SEXUALLY EXPLOITED YOUTH IN CARE: AN INTEGRATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW OF TREATMENT MODELS AND POLICIES IN ALBERTA

By

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DEDICATION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This comprehensive integrative literature review examines sexually exploited youth in group care from a Canadian perspective. The focus was on treatment models and intervention programming available in Canada for sexually exploited youth, youth at risk of sexual exploitation in group care, sexual exploitation, and the risk factors associated with sexual exploitation. Youth are at an increased risk of sexual exploitation due to normative developmental changes and vulnerabilities and those who prey on those vulnerabilities. Moreover, youth in group care are a specifically vulnerable population because they are often unhoused, without persistent or positive caregivers, and under trauma and stress. Risk factors highlight that those most vulnerable are girls, Indigenous youth, runaway youth from care, and 2SLGBTIQ+ youth. This literature review discovered that trauma informed care (TIC) is at the heart of most successful treatment models, and intervention and prevention programs, including trauma crisis intervention (TCI). The literature highlighted the lack of understanding about youth in group care and the need for ongoing research to inform policymakers. By synthesising existing literature, policies, and programs, this review aimed to promote the safety, well-being, and empowerment of youth within group care.

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Sexually Exploited Youth in Care:

An Integrative Literature Review of Treatment Models & Policies in Alberta

Young people are at an increased risk of sexual exploitation due to normative vulnerabilities, such as self-exploration, yearning for a romantic relationship, and their still-developing cognitive abilities (McDonald, 2023; National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020). Therefore, this is a critical point in an individual's life because they are experiencing normative developmental milestones such as forming peer relationships, exploring sexuality, and developing autonomy, all of which can be exploited by those preying on youth. Additionally, reaching developmental milestones becomes challenging if adversities or vulnerabilities such as running away, homelessness, mental health concerns, child welfare involvement, and poverty occur because of the effects of stress and trauma on the developing brain (Bick & Nelson, 2016).

Throughout a youth's development, they also experience behavioural changes, such as the presence or absence of emotional regulation strategies (NASEM, 2020) and impulse control, self-esteem, physical, identity, and mental changes (Allen & Waterman, 2019). Moreover, their brains continue to change and mature until their prefrontal cortex is fully developed at approximately age 25, which is responsible for impulse control and decision-making (Van Duijvenvoorde & Crone, 2013). Therefore, youth lack the ability to think critically (Allen & Waterman, 2019). This can lead them to trust those who may take advantage of them because of their desire for independence, curiosity about relationships, and likelihood to engage in risk-taking behaviour (Van Duijvenvoorde & Crone, 2013). These factors, coupled with being involved in the child welfare system and out-of-home care placements, put youth at an even greater risk of sexual exploitation because of their lack of support networks, absence of strong

community ties, limited access to mental health resources, and traumatic or adverse childhood experiences, (Carsley & Oei, 2020).

Out-of-home care placements refer to a system in which youth are in the care of individuals or facilities outside their own homes due to various reasons, such as abuse, neglect, parental substance abuse, or other unsafe living conditions. Therefore, out-of-home care is often used as an umbrella term to encompass different types of care, such as foster care, group homes, residential treatment centres, extended family care, adoption and kinship placements (Saint-Girons et al., 2020). A study by Saint-Girons et al. (2020) examined the number of youth in out-of-home care across Canada and found that in 2019, the number of youth in out-of-home care was estimated to be 54,139. In Alberta, 7,872 youth were in out-of-home care in 2019, 5,775 of whom were Indigenous (Saint-Girons et al., 2020). They also found that the number of children in out-of-home care has recently decreased (Saint-Girons et al., 2020).

According to estimates by Jones and colleagues, from 2003 to 2013, the number of youth in out-of-home care in Canada, excluding the territories, was estimated to be 62,063 to 64,755 compared to 54,139 youth in 2019 (Saint-Girons et al., 2020). There are numerous reasons for this decrease in the number of youth in out-of-home care, but they can be broadly separated into changes in reporting methods and the actual number of children in out-of-home care (Saint-Girons et al., 2020). Changes in practice could include a greater emphasis on family preservation services to keep the child at home or reducing time in care through improved access to permanency options such as adoption or reunification (Saint-Girons et al., 2020). Therefore, changes in reporting methods and changes in practices help account for this decrease.

Youth living in group homes, designed for young people who are unable to live with their families, are also at an increased risk of sexual exploitation because many come from homes

with dysfunction, abuse, and neglect (Carsley & Oei, 2020). A group home is a community-based facility primarily funded by the government. Group homes are intended to create an environment similar to that of a 'normal' home for youth who cannot live with their families or caregivers for various reasons such as neglect, abuse and other unsafe living conditions (Development Services Group, 2008). Youth in group homes have more freedom than those in locked or secure facilities as they often receive independent community time, internet access and a choice of activities, such as sports and planned group or individual excursions. Therefore, youth in group care are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation because of risk factors such as running away from care, interacting in the community, engaging in risky sexual behaviours, and lacking support networks, but also due to these increased freedoms (Carsley & Oei, 2020; Development Services Group, 2008).

The risk of sexual exploitation is also amplified in youth who have adverse childhood experiences (McDonald, 2023). Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are stressful or traumatic events that occur in an individual's first 18 years of life, such as emotional, physical or sexual abuse, neglect, mental health problems, and household dysfunction (Carsley & Oei, 2020). A study conducted by Turpel-Lafond (2016) reviewed 145 reports of sexualized violence against 121 youth in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) and British Columbia's 23 delegated Aboriginal Agencies (DAAs) between 2011 and 2014. The study found that sexually victimised youth in care were more likely to be absent from their placements, including leaving without permission or leaving with permission but not returning upon the agreed amount of time (Turpel-Lafond, 2016). These youth were more likely to be victims of sexual exploitation because they were left vulnerable, on the streets, without protection, and preyed upon (Carsley & Oei, 2020; Turpel-Lafond, 2016).

Youth in group care are a specifically vulnerable population as they are often unhoused, without persistent caregivers, and under trauma and stress. Therefore, it is crucial to identify whether the current prevention and intervention strategies work effectively to protect youth from sexual exploitation. The significance of this research lies not only in its potential to inform policymakers but also in its ability to foster a safe and supportive environment for sexually exploited youth in care. My project examined the literature to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the risk and preventative factors associated with youth sexual exploitation?
2. What intervention and prevention programs are available for sexually exploited youth in group care in Alberta?
3. What are the themes and patterns of effective treatment models and interventions for sexually exploited youth in group homes?

Methodology

The purpose of this paper was to provide an extensive understanding of sexually exploited youth in group homes in Alberta and explain how interventions and treatment models reduce the risk of future sexual exploitation. The treatment models being examined originate from both Canada and the United States and aim to answer the primary research question - What are the themes and patterns of effective treatment models available for sexually exploited youth in group homes?

This paper is a combination of an integrative literature review about sexually exploited youth in group homes in Canada and Alberta and a look at what current intervention programming and treatment models are available in Alberta. The purpose is to provide a comprehensive understanding of youth in group homes and child exploitation and synthesise existing literature on intervention programming and treatment models aimed at addressing the needs of sexually exploited youth in group homes.

This paper used a mixed methods approach, combining exploratory and descriptive research designs to answer the research questions. Descriptive research aims to describe what currently exists within the research problem and obtain information about the problem (University of Southern California, 2019). This design will answer the what, where, when and how questions, such as what treatments are available for sexually exploited youth and what is the effectiveness of these models. The descriptive design is limited because it cannot conclusively address answers to why. However, it is a valuable tool that is an initial step for producing new hypotheses (University of Southern California, 2019).

Exploratory research gathers insights and investigates a problem by exploring the gaps in the literature (University of Southern California, 2019). Therefore, the exploratory design will

investigate the effects these programs and treatment models have on youth in group homes. This design benefits the paper by establishing an understanding of how to proceed in future research (University of Southern California, 2019).

The integrative literature review data was collected from scholarly articles, intervention agency annual reports, police agency reports, official statistics, and Provincial and Federal statutes. The data sources and articles were gathered from scholarly article databases accessed via Google Scholar, MRU's library, open-source repositories, and intervention websites. Using the keywords: "sexual exploitation," "youth," "group homes," "child welfare system," "intervention programming," "treatment models," and "Canada" allowed for more relevant literature to be retrieved surrounding the topic. The literature was analysed, and synthesised based on the findings, gaps, and themes to understand intervention strategies for sexually exploited youth in group homes in Canada.

The applicability of sources was evaluated based on their relevance to the topic and subtopics; therefore, each source answers and addresses different questions. Eligible studies for this research included those: (a) were Canadian-based studies, (b) referred to sexual exploitation or abuse, and (c) specifically described a treatment model or intervention developed for youth who experienced sexual exploitation.

For this project, youth is defined as anyone under 18. The terms youth and child will be used interchangeably as under the *Protection of Sexually Exploited Children Act* (PSECA), anyone under 18 is considered a child. PSECA deals directly with the protection of sexually exploited youth or youth at risk of sexual exploitation (Government of Alberta, 2010). The terms sexual exploitation and abuse will also be used interchangeably, as sexual abuse is a form of sexual exploitation.

