Prevention Program

The NAN curriculum is an interactive, 5-module program developed by the Love 146 nonprofit organization for in-person delivery to youth 13–21 (2020). The NAN program has been delivered to youth across 24 U.S. states in schools, youth-serving agencies, and juvenile justice settings. Trained facilitators provide the lessons in-person to small groups of youth (e.g., classrooms). The curriculum is designed to help prevent child trafficking and exploitation by: 1) providing youth with information on human trafficking and exploitation; 2) teaching youth to recognize exploiter recruitment tactics and understand personal vulnerability both in-person and online; 3) practicing refusal skills with youth that can help them avoid or reduce risk both in-person and online; 4) identifying healthy support systems; 4) teaching skills to navigate potential and existing exploitative situations; and 5) increasing youth awareness of helping resources within their communities as well as nationally. The developers worked to integrate components associated with effective prevention programs generally, including varied teaching methods, sufficient dosage, opportunities for positive relationships, and developmental and socio-cultural relevance (Nation et al., 2003). Brief baseline and post-program surveys are administered in-person by trained NAN facilitators as an integrated part of program delivery, providing ongoing process evaluation data for Love 146. The surveys collect information from youth on their attitudes toward CSE/trafficking and healthy relationships, and on their intention to seek help from different supports if they were faced with CSE.

The Current Study

The current study utilized survey data collected by the NAN program between October 2020 and May 2023 to better understand youth attitudes toward CSE and help-seeking in a large sample of youth ($N = 10{,}915$), and to compare baseline and post-program changes in survey responses. Specifically, analyses sought to answer the following research questions: 1) What

are baseline attitudes about CSE/trafficking and help-seeking for a large sample of youth across the U.S.?; 2) How do baseline CSE/trafficking and help-seeking attitudes vary across youth demographics and community settings and geographic locations (e.g. urbanicity)?; 3) What factors predict a greater intention to seek help for CSE at baseline?; and 4) How do CSE attitudes and help-seeking intention change between baseline and post-prevention program delivery surveys?

METHODS

Procedures

Youth participating in *Not a Number* completed surveys prior to receiving the first lesson and following the fifth (and final) lesson as part of program monitoring procedures. The current study analyzes data from surveys administered between October 2020 and May 2023. Over this three-year time period, baseline data were collected from 766 groups of youth ($n = 11,671$) and posttest data were collected from 686 groups ($n = 9,236$). The data were collected from program delivery across 24 states. No personally identifying information is collected on surveys, therefore, it was not possible to pair baseline and post-survey responses for youth. Fewer groups completed the post-program survey because time constraints sometimes required facilitators to omit survey delivery following the final lesson. Data were analyzed as part of process evaluation research procedures conducted in preparation for a rigorous evaluation of the *Not a Number* prevention program. Human subjects' involvement for the full study, including the secondary data analyses conducted here was approved by the University of New Hampshire IRB (IRB#: IRB-FY2023-193).

Participants

Analyses presented in this paper were limited to participants with 75% or more complete data resulting in a baseline survey sample of 10,915 youth (94% of all baseline respondents) and a post-program survey sample of 8,713 youth (94% of all posttest respondents). About half of the youth participants in the *Not a Number* program were between 10 and 14 years old, with this age group making up 47.70% of the baseline survey sample and 48.40% of the post-program survey sample (See Table 1). The sample also included a large proportion of 15- to 17-year-olds (33.34% baseline and 38.83% posttest) and a smaller proportion of 17- to 21-year-olds (9.77% baseline and 9.81% posttest). The mean age for youth taking the baseline survey sample was 14.65 years old ($SD = 1.37$) and 14.68 years old ($SD = 1.35$) for the post-program survey. Age was missing for 9.20% of the baseline sample and 2.96% of the posttest sample.

Survey participants were mostly cisgender female (48.5% baseline; 47.6% posttest) and cisgender male (44.0% baseline; 43.2% posttest), with 1% of youth identifying as transgender or other gender, and 6.4% data on gender missing. One-third of youth (33.7%) identified as Black or African-American; 24.5% as White, 17.4% as Latino or Hispanic, with smaller percentages identifying as Asian, Native American, multiple race/ethnicities, or another race/

