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**Breaking the Culture of Silence  
in Newfoundland & Labrador:  
Provincial Assessment of  
Youth Sexual Exploitation (YSE)**

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**thrive**



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# Executive Summary

**Youth sexual exploitation is an ongoing violation of human rights in our communities across Newfoundland and Labrador. These experiences are perpetuated within families, between peer groups, by adults in our communities, and inside our homes via the online world. Due to the insidious nature of youth sexual exploitation, disclosures and reporting are rare occurrences. Further, the power differential between a youth being exploited, and the exploiter, are vast. The unbalanced power dynamic often favors the exploiter, deepening the isolation and silencing of the youth.**

**This report aims to create knowledge and understanding about what youth sexual exploitation is and how it manifests in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Additionally, we asked our communities what is needed to effectively prevent, address, and respond to youth sexual exploitation so that we can end the culture of silence surrounding it. To our knowledge, this is the first capacity assessment in the province focused on youth sexual exploitation. We hope it's not the last.**

**In this report you will find background on Thrive and the Coalition Against the Sexual Exploitation of Youth (CASEY), the methods for data collection which include discussions with folks who have lived experiences, sharing circles with service providers, and online surveys for the general public and those who work with youth. Finally, we provide recommendations for how our communities can be more proactive and responsive to the needs of youth in hopes of preventing youth sexual exploitation. A summary of recommendations is provided below. You will notice this report is not written in a traditional academic format. This was intentional. I am the assessor and I am an Indigenous knowledge gatherer and holder. I am an Inuk Two Spirit Labradorian with lived experience of sexual exploitation as a youth and it's been through extensive healing practices with both Indigenous culture and western medicine that I find myself in a place where I can hold space to do the work of this assessment in a unique way. This work is more than a report, it is a responsibility that I hold close to my heart. My heart will seek to speak directly to yours in the coming pages. I hold this honour in very sacred ways.**

## Summary of Recommendations:

**There is a strong call for provincial leadership to address this issue. Communities and service providers need resources to effectively work towards the prevention of youth sexual exploitation. Creating responsive and proactive systems such as the educational, healthcare, legal, and government systems is key to ensuring youth are supported when they disclose instances of sexual exploitation. Further, knowledgeable and responsive systems will help prevent exploitation.**

**Many of the recommendations focus on providing all people in our communities with the information, skills, tools, and resources they need to effectively prevent, address, and respond to youth sexual exploitation.**

**Providing resources to ensure the basic needs of youth and their families are met is another focus of the recommendations. Poverty is a root cause of youth sexual exploitation in terms of folks who exploit and those who are exploited. Long-term effective poverty reduction measures are one of the most effective prevention measures.**

# Introduction

**Sexual exploitation of youth in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) is deeply intertwined in a culture of silence. This is the predominate theme that has emerged from our provincial assessment which included voices from across the province. These voices included those with lived experience, service providers, and the general public. In this report, we will explore these perspectives as they relate to the needs of those who have experienced or been impacted by youth sexual exploitation in Newfoundland and Labrador. Please note, this is not an easy conversation, and we encourage you to seek support if you feel impacted throughout your reading of this report<sup>1</sup>.**

**Trauma Informed Practice was, and is, a core value that was held throughout the capacity assessment. Our goal is to understand the experiences and realities of youth sexual exploitation in NL. The Coalition Against the Sexual Exploitation of Youth (CASEY) aims to support the development of community identified solutions to community-identified needs, build supportive networks, and create a safer province for youth; one that is free from sexual exploitation.**

**CASEY is comprised of community members, stakeholders, and experiential voices working collaboratively to address the sexual exploitation of youth. CASEY is the only organization in the province with the specific mandate of addressing the sexual exploitation of youth. Many of CASEY's members support young people who have been impacted by this issue.**

**CASEY's four key areas of work include:**

- **Creating awareness and understanding of sexual exploitation of youth within the general public, among youth, and organizations that work with youth.**
- **Building capacity to effectively address the issue of sexual exploitation of youth through networking, collaboration, and information sharing.**
- **Advocating for appropriate supports and resources to reduce or prevent the sexual exploitation of youth.**
- **Supporting survivor leadership within CASEY and the broader community.**

<sup>1</sup> The Canadian Anti-Human Trafficking Hotline can be reached at 1-833-900-1010 for those seeking support. This is a 24/7 service with over 220 languages available. You can also reach the hotline staff at [canadianhumantraffickinghotline.ca](http://canadianhumantraffickinghotline.ca) and use their online messaging function.