Limitations

Like all studies, some limitations occurred throughout this paper. This paper only contains secondary data, which can limit the research analysis (Prada-Ramallal et al., 2016). There was a lack of information about sexually exploited youth in group homes; therefore, much of the literature focuses on youth living at home. This paper is also limited in its scope and depth because of time constraints, as it was an undergraduate honours paper.

Definitions

Group Homes

Group homes, also known as residential group care or treatment centres, house youth sent by a government service who cannot live with their families or other caregivers (Pritchard, 2018). These youth are unable to reside in their family homes and are placed in group homes for a variety of reasons, such as challenging behaviours, mental health concerns, unsafe home environments, family instability, and juvenile court involvement (Pritchard, 2018). Group home settings are intended to create a home-like atmosphere in the community where youth live 24 hours a day, seven days a week (Baker & Calderon, 2004; Bigby et al., 2014; Pritchard, 2018). Youth in group homes have more freedom and responsibility and are provided with more privileges, fewer restrictions, community access, and the opportunity to attend neighbourhood schools (Baker & Calderon, 2004; Lee & Thompson, 2008).

A cross-sectional analysis conducted by Pollock et al., (2024) gathered data from all Canadian provinces and territories from 2013/2014 to 2021/2022 to determine the number of youth in out-of-home care. This study found that an estimated 61,104 youth were in out-of-home care on March 31, 2022; therefore, the national rate of out-of-home care was 8.24 children per 1000 population (Pollock et al., 2024). Moreover, rates were highest among males and youth aged one to three and 16 to 17 years (Pollock et al., 2024).

Group Home Staff

Group home staff, also known as youth (care) workers or social educators, work in group homes or other residential facilities designed to provide care for youth using guiding frameworks (Anglin et al., 2023). Group home staff support these youth by helping with meal preparation, administering medication, ensuring the safety of all youth in the home, and implementing

interventions when necessary. Staff members have a responsibility to be educated and a high degree of compassion and patience to handle the individual's behaviours (Pritchard, 2018). Therefore, all staff are provided with the necessary training to help a child through a crisis and teach more constructive ways to cope with stress or painful situations (Eenshuistra et al., 2019). Group homes also have different staff types, such as team lead or shift lead and critical workers.

Child Sexual Exploitation

Section 153(1) of the *Criminal Code of Canada* defines sexual exploitation as instances where an individual who is in a position of authority or trust over a young person is exploitative of the young person or is in a relationship of dependency with the young person under the age of eighteen years (*Criminal Code,* RSC, 1985, c C-46, s 153(1)). Individuals in a "position of authority or trust" to a young person can include online communities, romantic relationships, authority figures, and peer groups (Murillo, 2023). Additionally, engaging in the sexual exploitation of a young person encompasses multiple actions. Section 153(1)(a) to (b) outlines these actions. For instance, (a) touching, directly or indirectly, with a part of the body or with an object, any part of the body of a youth for sexual purposes; or (b) invites, counsels or incites a youth to touch the body of any person for sexual purposes (*Criminal Code*, 1985).

There are various other offences under the umbrella of youth sexual exploitation, including human and sex trafficking. Under section 279.011, the *Criminal Code* defines trafficking of a person under the age of eighteen years as:

> 279.011 (1) Every person who recruits, transports, transfers, receives, holds, conceals or harbours a person under the age of eighteen years or exercises control, direction or influence over the movements of a person under the age of eighteen years, for the

purpose of exploiting them or facilitating their exploitation is guilty of an indictable offence and liable (*Criminal Code*, RSC 1985, c. C-46, s. 279.011).

Sex trafficking stands out as a prevalent form of youth sexual exploitation. It is one of the most common forms of trafficking, encompassing the sale of youth for sexual purposes within national boundaries (domestically) as well as beyond borders (internationally) (Baird et al., 2020). By age, all youth are vulnerable to involvement in sex trafficking. However, some youth populations are more vulnerable to recruitment than others, such as youth in the child welfare system (Baird et al., 2020).

Additionally, the term child or youth prostitution is never used when discussing sexual exploitation because it is not a consensual experience (Government of British Columbia, 2024). The age of consent to sexual activity in Canada is 16. However, a 16 or 17-year-old cannot consent to sexual activity if (a) their sexual partner is in a position of trust or authority towards them, (b) is dependent on their sexual partner for care or support, and (c) the relationship is exploitative (Government of Canada, n.d.a.). To determine whether the relationship is exploitative, the following factors may be considered: the young person's age, the age difference between the young person and their sexual partner, the development of the relationship and whether the partner may have controlled the young person (Government of Canada, n.d.a.).

Child Online Sexual Exploitation

Online sexual exploitation includes situations that encompass any form of sexual abuse, violence, and exploitation directed toward a young person through the use of the Internet and other technologies (Savage, 2024). Examples of this include child pornography, luring, invitation to sexual touching, and non-consensual distribution of intimate images (Savage, 2024; Sinclair et al., 2015). Rapid changes in technology, mainly beginning in the early to mid-2000s, have

enhanced the opportunities for online connections and the potential for online exposure to risks such as sexual exploitation (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022). The use of the Internet and Internet-related sexual exploitation drastically increased during the COVID-19 pandemic because large numbers of people relied on the Internet (Savage, 2024). For example, a Statistics Canada report by Savage (2024) found that between 2021 and 2022, there was an 18% increase in the rate of online sexual exploitation.

Canadian Statistics

Sexual abuse is a prevalent form of sexual exploitation but is among the least likely to be reported to the police (Government of Canada, n.d.b.). Instances of sexual abuse may not be promptly reported following the occurrence of the offence because victims may not want to involve the police, it was deemed not necessary, it was considered a personal manner, or the incident was dealt with in a different way (Government of Canada, n.d.b.). Reasons for not wanting to involve the police often include the perception that police could or would not do anything to help them, the fear of revenge by the offender and wanting to avoid publicity regarding the incident (Government of Canada, n.d.b.).

Results from the 2018 Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces (SSPPS) found that one in ten (7.8%) Canadians experienced at least one type of sexual abuse prior to age 15 (Heidinger, 2022). Women (12%) were three times more likely than men (3.7%) to have experienced sexual abuse from an adult during their childhood, approximately three times more likely to have been coerced into unwanted sexual acts by an adult (5.3% compared to 1.9% for men) and nearly four times more likely to have been sexually touched by an adult (11% versus 3.5% for men) (Heidinger, 2022). Additionally, most Canadians who experienced childhood sexual abuse reported that the most severe incident was perpetrated by either a friend, neighbour, or classmate or by a family member such as a grandparent, sibling, or relative (Heidinger, 2022). According to the SSPPS, a comparable percentage of individuals who suffered childhood sexual abuse identified the perpetrator of the most severe incident as either a friend, neighbour, or classmate (29%) or as another family member (30%) (Heidinger, 2022).

Teen dating violence is a form of sexual abuse, including unwanted sexual touching experienced in dating or sexual relationships during their youth. These behaviours can manifest in

face-to-face interactions among dating partners or through electronic means online, commonly known as cyber dating abuse or technology-facilitated violence (Sutton & Burczycka, 2024). Like intimate partner violence (IPV) more broadly, teen dating violence might be a singular instance of abuse or consist of recurring forms of abuse over a period (Sutton & Burczycka, 2024). Regarding long-term impacts, certain studies suggest that adolescents who undergo dating violence are at an increased risk of encountering violence in their adult relationships. They also exhibit higher rates of depression, suicide attempts, and mental health challenges, along with a propensity to abuse drugs and alcohol in later life (Sutton & Burczycka, 2024).

According to the 2018 SSPPS, among teenagers aged 15 to 17 who have been in a relationship at some point since the age of 15, over four out of ten (45%) reported encountering abuse or violence from a dating partner in Canada (Sutton & Burczycka, 2024). This percentage was the same for both teenage girls (46%) and teenage boys (46%) within this age bracket (Sutton & Burczycka, 2024). Moreover, 4% of teenagers reported experiencing sexual violence from a dating partner after reaching the age of 15, with one in 14 (7%) girls aged 15 to 17 included in this figure (Sutton & Burczycka, 2024). Within this age group, girls recounted instances of partners coercing them into unwanted sex acts (7%) or attempting to force them into sex (5%) (Sutton & Burczycka, 2024).

Human trafficking is another prevalent form of exploitation (Heidinger, 2023). A secondary data analysis of sex trafficking cases from 2008 to 2016 in Ontario conducted by Baird et al., (2020) found higher rates of vulnerable young people under 25 in group homes experiencing sexualized violence such as sex trafficking and exploitation. Examples of vulnerable populations include homeless, runaway, and street-involved youth, youth in group homes, and gender minority youth (Kimber & Ferdossifard, 2021). The data analysis included

223 victims of sex trafficking, 52 of which were in the child welfare system and found that the majority (39.6%) of those involved in the child welfare system were living in group homes prior to being trafficked compared to only 12.2% of youth not involved in the child welfare system living in group homes prior to sex trafficking (Baird et al., 2020).