TABLE 1
Characteristics of Baseline and Post-Program Survey Participants

Youth Characteristics	*Baseline survey* N = *10,915* *% (n)*	*Post-program survey* N = *8,713* *% (n)*
Age		
10-14	52.5 (5,206)	48.3 (4,217)
15-16	36.7 (3,639)	40.1 (3,383)
17-21	10.8 (1,066)	10.1 (855)
Missing	9.2 (1,004)	2.9 (258)
Gender		
Female	48.5 (5,296)	47.6 (4,148)
Male	44.0 (4,804)	43.2 (3,766)
Transgender/Other	1.0 (112)	1.0 (90)
Missing	6.4 (703)	8.1 (709)
Race/ethnicity		
Asian	2.1 (230)	1.6 (142)
Black/African-American	33.7 (3,676)	34.3 (2,989)
Latino/Hispanic	17.4 (1,902)	15.6 (1,357)
Native American	1.1 (120)	<1.0 (83)
White	24.5 (2,669)	24.6 (2,146)
Other[a]	2.1 (229)	1.9 (163)
2+ race/ethnicity	5.1 (559)	4.4 (383)
Missing	14.0 (1,530)	16.6 (1,450)
Group setting		
School	86.6 (8,673)	88.1 (7,535)
Community[b]	13.4 (1,345)	11.9 (1,015)
Missing	8.2 (897)	1.9 (163)
County-level urbanicity code		
Large metro	73.3 (7,690)	73.1 (6,041)
Smaller metro	15.6 (1,634)	15.2 (1,260)
Non-metro	11.1 (1,167)	11.7 (967)

[a]Other category includes those who selected Middle Eastern or "Other" racial category.

[b]Community setting represents a composite variable that includes child welfare centers, clinical settings, juvenile justice centers, residential facilities, shelters, and other community settings.

ethnicity. Fourteen percent of data on race/ethnicity for the samples was missing. The majority of NAN groups were held in school settings (86.6%), with other community settings (13.4%) making up the remainder (including child welfare centers (8%), clinical settings (2%), community settings (24%), juvenile justice centers (20%), residential centers (26%), shelters (6%), and other settings (15%)). Counties where groups were held were divided into three categories of urbanicity: large metro, smaller metro, and non-metro. Most of the youth were from large metro areas (73.3% baseline survey participants), with 15.6% from small metro areas, and 11% from non-metro or rural areas.

Measures

The surveys administered as part of the NAN program were developed by Love 146 to assess program impact and inform curriculum revisions. Baseline and post-program surveys are identical. The surveys collect information on youth age, gender, and race/ethnicity. Youth self-report their gender, and it is summarized in three categories: "male," "female," and "transgender+." It is possible that some of the female and male groups include non-cisgender youth who identified with these genders. Group settings were dichotomized into either 1) a school setting, or 2) a composite "community setting" that combined child welfare centers, clinical settings, community settings, juvenile justice centers, residential centers, shelters, and other settings. To describe location urbanicity, we identified county-level codes for each available group zip code location and then downloaded rural-urban continuum codes for each county code using data provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service (2023). Seven rural-urban codes were collapsed into three categories: 1) large metro; 2) smaller metro; and 3) non-metro (rural) for the purposes of our analyses.

Surveys then asked youth participants 12 questions that measured attitudes toward CSE and healthy relationships, and 12 questions about their intention to seek help when faced with grooming or trafficking scenarios. The response option for all questions below was a 5-point Likert style scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

Cse/Trafficking

Surveys had five questions that captured youth attitudes toward CSE dynamics (e.g., "Traffickers often pretend to be friends or romantic partners to take advantage of someone's vulnerabilities.") All CSE attitude items are included in Table 2. The baseline Cronbach's alpha for these five questions was 0.69, and the posttest alpha was 0.75. Mean CSE attitude scores for all five questions were used in some analyses.

Healthy Relationship

Six questions on the survey asked respondents about attitudes toward relationships (see Table 2) (e.g., "Consent to sexual activity requires a yes from all parties without pressure."). For two items, the desired response was reversed (disagreement reflected more informed attitudes toward healthy relationship dynamics) and scores for these items were reversed for scale-level analyses. The baseline Cronbach's alpha for these six questions was 0.53, and the posttest alpha was 0.61. Mean healthy relationship attitude scores for all five questions were used in some analyses.

Safety Plan

One question from the baseline and post-program surveys was analyzed separately: "I have a safety plan for potentially risky situations."

TABLE 2
Baseline Survey Response Distribution for Questions on Attitudes About CSE/Trafficking and Relationships ($N = 10,915$)