**These areas of work promote an evidence-based wraparound approach to addressing and preventing youth sexual exploitation. However, CASEY recognizes that the needs of youth and communities impacted by youth sexual exploitation far exceed our limited capacity. Still, we are committed to doing the best we can with what we have. Having said that, CASEY acknowledges that this work requires multisectoral engagement and a highly collaborative approach.**

**Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Newfoundland and Labrador, like many provinces, saw an increase in time spent online. With that extended time online came increased risk for being targeted for sexual exploitation. Youth were particularly vulnerable during this time as their school, social activities, and free time were all virtual. During the peak of pandemic lockdowns and the time following, CASEY received an increase in concerned adults reaching out for resources, guidance, and supports. With front-line services severely restricted, CASEY took to online platforms to reach out beyond the St. John's metro region. CASEY offers two core trainings to the public, NOTIFIED which is a free online modular training for youth and adults to better identify and respond to online sexual exploitation. The other is a training geared towards caregivers (service providers, foster families, folks living or working with youth) to understand what youth sexual exploitation is, how to prevent sexual exploitation via evidence-based education and skill development, how to respond to disclosures, and what service providers can do to help meet the needs of youth in our communities.**

**As we connected with service providers from across the province, we learned that many felt they did not have the skills, training, or resources to adequately identify and support youth who are being sexually exploited. Further, many service providers identified a lack of prevention infrastructure that would allow them to do prevention work with youth who are at higher risk of being targeted. What this told us was that youth in our province are in dangerous and exploitive situations with little support, and few formalized places to turn for supports. Simply put, Newfoundland and Labrador does not have the mechanisms in place to prevent, identify, and appropriately respond to the sexual exploitation of youth. This reality was deepened with the loss of core funding to the Blue Door program in 2022. Due to the lack of information about sexual exploitation and the lack of supports CASEY endeavored to get a better understanding of the landscape of youth sexual exploitation in the province.**

## **Defining Youth Sexual Exploitation:**

**Youth Sexual Exploitation (YSE) is the abuse of positions of vulnerability, power, trust, and dependency to profit monetarily, materially, socially, or politically off the exploits of another person. Sexual exploitation of youth, in Canada, legally refers to anyone under the age of 18 who is exchanging sexual services. Sexual services can include (but is not limited to) sexual acts, escort services, stripping or pole dancing, sexual massage, child sexual abuse materials, including writing, images, videos, audio recording, phone sex, and more. Sexual exploitation does not necessarily end when a person turns 18. Sexual exploitation can be and is present in the adult sex trade industry. Importantly, not all who are engaged in the adult sex trade are being exploited. Sexual exploitation can take many forms including contact and non-contact. Contact sexual exploitation is any form of exploitation where physical contact is made between the exploiter and the youth. This form of exploitation is not limited to penetrative acts, it includes any form of physical contact. Non-contact sexual exploitation is typically online and does not involve any physical contact between the youth and the exploiter. Non-contact sexual exploitation, when facilitated online, can be constantly present in a youth's life.**

**CASEY has one full-time coordinator and limited core funding from the provincial government's office of Women and Gender Equality. The work is more than one staff person can take on which highlights the importance of having a coalition of folks working towards common goals. One staff person within one agency is not enough to adequately address this issue pan provincially. Youth in our province deserve access to education, supports, and services needed for them to fully participate in their communities without the ongoing risk of being sexually exploited. Cycles of abuse and exploitation are broken by intensive healing actions and ongoing supportive work. Therefore, it is not enough to talk about this issue and raise awareness. There must be action. Now let's discuss the results of the assessment.**

# Methodology - How We Gathered the Information:

**To best enrich the reporting of this capacity assessment, one needs to understand the framework used to make sense of the experiences surrounding sexual exploitation in the province.**

**Throughout this report we will refer to the data gathered and reported on as the “story” of sexual exploitation of youth in Newfoundland and Labrador. This language was chosen because it is the lens through which the assessor worked as an Indigenous knowledge gatherer and holder. The assessor is an Inuk Two Spirit Labradorian with lived experience of youth sexual exploitation. The assessor has been through extensive healing practices with both Indigenous culture and western medicine which allows them to be in a place where they can hold space to do the work of this assessment in a unique way. The assessor also has more than twenty years of experience in nonprofit work. Much of this work has been youth and community-based. The assessor also sits on committees and boards where they lend their wisdom from this collaborative approach, bringing ceremonies from Indigenous mentors and education obtained from college and frontline employers. The assessor believes we work from a place of the ancestors and the next generations – that these circles include us all and that we have a story here to tell, that everyone needs to hear. This work is more than a report, it is a responsibility that is held close to the heart.**