Alberta

A survey conducted in 2019 by the Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services (AASAS) sought to produce an estimate of Albertan's experiences of sexual abuse and identify the nature, extent and type of sexual abuse experienced (AASAS, 2020). 1,512 surveys were completed in Alberta by adults from June to September 2019 and found that one in three (34%) individuals under the age of 18 experienced sexual abuse (AASAS, 2020). Additionally, nearly one in two girls (44%) and one in four boys (24%) have experienced sexual abuse in Alberta (AASAS, 2020). The respondents were also asked what the most common type of support service available for survivors of youth sexual abuse should be and identified that access to counselling or mental health services (44%) was the most important (AASAS, 2020). 40% of respondents also stated that there are not enough support services or interventions available for victims of youth sexual abuse in Alberta (AASAS, 2020).

In March 2020, 10,580 youth received intervention services in Alberta (Government of Alberta, 2021). Of those 10,580 youth, 8,260 were in out-of-home care placements while receiving services, including group homes (Government of Alberta, 2021). Additionally, of those 8,260 youth in out-of-home care, only 625 youth were in community group homes (Government of Alberta, 2021). Comparatively, in March 2023, there were 9,363 youth receiving intervention services in Alberta (Government of Alberta, 2023). Of those 9,363 youth, 7,851 were in out-of-home care placements while receiving services (Government of Alberta, 2023). Moreover,

of those 7,851 youth in out-of-home care, 668 were in community group homes (Government of Alberta, 2023).

For a more in-depth look, Table 1 below presents the number of youth receiving intervention services in group homes, other out-of-home care placements and at home (not in care) in Alberta from 2018 to 2023.

Table 1

Number of youth receiving intervention services in Alberta from 2018 to 2023

YEARLY AVERAGE	MARCH 2018	MARCH 2019	MARCH 2020	MARCH 2021	MARCH 2022	MARCH 2023
Total In Community Group Homes	465	501	555	625	612	668
Total In Other Out-Of-Home Care (e.g., Foster Care, Kinship Placements, and Treatment Centres)	6,864	7,256	7,618	7,635	7,320	7,183
Total Not In Care	3,129	3,191	2,917	2,320	1,916	1,512
Total Child Intervention	10,458	10,948	11,090	10,580	9,848	9,363

Note. Government of Alberta (n.d.)

Based on Table 1, the total number of youth receiving youth intervention services decreased by 10.5% from 2018 (March) to 2023 (March). The number of youth receiving intervention services at home (not in care) also decreased (52%) from 2018 (March) to 2023 (March). In comparison, the number of youth receiving intervention services in community

group homes dramatically increased by 44% from 2018 (March) to 2023 (March). The number of youth receiving intervention services in other out-of-home care placements also increased (5%) from 2018 (March) to 2023 (March). In addition, the total number of Indigenous youth receiving intervention services increased by 29% from 2018 (March) to 2023 (March) (Government of Alberta, n.d.).

Theoretical Framework

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB), developed by Ajzen in 1985, states that behavioural decisions result from a reasoned process in which control influences behaviour (Sommer, 2011). TPB is an extension of the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen, 1991; Sommer, 2011) and shares the same central feature: an individual's intention to perform a particular behaviour is driven by motivation (Ajzen, 1985). Ajzen (1985) found that the stronger the motivation to engage in a behaviour, the more likely they will partake. At its core, the theory proposes that behaviour is influenced by prominent information or beliefs pertinent to it. TPB suggests that three key factors, attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, predict motivation (Mlyakado & Li, 2022). These three variables predict intentions to act, and those intentions predict behaviour.

Attitude refers to an individual's perception of a particular behaviour and decreases or increases the likelihood of a young person engaging in the behaviour; subjective norms are perceived social pressures that influence behaviour, and; perceived behavioural control relates to an individual's perception of their ability to perform the behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). It is essential to understand these key factors to help predict behaviour and improve efforts to change behaviour through interventions (Ajzen, 1985). Moreover, as a broad principle, when attitudes and subjective norms toward a behaviour are more favourable and perceived behavioural control is higher, an individual's intention to engage in the behaviour is stronger (McArthur et al., 2023).

According to Ajzen's formulation of TPB, attitude toward a behaviour includes beliefs regarding its effectiveness (instrumental beliefs) as well as beliefs concerning the experiential aspect of the behaviour (affective beliefs) (McArthur et al., 2023). Affective beliefs pertain to a person's perception of the pleasantness of engaging in a behaviour, while instrumental beliefs

relate to beliefs about the effectiveness of specific behaviours (McArthur et al., 2023). The significance of attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control in predicting intention is anticipated to differ depending on the behaviour and context. Consequently, it might be observed that only attitudes significantly influence intentions. In contrast, in others, attitudes and perceived behavioural control adequately explain intentions, and in other cases, all three predictors may independently contribute to intentions (McArthur et al., 2023).

TPB has been adopted to understand human behaviours, such as help-seeking intentions for sexual exploitation among youth (Mlyakado & Li, 2021; Mlyakado et al., 2023). For example, positive attitudes, such as believing that seeking help is effective and beneficial, may increase the likelihood of help-seeking behaviour. These attitudes can be influenced by trust in support systems or service providers, perceptions of personal safety, social stigma, and social support (Mlyakado & Li, 2021). Therefore, if a youth is in an unsupportive environment, it may deter them from seeking help and reporting any incidences of sexual exploitation.

Mlyakado and Li (2021) conducted a cross-sectional survey containing 60 items to collect data from a stratified random sample of 1,116 secondary school youth aged 13-17 in Tanzania to explain the factors that determine the help-seeking intentions of youth subject to sexual exploitation by drawing on the TPB. The participants were selected from two areas in Tanzania's eastern and northwestern regions, and the data were analysed utilising hierarchical multiple regression (Mlyakado & Li, 2021). The survey revealed that 19.3% of the teenage respondents showed minimal inclination to seek help regarding sexual exploitation, while 42.4% exhibited moderate intentions, and 38.4% demonstrated high intentions (Mlyakado & Li, 2021). Consequently, the data showed that more than 60% of the participants had either low or moderate levels of intention to seek help regarding sexual exploitation (Mlyakado & Li, 2021). Mlyakado

and Li (2021) found that the reasons for low to moderate levels of the help-seeking intentions of youth subject to sexual exploitation include the lack of perceived social support and negative attitudes toward seeking help.

A similar study was conducted by Mlyakado et al., (2023) to understand youths' help-seeking intention for online sexual exploitation (OSE) using the TPB in Tanzania. Mlyakado et al., (2023) gathered data through a cross-sectional survey design, sampling 1,014 secondary school adolescents using a stratified random method from two regions in Tanzania, specifically Dar es Salaam and Ruvuma. The findings from this study suggest that as adolescents grow older, their willingness to seek assistance for OSE also rises because young adults and adults have more autonomy and decision-making power compared to youth and have access to more support networks. Furthermore, the data also indicates that the TPB is applicable in comprehending adolescents' intentions to seek help for OSE. Specifically, the variables studied accounted for approximately 10.8%, 9.2%, and 11.2% of the variability in their intentions to seek help from any source, formal channels, and family, respectively (Mlyakado et al., 2023). These results affirm the TPB's ability to identify factors influencing individuals' intentions to seek help regarding sexual exploitation.

The TPB also helps explain why youth engage in risky behaviour such as running away, connecting with strangers online, and unsafe sexual practices (Ajzen, 1991). This theory suggests that behaviour is determined by behavioural intention, which measures a person's motivation to engage in such behaviours and is determined by either attitudes, subjective norms, or perceived behavioural control (Mckellar & Sillence, 2020). Attitudes are beliefs about the perceived costs or rewards of behaviour in a positive or negative evaluation; subjective norms are beliefs about the pressure they feel from their friend group or other social groups; and perceived behavioural

control is a summary of beliefs about the simplicity or difficulty of performing a behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Mckellar & Sillence, 2020; Mlyakado & Li, 2022).

Risk and Protective Factors

Risk factors for youth sexual exploitation are variables that predict a high probability of sexual exploitation (Farrington et al., 2012). The threat of sexual exploitation in youth who have multiple risk factors is amplified due to a combination of vulnerabilities such as a history of abuse and neglect (McDonald, 2023); therefore, youth in group care are more likely to experience sexual exploitation because they often encompass numerous risk factors such as frequently running away from care, lack of supportive family relationships, and substance misuse. In fact, a study conducted by Fedina et al., (2019) with 328 participants engaged in the commercial sex industry examined runaway histories and found that runaway youth have experienced disproportionately high rates of youth sexual exploitation. Therefore, as per the definition of risk factors, the variable running away predicts a high probability of sexual exploitation.