	Strongly Disagree % (n)	*Disagree % (n)*	*Undecided % (n)*	*Agree % (n)*	*Strongly Agree % (n)*
CSE/Trafficking Attitudes					
People can be exploited for labor and commercial sex in my neighborhood.	16.1 (1,734)	9.3 (997)	39.8 (4,290)	20.6 (2,220)	14.3 (1,538)
Youth under 18 who are involved in commercial sex are considered victims.	2.8 (304)	5.3 (578)	19.5 (2,111)	33.7 (3,661)	38.7 (4,199)
Boys can be exploited for commercial sex as well as girls.	3.6 (392)	3.0 (325)	12.9 (1,402)	33.1 (3,583)	47.4 (5,130)
Traffickers often pretend to be friends or romantic partners to take advantage of someone's vulnerabilities.	2.2 (235)	2.5 (268)	16.2 (1,760)	38.8 (4,203)	40.4 (4,375)
Both men and women can be traffickers.	2.2 (237)	1.5 (165)	8.9 (966)	26.7 (2,903)	60.8 (6,616)
Relationship Attitudes					
It's a sign of an unhealthy relationship if someone insists on reading their partner's texts.	5.1 (558)	16.6 (1,800)	33.4 (3,621)	31.9 (3,456)	13.1 (1,417)
Consent to sexual activity requires a yes from all parties without pressure.	3.5 (376)	3.8 (407)	15.0 (1,618)	22.4 (2,424)	55.4 (5,992)
It's a sign of love to do things someone asks you to do, even if you don't want to. [R]	35.3 (3,810)	30.0 (3,248)	18.9 (2,039)	11.1 (1,196)	4.8 (523)
If someone is exploited while under the influence of drugs or alcohol, it is their fault. [R]	35.1 (3,798)	23.7 (2,559)	22.5 (2,436)	12.2 (1,324)	6.5 (699)
Words can lower self-esteem and increase vulnerabilities.	2.1 (232)	3.4 (372)	17.1 (1,858)	40.0 (4,343)	37.3 (4,049)
Placing your social media account on private reduces risky interactions online.	2.8 (307)	7.7 (836)	16.9 (1,831)	46.5 (5,026)	26.1 (2,820)

Help-Seeking for Attempted Exploitation

Six questions asked about what youth would do "if someone was grooming/trying to exploit" them. Questions asked if they would: do nothing; talk to a friend; talk to an adult (parent, school teacher, doctor, or someone else); leave the situation; call a 24-hour information line for support & resources; or call the police (see Table 3). The baseline Cronbach's alpha for the five help-seeking resources questions (excluding "do nothing") was 0.69, and the posttest alpha was 0.71. Mean scores for these five questions was used in some analyses.

Help-Seeking for Trafficking/Exploitation

Youth were also asked what they would do "if someone was trafficking/exploiting" them. Response options were the same offered for attempted exploitation (see Table 3). The baseline

TABLE 3
Baseline Survey Response Distribution for Questions on Safety Planning and Help-Seeking Intention (N = 10,915)

	Strongly Disagree % (n)	*Disagree % (n)*	*Undecided % (n)*	*Agree % (n)*	*Strongly Agree % (n)*
Safey Plan					
I have a safety plan for potentially-risky situations.	3.8 (416)	11.6 (1,262)	34.9 (3,790)	35.6 (3,857)	14.1 (1,525)
If someone was grooming/trying to exploit me, I would:					
Do nothing.	56.9 (6,157)	25.6 (2,766)	12.7 (1,377)	3.3 (362)	1.5 (164)
Talk to a friend.	4.7 (512)	7.4 (802)	22.3 (2,419)	48.9 (5,317)	16.7 (1,820)
Talk to an adult (parent, school teacher, doctor, or someone else).	4.0 (435)	5.3 (581)	15.6 (1,700)	34.2 (3,718)	40.9 (4,447)
Leave the situation.	5.6 (612)	5.1 (548)	16.1 (1,748)	35.9 (3,902)	37.3 (4,047)
Call a 24-hour information line.	8.8 (958)	13.4 (1,448)	32.9 (3,568)	24.1 (2,619)	20.8 (2,256)
Call the police.	6.8 (738)	7.9 (862)	25.2 (2,743)	25.7 (2,798)	34.3 (3,731)
If someone was trafficking/exploiting me, I would:					
Do nothing.	66.6 (7,149)	19.5 (2,089)	10.1 (1,088)	2.1 (221)	1.8 (192)
Talk to a friend.	6.5 (700)	7.7 (832)	22.2 (2,396)	41.0 (4,421)	22.6 (2,438)
Talk to an adult (parent, school teacher, doctor, or someone else).	3.3 (357)	3.1 (331)	12.7 (1,376)	32.2 (3,480)	48.7 (5,271)
Leave the situation.	7.0 (753)	5.1 (545)	16.7 (1,799)	30.0 (3,236)	41.2 (4,442)
Call a 24-hour information line.	7.0 (750)	8.3 (892)	28.1 (3,025)	25.0 (2,696)	31.7 (3,423)
Call the police.	4.5 (489)	3.8 (410)	16.6 (1,794)	24.1 (2,606)	51.0 (5,519)

Cronbach's alpha for the five help-seeking resources questions (excluding "do nothing") was 0.70, and the posttest alpha was 0.73. Mean scores for these five questions was used in some analyses.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Stata/SE version 17.0. Reliability analyses (Cronbach's alpha) were calculated for attitude and help-seeking questions. For Research Question 1, descriptive data were calculated to summarize data on baseline attitudes and help-seeking survey responses. For Research Question 2, analyses of variance (ANOVA) were used to examine differences in baseline mean scale scores by age, race/ethnicity, gender, group setting and urbanicity for: CSE/trafficking attitudes, relationship attitudes, safety planning, and help-seeking for grooming and exploitation scenarios.