**Given these experiences, lenses, and ways of being and knowing, this document will not feel like an academic report. However, the story is very much based in factual data, or as the assessor calls it – truths. These truths came from the voices of those impacted, those living and working with youth, and/or experiences of their own YSE. You will hear their words, their experiences, and their recommendations. Bearing witness to these stories and experiences is an honour the assessor holds in very sacred ways.**

**Folks were engaged in the assessment in different ways, all of which were grounded in evidence-based practice and trauma-informed ways of engaging. The team at CASEY and Thrive spent significant time establishing how to ethically speak with communities and those with lived experiences in a way that honors their experiences but does not put the research participant in a position where they are likely to be retraumatized, unsupported, or harmed by sharing their experiences. The staff team met regularly to determine how to best complete this work safely.**

## **Our approaches included:**

- **Two anonymous online surveys, one for service providers connected with agencies across the province and one for individuals in the general community.**
- **Virtual and in-person sharing circles for stakeholders from agencies that directly or indirectly work with those impacted by YSE. This research tool is similar to a focus group in academic research.**
- **Semi-structured interviews with folks who self-identified having lived experience of YSE.**

**There was great care in how the information was gathered and held to ensure participants were supported and felt safe throughout the experiences. Resources were given and supports were identified for all folks who participated in the assessment. Below is a brief overview of each approach.**

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**Create a low barrier, judgement free place for Youth being exploited to go where they don't need to meet a requirement to receive services, even just having a safe, secure and restful place to go.**

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## Online Surveys:

Two surveys were available online throughout the assessment. The Organization Focused survey was designed for service providers and volunteers. The Community Focused survey was designed for the general public. Overall, 76 completed surveys were submitted for data analysis. The community survey consisted of 22 questions and organizational one was 24 questions, each taking approximately 20-25 minutes to complete.

Surveys were distributed using the snowball sampling. Our original outreach consisted of social media and emails to organizational connections. From there we asked respondents to share the assessment tools via word of mouth, email, and their social media. This allowed us to get a cross section of responses throughout the province, including rural and remote as well as urban perspectives.

## Sharing Circles:

12 sharing circles were held throughout the assessment. The circles included a wide range of stakeholders who are working directly or indirectly with those impacted by or experiencing YSE. This included 85 representatives from 17 organizations, government agencies, and Indigenous groups.

Those who participated include representatives from:

Those working in the sexual violence sector, systems navigation, with 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, health services, youth programs and groups, with Indigenous communities, recreation, the education system, and community networks. To ensure anonymity, we will not be sharing the specific organizations that participated

We gave 5 prompts to be used for “rounds” of sharing:

1. What does youth sexual exploitation look like in your community/work?
2. Can you tell me about what you feel your organization is doing well in regards to sexual exploitation of youth, and what are the organizational strengths in addressing youth sexual exploitation?
3. What barriers/gaps do you see in what is needed to address youth sexual exploitation?
4. What tools do you need to address sexual exploitation of youth in your community/region? Nothing is too small or big in this exercise.

**5. Closing Exercise: If you could wave a magic wand & do at least one thing to help prevent sexual exploitation of youth in your community/region, what would it be?**

**We were very happy to see all areas of the province represented as well as a great array of staff/volunteers that came from community agencies, government departments, regional organizations, and Indigenous groups. An important aspect of the sharing circles when held using Indigenous protocols is that everyone gets equal opportunity to contribute to discussion (including the ability to pass) as we pass around a “virtual” talking stick and opened up for general discussion at the end of each “round of sharing” to give people the chance to add more to their response.**

**Talking about YSE in this way can become emotional and we took great care in how we opened, held, and closed the circles. This care included opening with a water and fire balancing ceremony that provided people with a sense of safety and caring that then was ended with a grounding mindfulness activity. The experiences that were shared were powerful, the recommendations thoughtful and heartfelt, and the caring that all showed to one another was inspiring. I was humbled to lead these circles with the support from the amazing staff at THRIVE and CASEY. You will hear the results from these discussions later in the report.**

### **Lived Experience Discussions:**

**We held 9 lived experience discussions virtually as one on one sharing sessions. We had representation from all regions of the province as lived experience individuals shared their knowledge with us regarding what helped them, what did not help (gaps/barriers), what could have helped, and what recommendations they would have for organizations, families, and government to help youth experiencing sexual exploitation today. We were very intentional that no one was asked to tell their personal stories of YSE, although sometimes it did come up in their sharing. We did not engage youth who have living experience (currently experiencing YSE) as we felt this would be unethical without the appropriate supports in place. Due to the limited capacity discussed in the introduction of this report, we worked within those constraints and instead connected with folks who are no longer experiencing exploitation and self-identified as being in a place of readiness to discuss this topic.**