Risk factors often include societal, family, and individual factors that are linked to a youth's likelihood of experiencing sexual exploitation (Development Services Group, 2015). Family risk factors refer to relationship and family-structure-based factors and can include poor parenting and attachment styles, a family history of addiction, and lack of parental involvement (Hay, 2004). Involvement in the child welfare system is also an example of a family risk factor. For instance, six studies conducted in the United States and Canada, researched by Mercera et al., (2023), found that involvement in the Canadian child welfare system was another risk factor for sexual exploitation. Two of the six studies found that homeless or runaway youth often report

past or current involvement in the child welfare system (Greeson et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2021).

A systematic review of risk and protective factors for sexual exploitation in youth from a cross-cultural perspective was conducted by Mercera et al., (2023) using a total of 65 studies and found that risk factors such as neglect (*n*=23), sexual abuse (*n*=21), compromised family functioning (*n*=17), economic vulnerabilities (*n*=17), and risky sexual behaviour (*n*=14) can underlie a youth's vulnerability and can create pathways to sexual exploitation. The most cited risk factor for sexual exploitation in both male and female youth within the review by Mercera et al., (2023) was a history of physical/emotional abuse or neglect (*n*=23). Youth in group care often encounter these risk factors before, during or after group care, making them more vulnerable. This makes them more vulnerable to sexual exploitation because they lack support systems, services, and basic needs and run the risk of mental health issues and desperation to survive.

Individual or personal risk factors are specific to the individual. They can include mental health disorders, addictions, behaviours, deviance, homelessness as a result of running away, and learning disabilities (Hay, 2004), as well as cultural, racial, or socioeconomic factors. Risky sexual behaviour is an example of an individual risk factor for sexual exploitation because being willing to engage in risky sexual behaviour, such as without STI protection, birth control, or without discerning partner selection, can be taken advantage of by predators looking to exploit youth. A systematic review and meta-analysis of 37 studies conducted with 67,453 participants aged 8 to 17 by Laird et al., (2020) found 52 factors associated with youth sexual exploitation, such as sexual abuse (*n*=19), running away (*n*=15), physical abuse (*n*=14), risky sexual behaviours (*n*=14), emotional dysregulation (*n*=10), and child protection involvement (*n*=8).

Laird et al., (2020) discovered that the most substantial risk factor overall for youth sexual exploitation is sexual abuse, and the most substantial externalizing factor is risky sexual behaviours, including sex with an adult (over 18), condomless sex, or meeting online strangers in person for sex.

Protective Factors

Several protective factors also exist to protect youth from sexual exploitation. Protective factors are attributes linked to a decreased probability of adverse childhood experiences and serve to mitigate the impact of risk factors. Examples of protective factors include communities where individuals have access to economic help, safe and stable housing, extracurricular activities, and mental health services; youth who have positive friendships, do well in school, and have caring adults outside the family who serve as role models, and families who create safe and supportive environments (SAMHSA, 2014). Moreover, protective factors are important mechanisms that modify occurrences of adverse sexual behaviour outcomes such as sexual abuse and exploitation (Carsley & Oei, 2020; Heerde & Hemphill, 2016) and promote resilience (Buchanan, 2014).

A systematic review of protective factors for sexual exploitation in youth was conducted by Mercera et al., (2023) using a total of 65 studies and found that positive experiences (n=9), such as positive and supportive relationships, act as protective factors from sexual exploitation. These relationships can exist with friends, family, group home staff, or others and are crucial for the positive development of youth (Mercera et al., 2023). Drawing on a Canadian study, Mercera et al., (2023) found that among substance-using high school students, involvement in clubs (e.g., sports) also decreased chances for sexual exploitation and acted as a protective factor.

A similar systematic review was conducted by Heerde and Hemphill (2016) to investigate the role of protective factors in modifying the occurrence of sexual exploitation and also found that supportive and positive relationships were critical protective factors. These essential factors provide a sense of belonging, security, guidance, and a framework for healthy relationships. Unfortunately, youth in group care harbour a combination of risk factors but few protective factors (Wright et al., 2021). Therefore, it is crucial for treatment models and intervention programming in group homes to promote these protective factors.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

CDC-Kaiser first explored Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) concerning health outcomes in 1998, which quickly led to an interest in the impact of ACEs on behaviour (Boulier & Blair, 2018). The original CDC-Kaiser study was conducted with 17,000 patients from Southern California who had attended the Health Maintenance Organisation for a standardised medical evaluation between 1995 and 1997 (Boulier & Blair, 2018). The study was conducted via two waves of surveys, which asked patients about their childhood experiences, including any experiences of abuse, household dysfunction, or neglect (neglect was added in the second wave) using the ten specific ACE exposures (Boulier & Blair, 2018; Watson, 2019). Therefore, screening for ACEs involves asking children or adults to complete a 10-item questionnaire (Watson, 2019).

The study found that 12.5% of adult respondents experienced four or more ACEs in their childhood (first 18 years), and 64% experienced at least one ACE (Boulier & Blair, 2018). A more recent cross-sectional analysis of the Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging by Joshi et al. (2021) found that 61.6% of the 44,817 Canadian participants aged 45-85 reported experiencing at least one ACE before age 16. The ACE scores of these 44,817 participants were examined to

assess the prevalence of ACEs and their potential impacts on health and well-being in later life (Joshi et al., 2021). Having a high score amounts to problems in adulthood, such as mental health conditions (Heidinger, 2022), cardiovascular disease and other health issues, substance misuse, and high rates of suicide as a result of toxic stress responses (Carsley & Oei, 2020). Having a high ACE score also contributes to the cycle of abuse across generations, wherein individuals who have experienced abuse as children are more prone to becoming abusers themselves or being subjected to abuse in adulthood (Heidinger, 2022).

ACEs refer to potentially stressful or traumatic experiences that occur during the first 18 years of life, such as sexual or emotional abuse, neglect, and types of household dysfunction such as divorce and witnessing violence in the home (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). The original CDC-Kaiser study identified ten categories of ACEs, including physical, emotional and sexual abuse; physical and emotional neglect; mental illness; incarcerated relative; mother treated violently; substance use; and divorce (Boulier & Blair, 2018). To determine an individual's ACE score, they are asked to report whether they experienced any of these ACEs, and the total number is calculated (CDC, 2019). Several surveillance systems also collect information about ACE exposures and consequences, including the Behavioural Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) (CDC, 2019).

Following the original study, various studies divided ACEs into three broad categories: abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. This breaks up the ten ACEs identified by Kaiser into three distinct categories: abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. Examples of abuse include physical (e.g., beating, burning, and kicking), emotional (e.g., verbal, mental, and psychological abuse), and sexual abuse (e.g., fondling, sexual exploitation, and violations of bodily privacy). Neglect includes both physical (e.g., failure to provide food, clothing, safety, and supervision in

the home) and emotional neglect (e.g., failure to provide support, love, and affection). Lastly, household dysfunction includes mental illness, incarcerated relatives, mothers treated violently, substance abuse, and divorce.

Another review by Murillo (2023) examined a sample of 95 youth from 11 secure facilities drawn from the Leveraging Safe Adults (LeSA) study in Texas and Illinois, which concentrates on deterring opioid use among youth involved in the justice system, to determine how many youth experience sexual exploitation. The findings revealed that, particularly for young females (15 to 18), both neglect and physical abuse ACEs put females at a greater risk for sexual exploitation (Murillo, 2023). For example, physical abuse, such as sexual abuse, is considered the "gateway" trauma to exploitation because of its lasting psychological impact (Cole et al., 2014; Murillo, 2023). Moreover, of the young females in the review by Murillo (2023) who have been exploited, 90% of them first experienced sexual abuse at home, many of whom are in foster care. "Of the victims who have been exploited, 60-85% were also victims of child sexual abuse, rape, or incest" (Murillo, 2023, p. 4).

These ACEs are indicators of sexual exploitation because what youth are lacking at home, such as love, attention, validation, acceptance, guidance, and affection, they will often look for elsewhere (Murillo, 2023). Therefore, the lack or absence of these factors can lead youth to seek fulfilment and connections elsewhere, such as online communities, romantic relationships, authority figures, and peer groups (Murillo, 2023). Unfortunately, knowingly or unknowingly, these connections can also be formed with pimps or exploiters (Casassa et al., 2021). Pimps or exploiters are people or groups that procure youth for sex acts (Casassa et al., 2021). Pimps or exploiters may initially offer these youth affection, but once a bond is established, it slowly diminishes. This bond is often called a trauma bond. A trauma bond is an

emotional tie between a victim and an exploiter, where the exploiter instills fear as well as gratitude (Casassa et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2013; Sanchez et al., 2019). This bond is necessary for an exploiter because it ensures that the victim will come back and not defy their needs (Casassa et al., 2021).

Adverse childhood experiences, especially sexual abuse, are unfortunately common for youth who are in group care and amount to short to long-term adverse consequences to their mental and physical health as well as interactions with the criminal justice system (Boulier & Blair, 2018; Murillo, 2023). Youth in group care who have been exposed to ACEs such as sexual abuse and exploitation have unique needs, including therapy, crisis interventions, and trauma-informed care (Murillo, 2023). Through the use of trauma-informed care, group home staff foster a safe and supportive environment for the youth to heal, develop coping skills, and build trust.