For Research Question 3, linear regression analyses were conducted with baseline data to examine predictors of a greater intention to seek help for exploitation/trafficking. To account for the hierarchical structure of the data (i.e. youth situated within groups), multivariate analyses report robust standard errors (SE) adjusted for clusters. Five models were examined: The first model included only youth characteristics (age, gender, race/ethnicity, and group setting). The second model added urbanicity. The final three models then added mean CSE/trafficking attitude scores, mean relationship attitude scores, and both mean attitude scores

together. Models used complete-case analysis, or listwise deletion, keeping only participants for which there were no missing data on the variables of interest.

Finally, the last set of analyses used data from both baseline and post-program surveys. Two-tailed one-sample t-test analyses were used to examine differences in baseline and post-program mean survey scores on CSE/trafficking attitudes, relationship attitudes, safety plan, and help-seeking intention for grooming and exploitation/trafficking scenarios. Because our data did not allow matching of participants' baseline and posttest mean scores, we instead compare posttest means with the baseline sample "threshold" means (York, 2016). Eta-squared statistics were calculated to provide an estimation of effect size.

RESULTS

Descriptive data (percent distributions across response options) were calculated for baseline CSE and relationship attitude questions (see Table 2). The majority of youth (60.8%) strongly agreed that both men and women could be traffickers. Smaller percentages strongly agreed that youth under 18 should be considered victims (38.7%), that boys can be exploited for commercial sex as well as girls (47.4%), and that traffickers often pretend to be friends or romantic partners to take advantage of vulnerabilities (40.4%). However, for the statement "people can be exploited for labor and commercial sex in my neighborhood," most youth (39.8%) were undecided with only 34.9% either agreeing or strongly agreeing.

For relationship health questions, the statement with most agreement was "Consent to sexual activity requires a yes from all parties without pressure," with 55.4% strongly agreeing and 22.3% either uncertain about their agreement or disagreeing. Only about a third of respondents strongly disagreed that: "It's a sign of love to do things someone asks you to do, even if you don't want to." (35.3%) or "If someone is exploited while under the influence of drugs or alcohol, it is their fault." (35.1%). Similarly, only about a third of respondents (37.3%) strongly agreed that "Words can lower self-esteem and increase vulnerabilities." The largest response to the statement that "It's a sign of an unhealthy relationship if someone insists on reading their partner's texts" was undecided (33.4%).

Descriptive data were also calculated for questions about having a safety plan and help-seeking in response to exploitation attempts or trafficking/exploitation victimization (see Table 3). When asked to respond to the statement "I have a safety plan for potentially risky situations," about a third of youth (35.6%) agreed, while another third were undecided (34.9%). When asked what they would do if someone was grooming them or trying to exploit them, the largest proportions of youth strongly agreed that they would leave the situation (37.3%) and tell an adult (40.9%). Another third strongly agreed that they would call the police (34.3%). Smaller percentages strongly agreed that they would call a 24-hour information line (20.8%) or talk to a friend (16.7%). If someone was trafficking or exploiting them half of the youth said they strongly agreed that they would call the police in that situation (51%) and talk to an adult (48.7%). Somewhat smaller percentages said they strongly agreed that they would leave the situation (41.2%), call a 24-hour information hotline (31.7%) or talk to a friend (22.6%).

Baseline Attitudes and Help-Seeking Intention Differences by Youth Characteristics

Next, we compared respondents' mean baseline scores on CSE/trafficking and relationship attitudes, safety planning and help-seeking intention for grooming and exploitation by different demographic subgroups of youth (see Table 4). Scores for all outcomes were significantly different across age except for help-seeking intention if being exploited or trafficked. Responses from youth 15–16 years old suggested more accurate perceptions of CSE/trafficking compared to 10- to 14-year-olds or 17- to 21-year-olds ($p < .05$). Older youth (17-to 21-year-olds) demonstrated more awareness of healthy relationship dynamics than younger age groups ($p < .001$) and were more likely to report having a safety plan in place for risky situations ($p < .001$). Finally, younger participants (10- to 14-year-olds) were more likely to report they would seek help in situations where someone was trying to groom them than older youth ($p < .01$).