**In hopes of creating safety and predictability all folks engaging in lived experience discussions received the questions in advance and were informed they could end the discussion at any time. Further, participants were asked to identify a support person they could connect with. Support folks were invited to join interviews at the**

**discretion of the participant. Each person was provided consent forms to sign that gave us permission to interview them and use their responses to inform the provincial assessment. An honorarium was provided to all lived experience participants regardless of if they completed the discussion or not. We had a diverse age range from emerging adults to elderly. All respondents were female identified or gender diverse. Unfortunately, no male identified individuals participated in lived experience discussions. This is one limitation of this report and representative of the stigma males often face when they have experiences of YSE.**

**As the assessor, I found myself using my own healing practices of Indigenous ceremony and holding space in good ways. This impacted the energy and overall sharing experience for those attending circles and discussions.**

## **Assessing the Realities of YSE in NL - What Did We Learn:**

**The goal of this assessment was to draw out themes from the data – what is going well in our province in terms of prevention, education, capacity, and responding to YSE, and what can be improved upon. Some points of reflection in this process included a) what gaps exist in the system, b) is this experience intergenerational? If so, what about the culture(s) of the province are lending themselves to this experience, and c) what are the community-identified issues and community-identified solutions that are needed.**

### **Youth Sexual Exploitation in Newfoundland and Labrador**

**Throughout the data gathering stage of this assessment, participants asserted that they experienced silencing and silence in response to youth sexual exploitation. Comments on silence ranged from lack of government funding and broader systems response, to individuals silencing others in the community or being silenced by the community for speaking out. In these discussions folks often referred to a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy existing in their family units, social spaces, and broader community. Within this, we also had respondents disclose experiences (their own or those that impacted them) that span generations. This highlighted both, the normalization of YSE and the culture of silence surrounding it. Both the normalization and the silencing are needed to create a space where YSE experiences are pervasive.**

## **The Leadership and Collective Wisdom of Lived Experience (LE):**

**As part of undertaking this provincial assessment on youth sexual exploitation we needed to have the wisdom and leadership of those with lived experience. In finding those with lived experiences, we reached out province wide through connections made during the sharing circles, surveys, and personal connections at Thrive.**

**Nine people agreed to participate in this part of the assessment. We are very grateful for their sharing. From this lived experience collective, we have voices from all over Newfoundland and Labrador that are of different ages and backgrounds. People came into this with different intersections and places in their lives and spoke of how they've transformed their experiences of exploitation into healing journeys and ways of empowering their lives. We spoke with those who identified as female, transgender, and gender diverse. We saw generations who came forward and while we were humbled at the openness to their sharing, we were also greatly impacted that the stories had a similar message – youth sexual exploitation has not stopped in our province and the issues that were there 40 years ago are still ones that young people face today. We must do better; we must not accept the culture of silence that is so embedded in Newfoundland and Labrador. We can and have to act. The openness of those with lived experience reinforce this truth.**

**We ask that you ground yourself as you prepare to read this section. To also join us in honoring the collective wisdom, courage, and leadership that these individuals shared with us. We are not changing their messages, instead we have given voice to them and helped them their sharing with us in ways to help you understand how we can and must change the attention given to YSE in Newfoundland and Labrador.**

**Education, education, education!! CASEY program and presentations should be taken to all corners of the province, especially in rural areas where things aren't often talked about and abuse is more hidden. The government needs to step up and provide regional centers as well for helping deal with trauma, getting out of the situation, employment and training opportunities etc.**

**I feel it is also important to disclose that my story is a part of these discussions as CASEY staff worked with me to hear my lived experience and knowledge. This was not something that I had planned to do but shortly into the lived experience discussion, I knew that it was important that I do so. I am well into my healing journey and if organizations and governments can learn open-mindedly to work together to address YSE in our province, then it's essential that I contribute to these solutions in authentic ways. I also feel it's important to note that during this assessment process I worked closely with Thrive staff to have a support plan in place for debriefing and being able to hold these truths and sharing that has been so powerful throughout this assessment without carrying trauma in my body, mind, and spirit. This is the intensity of this work and why it's so critical we all take responsibility and action to change this culture of YSE and break cycles of youth trauma.**

**With that, I ask that you all reach out to your supports as you read this section of the report and if you need extra help – reach out to CASEY and other professional/personal networks. We never do this healing alone, nor do we take actions in solitude.**

**This is what we heard from the lived experience knowledge holders. The first two questions, we asked individuals to think of the time in their lives when the sexual exploitation was happening. The last two were from their perspectives now as people on their healing journeys that could help us to inform community, service providers, and governments who will be reading this assessment. We finished with giving them an opportunity to add any other comments or thoughts.**