History of Child Welfare in Canada

The child welfare system (CWS) in Canada is vital for promoting the safety and well-being of youth. The CWS prioritises family preservation and reunification for youth in out-of-home care, including those in group home placements. This system is designed to intervene and provide support in situations where children may be at risk of abuse, neglect, exploitation, or other forms of harm. In Canada, the 13 provinces and territories and Indigenous child welfare organisations are responsible for protecting and supporting youth at risk of abuse and neglect (Trocmé et al., 2018). For example, The *Child Youth and Family Enhancement Act* (CYFEA) and the *Protection of Sexually Exploited Children Act* (PSECA) protect youth in Alberta.

In response to the growing movement of "child-saving" societies, Canada's CWS emerged near the end of the nineteenth Century by reorganising church-run orphanages (Trocmé et al., 2018). A "child-saving" society refers to a societal approach that prioritises the protection of youth by intervening to protect and potentially save youth at risk of abuse and other harms that threaten successful development (Katz, 1986; Trocmé et al., 2011; Trocmé et al., 2018). To aid in the protection of women, youth and animals in 1887, The Toronto Humane Society was founded, renamed the Children's Aid Society in 1891, and was the first such child protection organisation in Canada (Trocmé et al., 2018). The Children's Aid Society advocated for foster care and adoption, granted guardianship authority to children's aid societies, and created the position of superintendent of neglected children (Trocmé et al., 2018). Similar organisations and agencies were developed across Canada in the following years. These organisations pursued legal mandates at the provincial level granting them the authority to take action by removing youth who were experiencing or at risk of abuse or neglect (Trocmé et al., 2018).

In the 1970s and 1980s, jurisdictions across Canada sought to modernise child welfare statutes by incorporating more specific procedures to protect parent and child rights and provide in-home support services as an alternative to placement whenever possible (Trocmé et al., 2018). The goal of the modernisation was to promote family reunification by rebuilding and straightening community and family ties. Beginning in the late 1990s, several jurisdictions broadened their child welfare statutes to encompass acts of emotional maltreatment by caregivers explicitly. Certain jurisdictions also included exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) as a basis for child protection intervention (Trocmé et al., 2011; Trocmé et al., 2018). Several jurisdictions also adopted risk assessment tools, service eligibility, and triage guidelines (Trocmé et al., 2018). The legislation in each province now defines circumstances necessitating state intervention to safeguard children. These include cases where children have been orphaned, abandoned, subjected to physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, or are not receiving adequate care from their guardians (Trocmé et al., 2011). Additionally, intervention may be mandated for children whose behaviour poses a risk to themselves or others.

In the present era, the Canadian CWS has continued to advocate for less intrusive family and community-centred approaches, such as interventions at home. Despite these adjustments, the child welfare mandates have led to a continuous rise in the number of youth placed in out-of-home care, along with higher rates of overrepresentation for Indigenous children (Trocmé et al., 2018). A more detailed analysis of these increases reveals that they are not primarily driven by immediate safety concerns for children but rather by concerns regarding the overall well-being of children living in challenging circumstances (Trocmé et al., 2018). Although the number of investigations involving severe abuse remains unchanged, there has been a significant

surge in the number of children referred due to risks of abuse and neglect, emotional maltreatment, or exposure to violence (Trocmé et al., 2018).

History of Indigenous Child Welfare

The development of the Indigenous child welfare system has followed a significantly different trajectory, shaped by colonialism (Trocmé et al., 2018). The colonialist history of child welfare for Indigenous peoples in Canada traces back to the 1800s when the residential school system was established. This system, along with other colonial policies, aimed to erase Indigenous culture, including language, traditions, and beliefs, through assimilation into Canadian culture (Trocmé et al., 2018). Although the last residential school was closed in the late 1990s, these racist colonial policies continue to impact the CWS across Canada (Trocmé et al., 2018). For instance, approximately 30 years before the last residential school was closed, a new form of child apprehension began to emerge in the CWS. A period commonly referred to as the 'sixties scoop' began with the 1951 amendment to the Indian Act to include language under Section 88, which stated "all laws of general application from time to time in force in any province are applicable to and in respect of Indians in the province" (*Indian Act,* 1985, s. 88). This cleared the way for provincial and territorial laws to be applied to Indigenous people, including the CWS expanding onto reservations (Trocmé et al., 2018).

During the 'sixties scoop,' youth were removed from their families and communities and often never returned home but were instead adopted or placed in out-of-home care (Trocmé et al., 2018). Youth who were adopted or placed in foster care mainly lived in white households and other provinces away from home (Trocmé et al., 2018). By the 1970s, foster care and adoption had taken over from residential schools as the primary system for protecting Indigenous children and providing out-of-home care (Trocmé et al., 2011; Trocmé et al., 2018). In the present era,

Indigenous youth remain overrepresented in the CWS; therefore, the push for increased family and community-centred options has gathered significant momentum, especially given mounting evidence showing a significant overrepresentation of Indigenous youth in Canada (Trocmé et al., 2018). In certain provinces, this overrepresentation is so pronounced that Indigenous children account for more than 75% of all children placed in out-of-home care (Trocmé et al., 2018).

Significant transformations have taken place in Canada's child welfare and Indigenous child welfare sectors over the last three decades, including a heightened awareness of the complexities surrounding physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect of children. These developments have not only influenced the type and emphasis of services offered to children and families but have also resulted in legislative changes mandating professionals and the public to report any suspected instances of child abuse (Trocmé et al., 2018).

Canadian Legislation

In 1992, a working group of Federal, Provincial, and Territorial Deputy Ministers was established to propose solutions regarding youth sexual exploitation. Their efforts resulted in amendments to the existing legislation through Bill C-27, which introduced harsher penalties for individuals involved in profiting from the prostitution of a child and employing violence to facilitate prostitution-related activities (Bill C-27, *An Act to amend the Criminal Code (child prostitution, child sex tourism, criminal harassment and female genital mutilation),* 2nd Sess, 35th Parl, 1997). More recent legislative amendments to the protection of sexually exploited youth include Bill C-22, Bill C-22, and Bill C-63.

Bill C-22. This bill, named *An Act to amend the Criminal Code (age of protection)*, was passed by the House of Commons on May 4, 2007, to increase the age of consent from 14 years of age to 16 years of age for non-sexually exploitative activity (MacKay, 2007). Exceptions under Bill C-22 encompass scenarios where an individual, within a five-year age gap, engages in sexual activity with a 14-15-year-old, individuals married to a youth, or individuals expecting a child with a youth prior to the Act's enactment (MacKay, 2007). Furthermore, sexual activity is not considered exploitative if it involves 12-13-year-olds engaging with someone no more than two years older (MacKay, 2007). However, Bill C-22 lacks emphasis on strategies to prevent, educate, and mitigate harm for children and youth impacted by sexual exploitation.

Bill C-26. This bill, named *An Act to amend the Criminal Code, the Canada Evidence Act and the Sex Offender Information Registration Act, to enact the High-Risk Child Sex Offender Database Act and to make consequential amendments to other Acts (Tougher Penalties for Child Predators Act)*, was introduced on February 26, 2014, in the House of Commons (MacKay, 2014). The amendment aims to modify the provisions of the Criminal Code related to sexual

offences against children and youth, specifically by raising the mandatory minimum and maximum penalties for these offences. Clauses 7 and 9 to 14 of Bill C-26 amend the *Criminal Code* to increase the mandatory minimum penalty for several Code offences, most of them sexual offences involving youth (MacKay, 2014). For instance, Bill C-26 increased the mandatory minimums on summary convictions for the possession of child pornography, accessing child pornography, luring a child, sexual assault (complainant under 16 years of age), and agreement or arrangement to commit a sexual offence against a child from 90 days to six months (MacKay, 2014).

Bill C-63. This bill, named the *Online Harms Act*, was introduced on February 26, 2024, in the House of Commons to prevent exposure to harmful online content, including youth sexual exploitation (Canadian Heritage, 2024). This bill would accomplish this by mandating online platforms to adopt measures that reduce the risk of harm, providing accessible ways to flag harmful content and block users, creating stronger laws to help protect all people in Canada from hatred and establishing a new Digital Safety Commission to oversee and enforce the *Online Harms Act's* regulatory framework (Canadian Heritage, 2024). This bill would also require online platforms and services to remove content (1) that sexually victimises or re-victimises a child and (2) intimate content posted without consent (Canadian Heritage, 2024).

Additionally, the *Online Harms Act's* framework focuses on seven types of extraordinarily harmful and damaging online content:

> Content that sexually victimises a child or re-victimises a survivor; intimate content communicated without consent; violent extremist and terrorist content; content that incites violence; content that foments hatred; content used to bully a child; and content that induces a child to harm themselves. (Canadian Heritage, 2024, para. 4).

For the purpose of this paper, content that sexually victimises or re-victimises a child and intimate content communicated without consent is of great importance because there is currently a lack of legislation that protects youth from online sexual exploitation (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022).