There were also some statistically significant differences in baseline outcomes for youth with different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Black youth scored slightly higher than other youth on CSE/trafficking attitudes ($p < .01$) but slightly lower than other youth on relationship attitudes ($p < .01$). They were more likely than other youth to describe having a safety plan for risky situations ($p < .001$) and reported a greater intention to seek help in both grooming ($p < .001$) and trafficking/exploitation scenarios ($p < .001$). Responses by Latino youth suggested less awareness of CSE/trafficking dynamics than other youth ($p < .001$) and were less likely than other youth to report having a safety plan for risky situations ($p < .01$). Native American youth reported a significantly higher likelihood of having a safety plan compared to other youth ($p < .05$). Finally, White youth reported greater trafficking and relationship health awareness than other youth ($p < .001$), a lower likelihood of having a safety plan ($p < .001$), and less intention to seek help in a grooming or attempted exploitation scenario ($p < .05$).

There were also significant gender differences in trafficking and relationship awareness: For CSE/trafficking attitudes, responses by transgender youth suggested the greatest understanding of CSE dynamics and responses by cisgender male youth suggested the least understanding ($p < .001$). Cisgender female youth responses demonstrated the highest understanding of healthy relationships, while responses by cisgender males suggested the least understanding ($p < .001$). There were no differences across different genders in terms of safety planning. However, for youth responses on help-seeking intention, transgender youth reported the lowest mean rates of help-seeking intention for both grooming and exploitation/trafficking, while cisgender female youth reported the highest intention to seek help in these scenarios ($p < .001$).

Finally, responses were compared for different group settings and urbanicity. Youth in school settings had significantly higher scores on relationship attitudes compared to youth in other community settings ($p < .001$) and a greater intention to seek help in both grooming ($p < .001$) and exploitation scenarios ($p < .001$). Youth from smaller metro counties (suburban areas) demonstrated less understanding of CSE/trafficking dynamics ($p < .001$) and relationship dynamics ($p < .001$) than either large metro or non-metro (rural) settings. There was no difference in safety planning by urbanicity, but youth from large metro settings reported significantly higher rates of help-seeking intention for grooming or in trafficking scenarios than youth from small-metro or non-metro communities ($p < .001$).

TABLE 4
Baseline Survey Mean Scores by Youth Demographics and County-Level Characteristics ($N = 10,915$)

	CSE/Trafficking Attitudes (5-items)		*Relationship Attitudes (6-items)*		*Safety Plan (1-item)*		*Grooming Help-Seeking Intention (5-items)*		*Exploitation Help-Seeking Intention (5-items)*	
	Mean (SD)	*F*	*Mean (SD)*	*F*	*Mean (SD)*	*F*	*Mean (SD)*	*F*	*Mean (SD)*	*F*
Full Sample Mean	3.93 (.70)		3.79 (61)		3.44 (1.0)		3.72 (0.75)		3.87 (0.83)	
Age		3.82*		20.60***		7.27***		5.68**		1.44
10-14	3.91 (.69)		3.75 (.61)		3.41 (.99)		3.75 (.74)		3.88 (.80)	
15-16	3.95 (.70)		3.81 (.61)		3.46 (1.00)		3.70 (.77)		3.85 (.86)	
17-21	3.92 (.75)		3.87 (.65)		3.54 (1.01)		3.67 (.81)		3.87 (.88)	
Race/ethnicity[1]										
Asian	3.90 (.64)	0.73	3.77 (.60)	0.44	3.46 (0.93)	0.05	3.75 (0.66)	0.38	3.90 (0.80)	0.25
Black/African-American	4.01 (.69)	79.21**	3.77 (.61)	6.75**	3.53 (1.00)	45.10***	3.78 (0.78)	34.82***	3.92 (0.85)	21.19***
Latino/Hispanic	3.84 (.71)	51.5***	3.78 (.58)	0.65	3.39 (0.93)	9.12**	3.70 (0.73)	2.99	3.86 (0.78)	1.15
Native American	3.95 (.74)	0.09	3.84 (.62)	1.35	3.62 (0.99)	6.32*	3.63 (0.87)	3.07	3.79 (0.88)	2.45
White	4.00 (.64)	34.6***	3.91 (.59)	143.38***	3.37 (1.02)	20.68 ***	3.69 (0.74)	6.57*	3.89 (0.80)	2.04
Gender		106.65***		264.18***		1.0		23.3***		17.3***
Male	3.81 (.71)		3.63 (.58)		3.44 (1.02)		3.68 (0.78)		3.85 (0.86)	
Female	4.05 (.67)		3.95 (.59)		3.45 (0.96)		3.78 (0.72)		3.92 (0.78)	
Transgender	4.14 (.76)		3.89 (.65)		3.33 (1.01)		3.54 (0.85)		3.65 (0.94)	
None reported	3.90 (.73)		3.69 (.67)		3.40 (1.04)		3.61 (0.80)		3.72 (0.91)	
Setting		0.21		19.93***		0.83		52.05***		55.12***
School	3.93 (.70)		3.80 (.60)		3.44 (.99)		3.74 (.73)		3.90 (.81)	
Community	3.92 (.76)		3.72 (.69)		3.47 (1.07)		3.58 (.89)		3.72 (.94)	
Urbanicity		16.68***		17.21***		0.20		33.4***		30.32***
Large metro	3.95 (.70)		3.80 (.61)		3.44 (0.99)		3.76 (0.74)		3.91 (0.81)	
Smaller metro	3.84 (.73)		3.71 (.64)		3.43 (1.03)		3.62 (0.80)		3.75 (0.88)	
Non-metro	3.92 (.67)		3.84 (.61)		3.44 (0.99)		3.62 (0.80)		3.75 (0.88)	

[1]Comparisons are between youth who endorsed racial category and all others; small cell size prevent analyses from including comparisons between Middle Eastern or "Other" race with all others.