## **Were there people, places, or things that helped you when you were a youth during that time?**

**The most heard response was “no”. People spoke about the lack of supports available, especially in rural and remote communities. Many people who experienced sexual exploitation also spoke of the secrecy of this experience, and the fact that they didn't tell anyone, or felt like they couldn't talk about it.**

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**Sexual Exploitation happened over multiple time periods, there were no supports for me at any point in time.**

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**For those who did receive support, here are the most common noted services that were helpful:**

**SCHOOLS:** For some, schools were a safe place where they could engage in extra-curricular activities, or provided an escape from an exploitive home life. Others noted that school staff noticed something was wrong and intervened.

**COMMUNITY BASED HARM REDUCTION SERVICES:** People spoke about specific specialized programming such as Thrive (Blue Door & Street Reach), AIDS Committee of NL's SWAP program and staff, and the Safe Harbour Outreach Project (SHOP). It is worth noting that all of the community-based supports that were identified operate primarily in the St. John's region, which reaffirms the experience of many people who could not find services in rural and remote communities.

**2SLGBTQIA COMMUNITY AND SERVICES:** Many people referenced the queer community and services as an important support system for them. People spoke about the Trans community, Lesbian Quakers, PFLAG, an LGBTQ Support group and Planned Parenthood's Camp Eclipse.

**NATURE, ART, MUSIC:** For many they found comfort in nature and/or creative expression. People spoke about the escape provided through music, poetry, and being on the land.

**PEERS, FAMILY & FRIENDS:** For those who felt safe to speak of their experiences, many noted that the support of their family and friends support was helpful. It was helpful to find peers who had similar experiences and feel understood, or for some, family and peers provided practical help like a safe place to stay and referrals to supports.

**SUBSTANCE USE:** For some using substances to help cope and also distract from the trauma they had experienced was a strategy. While, in some cases this led to living in the cycle of addiction, for those without access to quality supports, this was a harm reduction tool.

## Were there gaps/barriers that made getting support difficult?

**THREATS & VIOLENCE:** The most common challenge to seeking out support that people identified was fear of further harm. Exploiters use an array of tactics to keep people silent, and threatening further harm to the individual or their family is very common.

**VICTIM BLAMING, STIGMA, AND SHAME:** Many people spoke about their fear of not being believed or worse, that they would be blamed for their exploitation. For some, shame, guilt, and the normalization of exploitation created real barriers to accessing help.

**LACK OF ACCESS TO SERVICE WITH EXPERTISE IN RESPONDING TO SEXUAL EXPLOITATION:** While respondents spoke to accessing services, there was a common theme raised that staff training in this specific area is inadequate, or staff don't recognize the signs at all. People with lived experience felt service providers were not qualified to deal with youth sexual exploitation, and often felt their experiences were dismissed. For many, they spoke about receiving help for the symptoms of sexual exploitation (self-harm, substance use, behavioral issues), but no support for the trauma of being exploited. For others, they felt that services and supports were not trauma informed or had restrictive criteria, which prevented people from seeking help.

**COLONIALISM, RACISM, HOMOPHOBIA, TRANSPHOBIA:** Indigenous people spoke about the impacts of intergenerational trauma, colonialism and racism as a barrier to access support. For people whose parents were impacted by residential schools and intergenerational trauma, there was both a culture of silence and a feeling of wanting to protect people who were already struggling from their own trauma.

For folks in the queer community there was recognition of a lack of inclusive, safe spaces. It was also noted that institutions have caused harm to the community (justice/ religious) and therefore people are hesitant to reach out for support.

**LACK OF AWARENESS & UNDERSTANDING:** People spoke about their own lack of awareness of what sexual exploitation was, the normalization of exploitation in many communities, and not knowing where or who to ask for help as a significant barrier. There is inadequate access to sexual education materials, lack of acknowledgement or recognition of sexual exploitation, and a normalization of misogyny.

“

**Grooming imprinted the message that the exploitation was wanted. It became familiar and, in some ways, a safe form of violence.**

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**I grew up around residential school history and trauma impacts. The intergenerational trauma and history of mistrust for institutions in Indigenous culture and communities kept me quiet and afraid.**

”

## What additional supports/services do you feel would have helped during that time?

**TRAUMA INFORMED, INCLUSIVE SPACES WITH STAFF WHO HAVE SPECIFIC EXPERTISE IN SEXUAL EXPLOITATION:** People noted what they really needed was service providers with specialized expertise in sexual exploitation. Organizations like Thrive, Women's Centre's, and Pathways NL were specifically mentioned.