Alberta Legislation

Two vital pieces of legislation in Alberta are in charge of protecting youth: The *Child Youth and Family Enhancement Act* (CYFEA) and the *Protection of Sexually Exploited Children Act* (PSECA). CYFEA, under the Alberta Ministry of Children's Services, is responsible for protecting youth and is the legal authority for child intervention services (Government of Alberta, 2010). First, the CYFEA provides guidelines for caseworkers working with families and outlines the situations in which interventions by Alberta Children and Youth Services may be necessary (Government of Alberta, 2010). In other words, this means that the CYFEA provides instructions and recommendations for caseworkers and specifies the circumstances in which Alberta Children and Youth Services may need to intervene, such as parental neglect and abuse in the household. The CYFEA also emphasises the use of support services for families to prevent the removal of a child unless alternative measures prove inadequate in ensuring the child's safety (Government of Alberta, 2010).

The second piece of legislation, PSECA, deals directly with the protection of sexually exploited youth or youth at risk of sexual exploitation (Government of Alberta, 2010). PESCA was initially named the *Protection of Children Involved in Prostitution Act* (PChIP) when first enacted in 1999 but was later amended in 2007 to be PSECA (Government of Alberta, 2010). PChIP, the first of its kind in Canada, was intended to protect sexually exploited youth but was amended in 2001 because the term child or youth prostitution is no longer used to discuss youth

sexual exploitation because it is not a consensual experience. PChIP was also amended to strengthen youth protection and preserve their legal rights (Government of Alberta, 2010).

PSECA is based around the guiding principles that sexually exploited youth are victims of sexual abuse, that they have the right to safety and security, that they require protection and support, that youth and their families require access to support services, and that perpetrators must be held legally accountable (Government of Alberta, 2010). Additionally, PSECA provides protection and specialised services to sexually exploited youth to reduce the and prevention programs to reduce the risk of youth sexual exploitation (Government of Alberta, 2014). From 2019 to 2020, 127 youth were served through the *Protection of Sexually Exploited Children Act* (PSECA) (Government of Alberta, n.d.). Comparatively, from 2022 to 2023, 103 youth were served through PSECA (Government of Alberta, 2023). There has been a 19% decrease in youth served through PSECA from 2019-2020 to 2022-2023.

Interventions for Sexually Exploited Youth in Alberta

To help prevent at-risk youth from types of victimisation such as sexual exploitation and support those who have already been sexually exploited, understanding intervention programming is crucial. Treatment programs work to prevent and help youth recover from sexual exploitation through the use of group homes, safe houses for street or runaway youth, educational training, life skills training, and crisis intervention services such as therapeutic crisis intervention.

Trauma-Informed Care

Harris and Fallot (2001), the early promoters and inventors of trauma-informed care (TIC) approaches in the field of human services, such as residential treatment centres and group homes, outlined five principles that TIC in human services should be built around: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. These principles emphasise creating an environment that is sensitive to the needs of individuals who have experienced trauma. Safety includes both the emotional and physical safety of everyone by creating a respectful environment to reduce the likelihood of re-traumatisation; trustworthiness means providing clear and transparent information; choice means to provide autonomy and encourage the expression of choices, allowing individuals to have a voice in decisions that affect them; collaboration means that both staff and clients should collaborate to reduce power differentials; and empowerment is concerned about bringing people's self-esteem up through skill development (Harris & Fallot, 2001).

Trauma-informed care (TIC) is a methodology of treatment and service to clients, typically in health care or crisis intervention work (Harris & Fallot, 2001). This approach recognizes and responds to the impact of trauma on a young person's behaviour, emotions, and

well-being. For example, TIC can be applied to mental health services, school settings and residential care facilities such as group homes to enhance trauma-sensitive environments. TIC is essential for group home settings to create a positive and trauma-aware environment that helps youth heal and grow.

Using TIC approaches with children impacted by trauma is valuable because this type of intervention focuses on skill acquisition and supportive relationship management and recognizes the traumatic roots of challenging behaviours (Brend et al., 2020). In addition, Brend and Sprang (2020) described how this framework influences the environment:

> This framework is used to create an organisational culture that recognizes the ubiquity of trauma in the development of altered neurodevelopment and compromised immune responses, traumatic stress symptoms, maladaptive behaviours, and impaired functioning in those with toxic levels of exposure. (p. 159)

This quote refers to how sensitivity and awareness of the needs of youth affected by trauma influence the environment. Therefore, the more trauma-informed a staff member is, the more supportive the environment will be for youth to grow and heal.

Using TIC approaches in group care will more vigorously address the effects of trauma without additional re-traumatisation. For instance, Program Penguin (Programme Pingouin), created by Boscoville, uses a TIC approach to respond to the needs of youth aged six to twelve in residential treatment centres or group homes in Québec and is aimed at helping staff develop trauma-informed attitudes and implement the five principles (Brend et al., 2020). Program Penguin aims to improve the services available for youth by developing the skills of group home staff and other workers to address the needs of youth better (Boscoville, 2023). The program's

approach to helping youth who have been affected by trauma is to understand that the young person's behaviours are primarily based on the trauma they have experienced (Boscoville, 2023).

Since Harris and Fallot first prompted the idea of TIC approaches in human services, new principles are often intertwined with the existing five principles in literature. For example, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (2014) incorporated a sixth principle, cultural, historical and gender issues. The sixth principle is to recognize and address any cultural, historical, and gender issues sensitively (SAMHSA, 2014). In other words, this principle emphasises the importance of group home staff or other adults recognizing cultural, historical and gender-related factors to respond to and address trauma by creating a safe and inclusive environment for youth to heal.

Established in 1992, SAMHSA (2014) addressed the need to recognize trauma as a crucial component of effective behavioural health service delivery and strongly emphasised early intervention strategies. SAMHSA put forth a framework for behavioural health sectors that can be adapted to other sectors such as child welfare, education, criminal and juvenile justice, primary health care, the military and other settings that have the potential to ease or exacerbate an individual's capacity to cope with traumatic experiences (SAMHSA, 2014). SAMHSA aims to provide a viable framework that can be used to support people receiving services. From SAMHSA's perspective, it is critical to promote the linkage to recovery and resilience for those individuals and families impacted by trauma (SAMHSA, 2014).

TIC is increasingly becoming one of the standard practices in youth group care across Canada and the USA (Schwickrath, 2021). For instance, systems such as youth group care facilities often adopt TIC via multiple intersecting pathways, including staff training models, policies, procedures, protocols, trauma-informed interventions, and leadership development

(Baker et al., 2018). One way to perform trauma-informed care is through Therapeutic Crisis Intervention (TCI). Group home staff in Canada and the USA are primarily trained using TCI (Nunno et al., 2003).

The development of TCI began in 1979 at Cornell University by staff at the Family Life Development Center (FLDC) to assess the nature and extent of child abuse and neglect when it occurs in group care and identify those factors associated with its incidence (Cornell University, 2022). The FLDC discovered that inappropriate use of discipline, isolation and restraint, poor management policies, and abuse were all factors. Therefore, unlike other techniques, the objective of TCI is to de-escalate potential crises by acknowledging triggers, preventing crises before they occur, mitigating potential and actual injuries to staff and youth, and providing care, support and control (Bitton & Rajpurkar, 2015; Cornell University, 2022). For example, over 12 months, a residential treatment centre in New York, using TCI techniques, observed a decrease in running away, physical aggression and injuries (Farragher, 2002). There was also an 80% decrease in the average number of restraints completed by staff per month, from an average of 45 to 8.6 restraints (Farragher, 2002).

TIC assumes that the successful resolution of a youth's crisis depends on the adults, including the staff's ability to respond in the most sensitive, caring, and appropriate manner (Nunno et al., 2003). The TCI certification process for group home staff involves (Cornell University, 2022):

- a five-day training process
- active participation, such as role-playing a potential crisis
- a passing score on a written test (>80%)
- complete attendance

Participants of the TCI program receive a training manual, PowerPoint presentations, live examples from trainers, and a workbook to train them effectively (Cornell University, 2022). The teachers and trainers for this program are staff within an organisation that utilises TCI approaches and delivers training to all levels of group home staff by observing, assessing, delivering hands-on training, and providing feedback (Cornell University, 2022).

PSECA Interventions

Under the PSECA legislation, there are two types of apprehensions: voluntary and involuntary. Apprehension is different from arrest because apprehension refers specifically to the Act of taking a person into custody under the provisions of PSECA, which protects youth from sexual exploitation. This apprehension can occur based on suspicion, complaint, or other legal grounds related to offences covered under PCESA, such as sexual abuse, exploitation, or harassment of children (Government of Alberta, 2014). On the other hand, arrest refers to taking a person into custody by law enforcement authorities for alleged involvement in a crime. Therefore, apprehension is concerned with protecting youth, not punishing them.

There are also two types of facilities: open and secure. Open facilities are non-secure environments where youth have a certain degree of freedom, including community group homes, foster homes, or staffed independent living services. Open facilities provide a supportive environment and help maintain young people's connections with their communities and families. Secure facilities are heavily monitored environments with strict security measures, such as secure treatment centres. Secure placements are intended for youth who pose a risk to themselves or others, require intensive supervision, or need a controlled environment to address specific behavioural or safety concerns. The key difference between open and secure placements lies in the level of security and control. Open placements offer a more flexible and supportive setting,

while secure placements prioritise safety, supervision, and containment for youth with higher risk levels or specific treatment needs.