Note: All scales have a range of 1–5

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$

Baseline Predictors of Help-Seeking Intention for Trafficking/exploitation

In the next set of analyses, we used linear regression models to understand unique predictors of help-seeking intentions in response to trafficking or exploitation (see Table 5). The first model included race, gender, and setting type with cisgender female youth, Black youth, and youth in school settings uniquely predictive of greater help-seeking intention. These variables maintained predictive strength after adding urbanicity in Model 2, with both metro and non-metro youth less likely to report help-seeking compared to large metro youth. When adding in CSE/trafficking attitude means and relationship attitude means separately as predictors in Models 3 and 4, race and gender became less predictive, with urbanicity still maintaining significance. In the final model 5, with all variables, both CSE/trafficking and relationship attitude scores were significantly predictive of greater intention to seek help, even after controlling for gender, race, and urbanicity.

Changes Between Baseline and Post-Program Survey Responses

In the final set of analyses, we compared mean scores on CSE/trafficking and relationship attitude mean scores, safety planning and help-seeking intention for baseline and post-program

TABLE 5
Youth Demographics and Youth Knowledge Score Regressed on Mean Baseline Intentions to Seek Help for Exploitation/Trafficking

	Model 1 (n = *9.911*)	*Model 2* (n = *9,522*)	*Model 3* (n = *9,522*)	*Model 4* (n = *9,522*)	*Model 5* (n = *9,552*)
	Regression Coefficient (Robust Standard Error)				
Gender (ref = male)					
Female	0.07 (0.02)**	0.08 (0.02)***	0.01 (0.02)	−0.04 (0.02)	−0.05 (0.02)*
Transgender +	−0.12 (0.11)	−0.11 (0.11)	−0.21 (0.12)	−0.21 (0.11)*	−0.25 (0.11)*
None reported	−0.07 (0.05)	−0.07 (0.05)	−0.13 (0.05)**	−0.11 (0.05)*	−0.14 (0.05)**
Age	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	−0.00 (0.01)	−0.00 (0.01)
Race/ethnicity[1]					
Asian	0.05 (0.06)	0.04 (0.06)	0.03 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)
Black	0.11 (0.03)***	0.09 (0.03)**	0.04 (0.03)	0.08 (0.03)**	0.04 (0.03)
Hispanic	0.03 (0.03)	0.06 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
Native	−0.02 (0.07)	−0.03 (0.07)	−0.05 (0.07)	−0.06 (0.07)	−0.07 (0.07)
White	0.08 (0.03)**	0.09 (0.03)**	0.04 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)
Location Type (ref = Community-based)					
School	0.20 (0.04)***	0.13 (0.04)**	0.13 (0.04)**	0.09 (0.04)*	0.09 (0.04)*
Urbanicity (ref = large metro)					
Metro	–	−0.14 (0.04) ***	−0.11 (0.04)**	−0.11 (0.04)**	−0.10 (0.04)**
Non-metro	–	−0.10 (0.04) *	−0.08 (0.04)*	−0.08 (0.04)*	−0.07 (0.04)*
CSE/Trafficking attitudes (mean)	–	–	0.27 (0.02)***	–	0.17 (0.02)***
Relationship attitudes (mean)	–	–	–	0.36 (0.02)***	0.28 (0.02)***

[1]Each racial category was entered separately, comparisons are between each racial group and all other youth.
* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

TABLE 6
Comparing Mean Scores Between Baseline and Post-Program Response Status

	Baseline Mean (SE)	*Post-Program Mean (SE)*	t *(n = 8712)*	p	*Eta-squared*
CSE/trafficking attitudes	3.93 (0.01)	4.36 (0.01)	60.88	<.001	0.09
Relationship attitudes	3.79 (0.01)	4.08 (0.01)	40.21	<.001	0.05
Safety plan for risky situations	3.44 (0.01)	3.91 (0.01)	45.70	<.001	0.05
Grooming help-seeking intention	3.72 (0.01)	3.94 (0.01)	27.66	<.001	0.02
Exploiting help-seeking intention	3.87 (0.01)	4.06 (0.01)	22.05	<.001	0.01

samples of youth (see Table 6). Scores on post-program surveys were significantly higher than baseline scores across all measures. Youth CSE/trafficking attitude mean scores increased 10.7% from baseline to posttest and relationship attitude scores increased 7%. Agreement that a safety plan was in place for risky situations increased 12% between baseline and posttest. Youths' reported help-seeking intentions increased by 6% at posttest for grooming situations and 5% for exploitation/trafficking situations. Eta-squared effect sizes ranged from .01 to .09 (small to medium effect sizes) for these differences, with medium effect sizes for increases in CSE/trafficking attitudes, relationship attitudes, and safety planning post-program delivery.