However, more broadly people spoke about the importance of organizations speaking openly about sexual exploitation, to ensure staff are trained in this topic and can recognize the signs, to have services that are trauma informed and barrier free, and that safety and confidentiality are protected.

**IMPROVED HEALTH CARE ACCESS AND RESPONSE:** Two key themes emerged regarding the health sector: increased access to specialized treatment, and improved confidentiality. People spoke about the need for qualified therapists, mental health treatment services, and more capacity within the current system. It was felt that there aren't enough service providers available, and turnover and burn out impacts the quality of services that are available. It was also noted that without private health insurance many people don't qualify for the continuity of care that can be found in the private sector.

Respondents also stated they would like to see improvements in health care settings regarding confidentiality. People spoke about how triage services are currently set up and the lack of confidential spaces to speak freely. Others felt there needs to be very clear communication of confidentiality and duty to report. Finally, for people living in small communities, health authorities need to clearly communicate how confidentiality is protected, especially when friends or family work within the environment.

**INCREASED EDUCATION & AWARENESS WITHIN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM:** It is recommended by people with lived experience that schools should offer more education and awareness on sexual exploitation, consent, and make resources available to people.

It was also noted that there should be Mental Health & Addiction workers in schools that are actively engaging students, providing supportive referrals, and understand gender-based violence.

**GOVERNMENT SERVICES THAT ARE ACCOUNTABLE AND RESPONSIVE:** People specifically spoke to challenges within the justice system and the need to ensure police, court staff, judges, and lawyers received training in sexual exploitation. There also needs to be structural changes so that sexual exploitation is taken more seriously, and those impacted are supported respecting their culture, gender, age, and experience.

**INDIGENOUS SPECIFIC SUPPORTS:** For Indigenous people, it is extremely important to ensure they have access to services that are culturally specific. Survivors spoke about the impact of their experiences and the healing they found through reconnection with their culture, Indigenous teachings, and connecting to ceremony as adults.

**PEER SUPPORT FROM PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE:** People identified that having access to peers with lived experience would have been very beneficial. Government agencies, schools, and community organizations should seek opportunities to hire people with lived experience.

**A CULTURE OF BELIEVING AND SUPPORTING THOSE IMPACTED:** Too many people who experience sexual exploitation feel they won't be believed, and that they won't get the support and understanding they deserve. Until there is a collective culture shift that responds to individuals in ways that are meaningful and respectful, then people will continue to be silenced.

## What would you like people reading this report to know?

**“We put divides on our children or think they can handle more than they really can.”**

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**“Exploiters are finding easier ways now for youth to be exploited (online, cellphones, apps, social media, etc.)” “Gaming and other online sites are places where youth are easily targeted, especially if they are lacking supports at home and/or in community.”**

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**“Not always marginalized youth who are victims of abuse and SE, youth who are from good families and are good students or involved in community can be victims too.”**

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**“Acceptance, healing makes me a powerful voice. I'm taking the negative out and turning my life into something positive”.**

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**“Self-harm can be a coping strategy. I actively made myself less attractive to avoid being a target. These things were very harmful to me.”**

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**“SE is generational – it sounds the same no matter the age and that hurts and shocks me. Why isn't this changing?”**

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**“It's my responsibility to heal and grow, but I'm not responsible for the trauma I've endured. Healing is a change I chose, I found that in my Indigenous culture.”**

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**Folks with lived experience were asked what specific recommendations they would like to see brought forward in this report. The responses were generally to address the current gaps in services, barriers to reaching out for help, and increasing awareness and education. In the final section of this report, the voices of those with lived experience, will be imbedded into the overall recommendations.**

**People don't want to get involved. "We don't talk about these things." "It is someone else's responsibility." "We're taught to not get involved." These are all messages that have been ongoing for generations in Newfoundland and Labrador.**

**In discussions, we heard from many age groups and a very clear message came through – the sexual exploitation of young people in Newfoundland and Labrador has been happening for many years. And still, the issues are not resolved; in fact from what we heard they are getting worse. Youth are more at risk than ever and we're not talking about it. Not in agencies, in schools, at home, or in our community spaces. This is a problem.**

# Learning from Sharing Circles and Community Wisdom:

## Who we heard from

This section summarizes the wisdom shared by the 85 individuals who participated in the sharing circles and 76 people who completed on-line surveys. Here is an overview of the demographic information provided:

