

Can sex trafficking be prevented?

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The high-profile case of Jeffrey Epstein has shined a light on the reality that minors are being commercially sexually exploited, and that sexual exploitation can happen in any neighborhood, city, state, or country.

But a new study conducted by researchers at Boston University School of Public Health and Northeastern University, funded by the National Institute of Justice, says there may be a way to prevent this sex trafficking. The study is the first to evaluate the effectiveness of a child CSE prevention program in the US.

Published in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, the study found that young teenagers who completed the Boston-based My Life My Choice Exploitation Prevention Curriculum showed signs of being less at risk for commercial [sexual exploitation](#) (CSE) afterward, including reporting half as many episodes of sexually explicit behavior. They were also 24 percent less likely to have experienced dating abuse, and 40 percent more likely to give CSE-related information and help to their friends.

"What is so exciting about the My Life My Choice model is that they are bringing education and support to girls who are believed to be at high risk before they are exploited," said Emily Rothman, professor of community health sciences at Boston University School of Public Health, and corresponding author of the study.

The My Life My Choice Prevention Groups work to prevent harm and connect young people who are at risk with supportive services, said Amy Farrell, associate professor of criminology and criminal justice at

Northeastern University's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, and a co-author of the study.

"As communities increasingly seek strategies to meet the needs of young people who are at risk of commercial sexual exploitation, it is critical to have models to guide these responses that have been tested empirically," Farrell said. "The model has been recognized nationally as a best practice and we now have evidence to support the idea that it has a positive impact."

My Life My Choice is a survivor-led pioneer program fighting to end the commercial sexual exploitation of children. Trained facilitators run MLMC Prevention Groups in 33 states and Canada. Child protection workers, teachers, social workers, juvenile probation officers, and others refer young people who might be at particularly high risk to an MLMC Prevention Group (groups are restricted to young people who identify as female and/or were assigned female at birth). Previous research has identified child CSE risk factors including neglect and abuse, involvement with the child welfare system, substance use, running away from home, being homeless (and particularly being homeless and LGBTQ), and having a lack of family support and education/employment opportunities.

"Our model is unique because it has been informed, created and delivered by survivors of the commercial sex industry," said Lisa Goldblatt Grace, co-founder and Executive Director of My Life My Choice. "We have paired this authentic, powerful perspective with public health innovation to develop our [curriculum](#). We are thrilled to see this evaluation reflect what we experience every day: prevention can make a difference."

In the 10-week MLMC curriculum, group facilitators (usually a clinician and/or a CSE survivor) provide information designed to increase

participants' knowledge about the commercial sex industry and individuals who sexually exploit others and shift their attitudes about the commercial sex industry. The curriculum also acknowledges barriers to making behavioral and safety-oriented changes, and teaches participants about risk factors for CSE, as well as helping participants develop media literacy skills and build self-esteem, resilience, and personal empowerment. Each participant keeps a journal during the curriculum and shares it only with the facilitator, giving the facilitator an opportunity to adapt the curriculum and giving participants a way to privately communicate possible threats to their safety and/or risky behavior.

The group participants assess their own vulnerability to exploitation, and the curriculum also encourages them to share what they have learned with other young people who may be at risk.

For the study, Rothman and her colleagues focused on about 300 participants in

My Life My Choice groups in Boston, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Florida, most of them around 14 years old. These participants filled out a survey before their first group, then responded to the same questions when they completed the curriculum and three months later. The surveys collected information about the demographics and lived experiences of the participants. They also measured behavior change and shifts in knowledge and attitudes about CSE and its harmful impact on youth (including questions about the recruitment tactics that pimps use, myths/facts about the commercial sex industry, healthy relationships, and drug and alcohol use as it pertains to CSE).

Both immediately after the curriculum and three months later, the researchers found that the participants reported half as many episodes of sexually explicit and potentially CSE-related behavior than they had

before the curriculum. These behaviors ranged from taking naked selfies to exchanging sex for money, food, a place to stay, drugs, gifts, or favors.

At the three-month follow up, participants were two times less likely to report dating abuse victimization than before the curriculum. They also demonstrated increased knowledge and awareness of CSE and its harms and 100% of youth gave CSE-related help to a friend.

My Life My Choice's Survivor Mentoring model was also studied. For more information, including results of both parts of this study, visit <http://www.mylifemychoice.org>.

More information: Emily F. Rothman et al. Evaluation of a Multi-Session Group Designed to Prevent Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Minors: The "My Life My Choice" Curriculum, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0886260519865972](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260519865972)

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