DISCUSSION

The current study provided information on how a large sample of youth understand the dynamics of commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) and relationships and report on their intention to seek-help in instances of grooming efforts or exploitation. Results found that although youth had some understanding of CSE and healthy relationship dynamics, there were important gaps in that understanding, such as awareness that CSE is a problem that exists in their own community. Findings also identified that there were significant variations in CSE/trafficking awareness across different groups of youth. Younger adolescents had less accurate information on CSE/trafficking dynamics than older youth, and gender minority youth and youth from juvenile justice settings reported less intention to seek help in grooming or exploitation scenarios. Prevention education for CSE should aim to address these gaps.

The data analyzed for the current study also found a strong relationship between awareness of trafficking and help-seeking intentions, offering promise for educational and awareness-raising program approaches. Significant changes across outcomes were also identified from baseline to immediate after delivery of the *Not a Number* (NAN) trafficking prevention program, offering some initial evidence on program impact. Although more rigorous evaluation research is needed to determine NAN program efficacy, the data analyzed in the current paper demonstrates the value of regular program monitoring efforts for informing CSE prevention education efforts.

Youth Understanding of CSE/Trafficking Dynamics

To be effective, prevention education needs to build on what youth already know and provide them with new information. Results from the current study indicate that most youth

participating in the NAN curriculum come in with some information of CSE/trafficking and healthy relationships. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that youth have been exposed to media and interpersonal messages about healthy relationships and relationship red flags by the time they reach adolescence (Hielscher et al., 2021).

However, youth responses to survey questions also identify gaps and a need to provide more nuanced information about healthy relationships generally and CSE in particular. For example, responses suggest that while youth recognize that both women and men can be traffickers, they do not necessarily see the problem as something that could happen in their own community. Youth also seemed unclear, for example, whether possessive behavior (e.g., insisting on reading a partner's texts) is a red flag in a relationship, and some victim-blaming responses were endorsed by youth. Research has documented that youth learn about CSE from media and family and friends (Hornor et al., 2020), however, the media often frames CSE as a crime involving captivity and force of girls and women by nefarious predators (Bouché et al., 2018). In addition to being largely misleading, these narratives can mean that the experiences and risk profiles for some youth are neglected, such as male and LGBTQ+ youth.

Study findings also identified that youth come to prevention programs with different levels of awareness of CSE/trafficking dynamics that should be better understood. The differences by age group suggest a need for prevention education to be developmentally targeted: younger children had significantly less understanding of trafficking and relationship health dynamics in comparison to their older peers. Youth in rural areas and cisgender males scored lower at baseline for questions related to awareness of CSE/trafficking dynamics and healthy relationships. Youth in higher risk community settings like juvenile justice, child welfare, and homeless shelters reported less awareness of CSE/trafficking and relationship health at baseline as well. Positively, results from the current study indicate that prevention programs like *Not a Number* appear to successfully increase information that youth have about trafficking and healthy relationships, at least immediately after program delivery.

Safety Planning and Help-Seeking for Trafficking Risks

Increasing youth information about help-seeking resources and improving confidence and intention for help-seeking is also an important value of prevention education. The study results provided information that could be helpful for prevention programs seeking to increase help-seeking efficacy for youth. Our analyses identified that younger participants were less likely to have a safety plan but reported more intention to seek help in grooming situations. This is similar to findings for prevention programs related to sexual violence and substance use (J. E. O'Brien et al., 2024). Black youth responding to the survey reported higher rates of having a safety plan and greater intentions to seek help in risky situations related to CSE when compared to youth from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. This is a notable finding, as other studies have found youth of color are less likely to seek help when compared to youth that are part of the dominant culture (Ayalon & Young, 2005; Neighbors, 1988). The differences in help-seeking for these youth could reflect greater fears of victimization as well as an increased perception of family, friends, and other community members as sources of support, relative to their peers.

Consistent with previous research (J. E. O'Brien et al., 2024), cisgender female youth expressed more intention to seek help compared to cisgender male and transgender youth. Furthermore, youth from schools reported greater intention to seek help than youth from other community settings, such

as juvenile justice-related agencies. This could speak to the protective nature of schools when it comes to CSE, a finding replicated in international samples (Rizo et al., 2021). Alternatively, it may indicate that youth from other community settings, such as juvenile justice or child protection, who have seen more system involvement, might have less trust that they will receive effective support from their communities or even their families. Finally, youth from non-urban communities self-reported less intention to seek help in grooming and CSE scenarios. This represents a significant gap. Recent research shows that youth residing outside of large metropolitan areas can experience CSE at rates similar to urban areas (Martin et al., 2023).