### AGE RANGE

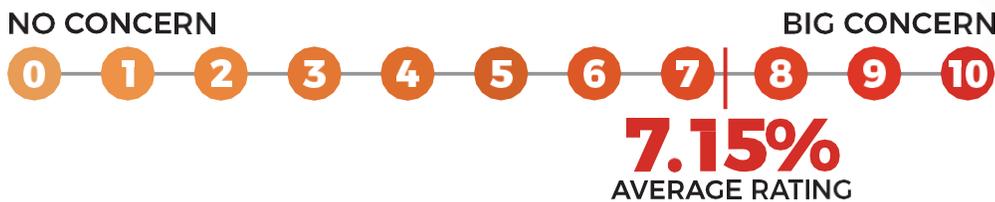


### IDENTITIES AND/OR EXPERIENCES YOU PERSONALLY CONNECT TO (PAST OR PRESENT)



## Is Sexual Exploitation in your community a concern?

Survey respondents were asked to rate on a scale of zero to ten if they felt YSE was an issue in their community. Zero means there is no exploitation present and 10 is it's a big concern.



“It’s a huge issue here and we need to protect our children. We cannot fail them.”

## What does youth sexual exploitation look like in your communities?



**SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE PRESENCE:** Those working in the education system explained that sending and receiving nude images/ videos is common amongst youth. Youth in grades four and five are requesting information about how to safely share intimate content. Further, youth are requesting information about what to do if their intimate content is shared without their consent. While engaging in intimacy is a healthy and normal part of human development, participants of the sharing circles raised concerns about a number of online platforms and their use by youth.

Snapchat was the most highlighted and concerning app for participants. They shared many youth are using Snapchat to facilitate the exchange of intimate content with the belief that the content truly disappears after being viewed by the receiver. However, according to Snapchats support site, there are many forms of snaps that are saved on their servers for varying amounts of time.

This concern of saving someone's snap without their consent and knowledge was echoed by participants in the sharing circles. Many identified experiences of revenge child sexual exploitation materials (CSEM)<sup>2</sup>, being acquired through Snapchat without the sender's knowledge and then being redistributed via the app.

Participants in the sharing circles highlighted another common concern regarding social media; Youth being overexposed to developmentally inappropriate content. Many identified that the algorithms used by TikTok, Instagram, and OnlyFans all promote content to youth that over exposes them to hypersexual content coupled with unrealistic images of what personhood, beauty, and attractiveness entail.

Participants explained that it is difficult for caring adults to have adequate online oversight due to lack of understanding for what youth do online, disappearing content, secret messaging options becoming more accessible and commonplace, and apps created to allow for heightened privacy (e.g. the app that looks like a calculator but is actually a password protected photo storage bank). Most participants called for better systemic oversight and accountability by

<sup>2</sup> Revenge Child Sexual Exploitation Material (CSEM) refers to any sexual content that depicts a child (a person under 18 according to the Canadian Criminal Code) being distributed with malicious intent or intent to cause harm to the person depicted.

the platforms themselves. With more accountability and in-app oversight, participants felt this would address some of their final concerns.

Participants noted it is becoming more common for youth to disclose sexual violence and exploitation via anonymized social media apps such as Whisper. Youth are also reaching out to known community organizations to disclose their experiences, sometimes with their real identities, but more often from fake or anonymized accounts. Most community organizations we connected with shared that they do not have a dedicated social media person, which means youth reaching out via this method may wait for undetermined periods of time for their message to be read and responded to. Further, most staff in social media-specific positions are not trained to effectively respond to disclosures.

**ADULT-YOUTH INTERACTIONS:** Participants identified a normalization of inappropriate adult-youth relationships within their communities. While adult-youth relationships can be safe and supportive mentorship experiences for youth, many do not take this healthy form. Instead, participants highlighted the high volume of adults providing spaces for youth to access and use a variety of substances. Often, these spaces and substances are provided in exchange for sexual acts, or are provided freely with the intention of sexually assaulting incapacitated youth.

Adults providing youth with access to resources they do not have easy access to was a common theme. Adults were noted as soliciting sexual acts from youth in exchange for housing, transportation (including taxi rides), food, surety<sup>3</sup>, and a sense of belonging within small communities. The last form of resource-motivated sexual exploitation was adult-adult facilitated. In these instances, an adult would offer resources to the caregivers of a youth in their home in exchange for access to the youth for the purpose of sexually abusing them.

Many noted that it was predominately men who were targeting young women/girls, and taking on the role of 'boyfriend', and there are often significant age differences and in many cases the youth is under 16 years of age. This is a very commonplace approach for traffickers to use, to pose as a love interest, and make the young person believe this person loves them. This is often referred to as the 'Romeo Approach'.

<sup>3</sup> Surety is a person who is responsible for a person exiting the criminal justice system. Often, the person is released into their care and the surety is responsible to ensure the person is following the conditions of their release. Typically, the person released resides in the home of the person providing surety. This creates a significant power imbalance.