Voluntary apprehensions

Under the PSECA legislation, there are two distinct types of interventions. The first is a voluntary intervention, where the youth voluntarily agrees to be enrolled in community-based programs, including group homes and safe houses (Government of Alberta, 2014).
These community-based programs are designed to assist youth to successfully exit from sexual exploitation (Government of Alberta, 2014) and reintegrate into their communities and families. Youth aged 16-18 can voluntarily access these programs with or without their guardian's permission; additionally, if the victim is over 18 but was victimised while they were under 18, then they can still voluntarily access these services (Government of Alberta, 2014). In comparison, youth under 16 can only voluntarily access interventions under PSECA with their guardian's permission. Moreover, upon apprehension, the child's legal guardian must be informed. Children & Family Services acts as their guardian in certain instances due to previous engagement in services like foster care or family intervention (Government of Alberta, 2010).

Youth interested in voluntarily accessing PSECA interventions are required to complete a voluntary service agreement. This agreement includes a description of the programs or services to be made available by attaching the Voluntary Service Plan or Transition to Independence Plan, the contributions to be made by the guardian, the duration of the agreement, and how the agreement may be amended or terminated (Government of Alberta, 2014). The Voluntary Service Plan is designed for children below 16 years old, while the Transition to Independence Plan is for youth aged 16 and above. These plans must detail the intended service providers, programs, and services, along with overall outcomes, goals, and progress indicators

(Government of Alberta, 2014). In cases where a child already has a Transition to Independence Plan due to previous intervention services, the plan should be reviewed and amended to incorporate services and objectives related to PSECA, aiming to help the child disengage from sexual exploitation.

Involuntary apprehensions

The second form of intervention within PSECA involves an emergency court-authorised apprehension. In this scenario, law enforcement or Children & Family Services must petition the court to seek legal authorization to take custody of the child where the child or youth is unwilling to cooperate voluntarily (Government of Alberta, 2010). This court order authorises the police officer or director to apprehend the child and bring them to a secure facility group home or safe house with intervention services (Government of Alberta, 2014). Upon admission to the group home or safe house, the child may be kept under confinement for up to five days initially, primarily for assessment and, if necessary, detoxification. Subsequently, the director can request up to two additional terms of confinement, each lasting up to 21 days (Government of Alberta, 2010).

Specialised Group Homes

Group homes for sexually exploited youth are specialised homes for youth at risk of sexual exploitation or currently involved in sexual exploitation and are designed to provide a safe and supportive environment allowing for personal growth (Trellis Society, n.d.a.). These homes offer various services, including educational and social-emotional learning (Hull Services, n.d.; Trellis Society, n.d.a.), TIC, cultural opportunities, community integration, and life skill development (Bell, 2011). Listed below are a few group homes in Alberta, but various others exist, including Heritage Family Services, located in Red Deer, Lacombe, and Rocky Mountain

House; Ben Calf Robe Society, Family Connections Inc. and Big Heart Homes Inc., located in Edmonton, and Mountain Plains Community Services Society of The North (MPCSSN), located in Grande Prairie.

Eleanor's House. A program provided by the Trellis Society, Eleanor's House, located in Calgary, is a voluntary short to long-term transitional group home for youth aged 13 to 17 at risk of sexual exploitation or experiencing sexual exploitation (Trellis Society, n.d.a.). Youth are referred to the program through Calgary Region Child and Family Services under PSECA (Trellis Society, n.d.a.). Additionally, Trellis Society's website offers a child sexual exploitation screening tool for parents or other individuals who are concerned that their child may be a victim of sexual exploitation (Trellis Society, n.d.a.).

Be Brave Ranch. A program provided by Little Warriors, Be Brave Ranch, located outside of Edmonton, is a specialised, trauma-informed, intensive based treatment program focused on helping youth who have been sexually abused (Little Warriors, 2019). Be Brave Ranch aims to provide a safe and supportive environment where youth can heal, develop coping skills, and rebuild their self-worth and resilience. The program begins with a 26-day stay at Be Brave Ranch for youth aged 8-12 and a 12-day stay for females aged 13-17 (Little Warriors, 2019). After the 26 or 12-day stay, throughout the year, youth will return to the ranch three times for 12 days to continue their face-to-face therapy and reconnect with their peers (Little Warriors, 2019). In between stays, youth will have access to the clinical team at the ranch via outpatient methods and community support (Little Warriors, 2019).

Hull Services. An agency that works with youth who have experienced chaotic lives, Hull Services, located in Calgary, offers youth and their families an opportunity to seek behavioural and mental health services (Hull Services, n.d.). Hull Services offers various

services such as group homes, including Raddisson and Cedarbrae Teaching Home, independent living services, campus-based residential care, and five immediate intervention programs. Reflections is one of the five immediate intervention programs provided by Hull Services and offers support to sexually exploited youth or youth at risk of sexual exploitation via a confined, court-ordered, and monitored service (Hull Services, n.d.).

Woods Homes. This mental health agency provides treatment and support to approximately 20,000 young people, adults and families annually and responds to more than 15,000 crisis calls (Woods Homes, n.d.). Woods Homes is based in Calgary but also operates in Lethbridge, Strathmore, Fort McMurray, Cold Lake, Grande Prairie and Lac La Biche and provides 40+ programs and services that fall under these pillars: in-home and counselling services, therapeutic campus care, foster care, therapeutic foster care, parented group homes, community group care, specialised group care, housing, hub services and learning centres (Woods Homes, n.d.).

Safe Houses

Safe houses for sexually exploited youth, also known as shelters, are specialised short-term facilities that must be secluded and securely isolated from external influences, with round-the-clock staffing by alert personnel (Government of Alberta, 2010). Safe houses offer various supports, including access to family communication, medical experts, Children and Youth Services staff, childcare professionals, mentors with firsthand street experience, and a case coordinator. The purpose of safe houses is to evaluate the youths physical and emotional health, substance use, risk of self-harm, potential involvement in sex work, family dynamics, and significant relationships (Government of Alberta, 2010). This assessment guides the selection of intervention services required and identifies the most suitable assistance for the child.

The Zebra Child Protection Centre. This non-profit organisation in Edmonton comprises over 50 professionals from six organisations: Alberta Health Services (AHS), the Child at Risk Response Team (CARRT), Edmonton Police Services (EPS), Children's Services, RCMP, and Zebra staff and volunteers (Zebra Child Protection Centre, 2023). Additionally, they have off-site partnerships with Alberta Crown Prosecution Services, Alberta Education, Alberta Justice, and the Child & Adolescent Protection Centre. The team at Zebra provides support for sexually abused youth by offering a 24-hour crisis response team, medical and forensic interviewing services, development of a child safety plan, provision of clothing, pyjamas, and mental health and medical care, and referrals to community support services (Zebra Child Protection Centre, 2023).

Beyond the initial intake, the Zebra Child Protection Centre provides advocacy and support services, including care calls and emotional support for caregivers, specialised support for court proceedings such as emotional support animals and recorded forensic interviews, and a child-friendly court waiting room funded by Zebra (Zebra Child Protection Centre, 2023). Moreover, the 2023 Zebra Centre Child Protection Impact Annual Report found that the majority (52%) of youth were referred to the organisation because of sexual abuse (Zebra Child Protection Centre, 2023).

The Reset Society of Calgary. This agency operates 24/7, providing comprehensive, long-term programming for females aged 16 and above who have experienced sexual exploitation or trafficking (Reset Society of Calgary, n.d.). They also offer specialised programs for pregnant women, women with children, and those facing co-occurring challenges such as addiction, trauma, and homelessness, collaborating with agencies nationwide (Reset Society of Calgary, n.d.). This program includes a three-phase continuum of services to support girls and

women exiting sexual exploitation, including i-EXIT, EXIT, and community support services (Reset Society of Calgary, n.d.).

Phase one, i-EXIT, is an on-site 30-day rapid-exit program that provides a safe place for the exit of sexual exploitation and assesses the immediate needs of victims (Reset Society of Calgary, n.d.). The goal of i-EXIT is safety and stabilisation. Phase two, EXIT, is a 12-month or more program that offers 24/7 supportive housing, therapeutic recreational activities, life-skills training, Indigenous activities and curriculum, and referral to community-based supports (Reset Society of Calgary, n.d.). The goal of EXIT is to promote healing. Phase three, community support services provide ongoing life-skills training that includes education and employment development, positive parenting and relationships, therapeutic recreation, positive lifestyle habits, nutrition, and women's health issues that are individually tailored for each individual (Reset Society of Calgary, n.d.). The goal of community support is to promote independence and empowerment.

Programming

All of the group homes and safe houses listed above offer different types of programming, such as community and educational programming and counselling. Various agencies in Alberta also offer programming for sexually exploited youth, including youth who have been sexually abused and trafficked, such as McMan Youth, Family & Community Services Associations of Calgary, Boys and Girls Club of Calgary, Trellis Society, Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse, Saffron Centre, and the Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton.