Regression analyses indicate that at baseline, while some variables remain influential on help-seeking for exploitation, the strongest unique relationship prior to program delivery was between trafficking and healthy relationship awareness and help-seeking intentions. This provides support for the possibility that improving the information that youth have about CSE and trafficking could increase help-seeking behaviors. At posttest, data also indicate that the *Not a Number* program increased help-seeking intentions, indicating that at least in the short-term, prevention programs may effectively provide youth with new knowledge in two foundational outcome areas.

Limitations

Findings from the current study should be considered in light of study limitations. While the comparison data between baseline and posttest survey results provide some suggestive support for program impact, the primary purpose of the secondary analyses conducted for this study was not to evaluate the efficacy of the *Not a Number* program. We were not able, for example, to connect baseline and post-program surveys for youth, and the post-program surveys were administered immediately following the last lesson, providing little indication about whether any knowledge gains were sustained by youth. Future evaluation research will need to be conducted that provides control groups and longer-term follow-ups.

Additional limitations of secondary data analysis should also be kept in mind in considering implications. The survey questions were designed by *Not a Number* as part of a program monitoring process. The timeframe available by program facilitators for survey administration limited how much information could be collected from youth in surveys and attitudes and help-seeking were the only constructs measured, with a small set of items used to capture those constructs. Percentages of missing data from some of the variables were notable (e.g., 14% of data on youth race/ethnicity was missing). Although the sample was very large, these limitations may affect the generalizability of the findings.

Implications for Research and Practice

Despite the limitations, the current study highlights the value of program monitoring data for prevention program implementation, not only for tracking changes in youth outcomes to help inform curricula development, but for the insights that it can provide for the larger field. The baseline survey data collected by Love 146 as part of their *Not a Number* program offers a unique and valuable contribution to information on youth perspectives on CSE and trafficking. The significant increases in awareness of CSE dynamics and help-seeking intentions for youth between baseline and post-program surveys is encouraging and suggests that *Not*

a Number is providing new knowledge and information on CSE to youth. Ultimately, rigorous evaluation will be needed to examine whether that awareness is maintained over time, and whether it translates to behavior and reduced risks. However, increased information about CSE/trafficking risks and help-seeking self-efficacy are arguably necessary first steps toward problem recognition and help-seeking behavior. The findings suggest that youth do lack some information about the dynamics of CSE.

Analyses presented in this paper highlight the need for prevention education to be directed in ways that address gaps and differences. For example, findings emphasize the need for prevention to be developmentally targeted. Younger adolescents appeared to be more willing to seek help in risky situations, but lacked some important awareness of CSE and relationship dynamics that could put them at risk. On the other hand, older youth and young adults appeared to have comparatively more information about CSE, but less intention to seek help in risky situations. Cisgender males, transgender youth and youth in juvenile justice-related settings had similarly lower rates of reported intention to seek help compared to other youth. Future research should understand this better: Do these youth subgroups distrust helping sources more than their peers? Do they see themselves as being able to handle risk scenarios more on their own? Once these differences in approach to help-seeking are better understood for these subgroups of youth, prevention education can be directed at helping them recognize the risks of handling serious issues like exploitation alone and identify trusted sources of help.

It is important to note that prevention education, on its own, likely will not be sufficient to fully prevent trafficking and CSE. Improved help-seeking for CSE risk is a key goal for prevention, for example, but support systems, resource availability, and trust and reliability of helping sources varies quite a bit across communities and cultures. Structural issues like racism, sexism and stigma affect adolescent and young adults' abilities seek help/knowledge of trafficking. Seeking help in and of itself may not be enough to prevent or intervene in CSE if the help that the youth receives is not helpful. While it is critical to make sure youth have the knowledge, skills and self-belief to know when they might need help and to see themselves as worthy of help, prevention education is only one approach that will be needed to address root causes of CSE and perpetration of harm.

CONCLUSIONS

As efforts to reduce the commercial sexual exploitation of youth through prevention education initiatives expands in the U.S., it is important to evaluate program goals, and conduct research that informs prevention program strategy and theory. The current study analyzed survey data from a large sample of youth on their understanding of CSE and attitudes toward help-seeking. Effective prevention education needs to extend the information that youth already have and provide them with skills that can improve their safety. The data analyzed for the current study provides CSE prevention education advocates with areas in need of additional focus, such using child development to better target education, and making sure that education is reaching youth who may have particular barriers to help-seeking such as males, gender minority youth, and system-involved youth.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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