McMan Youth, Family & Community Services Association of Calgary. This comprehensive child and family advocacy agency in Calgary offers various support services, including educational programming, housing support, community and skill development groups,

counselling, addiction treatment, mental health programs, and Indigenous-specific programming (McMan, n.d.). They create individualised care plans tailored to the specific needs of youth and families and provide education on prevention and interventions that promote healthy choices and development. Their programs are accessible to youth aged 12-18 and families referred under PSECA or CYFEA voluntarily or through referrals from parents, youth, community members, or schools (McMan, n.d.). Additionally, they collaborate with law enforcement for youth apprehended under PSECA and CYFEA (McMan, n.d.).

For example, the Collaborative Outreach Preventing Exploitation (COPE) Program is a voluntary program offered by McMan Services that provides support to youth at risk of or experiencing sexual exploitation by helping youth build and maintain healthy relationships, make informed decisions for the future, navigate education, counselling and related resources and increase the youth's self-efficacy and independence (McMan, n.d.).

Boys and Girls Club of Calgary (BGCC). This has been an established community program since 1939, which supports vulnerable children and youth in Calgary and offers housing and shelters, community clubs and camps, education and job skills training, Indigenous initiatives, and community-based care support (Boys & Girls Club, n.d.). The Boys and Girls Club (BGC) operates not only in Calgary but across various communities in Canada to help youth build confidence, acquire skills, and succeed.

Hera. Another intervention program provided by the Trellis Society, Hera, is intended for females aged 13 to 17 at risk of sexual exploitation or experiencing sexual exploitation using a therapeutic approach. This program academically follows the Calgary Board of Education and runs year-round, Monday through Friday, except for spring and summer break (Trellis Society, n.d.b.). The goal of this program is to help girls at risk of sexual exploitation develop skills,

move forward in a positive direction, heal in a therapeutic environment, re-examine their lives, and safely connect with the community.

Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse (CCASA). This program serves as a central crisis and educational resource for sexual abuse in Calgary. CCASA's focus is on offering tailored services to victims, their families, and the community, delivered through safe and accessible interventions such as crisis support, counselling, educational programs, outreach initiatives, assistance in police and court matters, as well as a volunteer and leadership program (CCASA, n.d.). For example, The Calgary Sexual Assault Response Team (CSART) is a support service offered by CCASA for individuals who have been sexually assaulted within the past seven days (168 hours) (CCASA, n.d.). CSART is available 24/7 to anyone 12 and up through any Calgary emergency department and for youth under 12 through the Alberta Children's Hospital (CCASA, n.d.).

Saffron Centre. This non-profit charitable organization works with those impacted by sexual violence in Sherwood Park and provides specialized education, counselling programs and assistance navigating the criminal justice system (Saffron Centre, n.d.). The Saffron Centre's goal is to support those impacted by sexual violence, including sexual exploitation, assault, and abuse and create safer communities through preventive education, as well as healing through TIC (Saffron Centre, n.d.).

Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton (SACE). This organization offers various programs for youth impacted by sexual assault, including counselling, for ages three to 17. Moreover, SACE requires that before seeking counselling, incidents of sexual abuse or assault be reported to either law enforcement or child welfare agencies without the necessity of charges or convictions being involved. SACE offers different types of counselling based on the individual's

age and interests (Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton, n.d.a.). For example, play therapy is a common form of counselling used for children at SACE because it allows children to express and "play out" their feelings by using therapeutic toys and tools (Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton, n.d.b.). In play therapy, the primary objectives include boosting the child's self-esteem and strengthening their coping abilities. This approach facilitates the client's development of problem-solving skills, creativity, communication abilities, emotional expression, and understanding of relationships, choices, and available resources (Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton, n.d.b.).

Conclusion

It is crucial to identify effective treatment models and intervention programming aimed at protecting sexually exploited youth in group homes because once identified, more preventative programming can be made available for those at risk and factors of effective programming can be implemented elsewhere. The exploration of treatment models and intervention programming has provided a more in-depth understanding of what works to help sexually exploited youth; from TIC to legislative reforms, there are promising avenues for supporting and protecting sexually exploited youth in group homes. Additionally, exploring the relationship between risk factors, ACEs, and the CWS served to develop a better understanding of how these factors contribute to and exacerbate incidents of youth sexual exploitation.

Additionally, this paper afforded me the chance to delve into instances of youth sexual exploitation in group homes, aiming for a deeper understanding of the extent of this crime in Canada and Alberta and how intervention services facilitate healing. It also allowed me to contribute to the existing literature by synthesising Canadian perspectives and comprehensively understanding this issue, allowing me to provide my insights and recommendations to further aid in combating youth sexual exploitation.

Discussion

This paper conducted an integrative literature review of programs that service youth in group homes experiencing sexual exploitation or at risk of sexual exploitation. The first section of the paper was dedicated to addressing the research question about risk factors associated with youth sexual exploitation and how intervention methods reduce these risks by enhancing protective factors (what are the risk and preventative factors associated with youth sexual exploitation?). The most common risk factors associated with youth sexual exploitation were running away from home (living on the streets) (Fedina et al., 2019; Greeson et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2021) and instances of sexual abuse (Laird et al., 2020; Mercera et al., 2023). However, protective factors can help mitigate these risks by promoting resilience. The protective factors that provided the most resilience and decreased the risk of sexual exploitation in youth were protective and supportive relationships (Buchanan, 2014; Heerde & Hemphill, 2016; Mercera et al., 2023).

Youth in group care face numerous risk factors that increase the risk of sexual exploitation. Therefore, this paper sought to compile a list of successful programs in group homes and other services developed for victims of sexual exploitation and youth at risk by promoting protective factors and decreasing risk factors and answer the second research question – What intervention and prevention programs are available for sexually exploited youth in group care in Alberta? For instance, group homes that emphasise the importance of positive relationships, create a safe and culturally sensitive environment, offer access to support networks, such as counselling, educational training and family reunification programs, strengthen community connections, and address the trauma that many youth in group homes face, reduce their desire or need to run away because they feel safe, empowered, and welcomed.

These group homes not only reduce the risk of youth running away but also youth engaging in risk-taking behaviour, risky sexual behaviour, instances of sexual abuse, and mental health problems. Hence, the need for holistic approaches that address the multifaceted needs of these vulnerable youth is paramount. This includes providing therapeutic interventions and addressing housing, education, and employment opportunities to support their long-term recovery and reintegration into society.

This paper was also able to answer the third and final research question – What are the themes and patterns of effective treatment models and interventions for sexually exploited youth in group homes? The key takeaway is that TIC is at the heart of most successful treatment models and intervention and prevention programs, including TCI. The importance of TIC cannot be overstated because it effectively and sensitively recognises and responds to the impact of trauma on individuals, particularly youth. In Canada, including Alberta, most group homes use TIC methods to train staff using TCI. This method prepares staff to deal with a crisis by promoting safety, building a trusting staff-youth relationship, addressing trauma and empowering choice. Although most group home services use TCI methods, interventions take on many different approaches, including specialised programs, such as Eleanor's House, and prevention education, such as Hera.

Moreover, based on the findings, the protective factor that provided the most resilience and decreased the risk of sexual exploitation (protective and supportive relationships) was incorporated in effective treatment models across Alberta, including Trellis Society, Heritage Family Services, Hull Services, Woods Homes, and others. Therefore, numerous agencies and services agree on the importance of strengthening supportive relationships. These supportive

relationships can take on many forms, including those with the environment, community, peer groups, and parents or other adults who act as role models.

In summary, while there are positive initiatives and resources available for sexually exploited youth in group homes in Alberta, there remain gaps and areas for improvement, including the lack of comprehensive education programs. Therefore, continued research, advocacy, and investment in evidence-based practices and interventions are needed to enhance the well-being of these vulnerable youth in Alberta. Ultimately, a society that prioritises the protection, resilience and support of its most marginalised members is a more just and compassionate society for all. Thus, educational programs should be accessible in all areas of Alberta and not only in cities or large towns.

In addition, for future studies, these findings will influence research because they show that an emphasis needs to be placed on online sexual exploitation because the use of the Internet and Internet-related sexual exploitation drastically increased. Therefore, education programs that teach youth about the risks involved with the Internet are crucial because of this dramatic increase. Youth should be taught about the dangers of the Internet, such as connecting with strangers online and sending sexually explicit messages. Youth should also be educated about online predators, grooming tactics, and safe online behaviour to help protect them from potential dangers because there are individuals who use the Internet to exploit and harm young people.

These findings also show that an emphasis needs to be placed on Indigenous youth in group homes experiencing sexual exploitation because they are vastly over-represented in the CWS and are more likely to be sexually exploited. This is not new information, but Indigenous youth remain over-represented despite various changes to the CWS and increased intervention

and protection services. For instance, In Alberta, 7,872 youth were in out-of-home care in 2019, 5,775 of whom were Indigenous (Saint-Girons et al., 2020).

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