**I would really like to emphasize the prevalence of grooming. I experienced this as a youth and am still impacted by these experiences. It is heartbreaking to see so many youth in my home town and elsewhere still experience this. It needs to be addressed and it needs to be talked about by everyone.**

**EXCHANGE OF MONEY/GOODS:** Whether it is adults, peers or self-exploitation, poverty was identified as a significant issue that often leads to young people experiencing exploitation. When young people do not have the financial resources to meet their basic needs, they are placed at higher risk for exploitation. Youth often want to be accepted by their peers and the value placed on consumer goods in our society creates significant pressures for youth. Therefore, offering youth access to resources to meet their basic needs, money, or non-basic needs is a tactic often employed by exploiters. This was supported by the survey data gathered.

**YOUTH-PEER INTERACTIONS:** Participants noted the rise in exploitive youth-youth interactions. Specifically, between older youth and younger youth where there is both, a developmental and power imbalance. These relationships, like the adult-youth relationships, have also been normalized within many communities. Again, these can be healthy, safe mentorship interactions but they often are not taking this form.

Participants discussed younger youth, often identified as those in junior high, spending time with high school students. Younger youth may be exposed to substances, sexual content that is not developmentally appropriate, and “side hustles” where younger youth may not understand the longer-term consequences.

We heard of youth having to take drugs in order to access a local party, older peers getting younger youth to take sexual pictures for distribution, and youth actively involved in the recruitment of peers for adult exploiters.

**TRAFFICKING:** The Government of Canada defines human trafficking as involving the recruitment, transportation, harbouring and/or exercising control, direction or influence over the movements of a person in order to exploit that person, typically through sexual exploitation or forced labour.

Many participants acknowledged a lack of awareness of human trafficking, which could explain why only 33% indicated this as the main form of exploitation in their communities, while providing examples of exploitation that meet the definition.

## Who is most vulnerable to be targeted for exploitation?

Here are the top five sub-groups identified as being the most vulnerable for exploitation. It is important to consider the intersections of these vulnerabilities, as many youth would fall within multiple and in some cases all of these areas, therefore increasing their vulnerability exponentially.

- Living in poverty
- Female
- Indigenous
- Child Protection Involvement
- Housing instable

## What are the limitations, gaps and barriers that impact your capacity to address or prevent sexual exploitation of youth?

**57%** of respondents said their community/organizations did not have the tools or resources to respond to the needs of youth who experienced exploitation.

## When asked to specifically highlight what is preventing local capacity to respond to sexual exploitation the most common responses were:

**LACK OF AWARENESS & EDUCATION:** Most respondents spoke to a lack of awareness or education both within their organizations, but also within society more broadly. Most professionals do not receive any training in their area as part of their studies, and there is limited access to training within the province.

The normalization of sexual exploitation and culture of silence was also noted as important factors that reduce the overall awareness of the prevalence of sexual exploitation. People spoke about not knowing the signs, not understanding the definitions, and also a sense of denial that this could even occur within our communities and province.

In fact, some respondents noted that with the information provided during this assessment process they were able to identify their own experience of being sexually exploited in the past, without ever having the language to name it.

**LACK OF RESOURCES & SERVICES:** Even when a youth is identified as experiencing exploitation and seeking support, most people pointed out there were no programs, supports, or services in their area to refer young people. The resource most often noted was reporting to police. This was not always seen as ideal, as many youth do not want to access the justice system, and even if they do, it was acknowledged the systems are not designed to provide the supports and services required to heal from the trauma.

For many service providers, it was identified that staff are already overwhelmed with the demands on their time and resources. Even when staff want to help and provide interventions there is just no capacity. Community based organizations specifically noted the overall lack of resources they are trying to operate within, the broad mandates for many organizations, and the lack of staffing and training resources to effectively support young people.

**SYSTEMIC INFLUENCES AND ISSUES:** Lack of systems response to this issue was highlighted repeatedly through all data gathering tools. Participants told us that systems were a driving factor in the perpetuation of youth sexual exploitation and a major contributor to low disclosure rates. Government systems and responses are the major umbrella for these concerns.

The current income support rates, policies that prevent co-habitation for young people under the Youth Services Program, concerns about confidentiality within systems, and an overall lack of safe affordable housing were all noted as systemic factors that create barriers to effectively addressing exploitation. A lack of reliable and consistent health services; including primary and emergency care, mental health care especially, if the need requires rapid response from mental health professionals was also noted.

Further, many people spoke to systems that have perpetuated harms to groups of people, therefore creating real barriers for individuals to then reach out to these systems for support. The impacts of colonization, racism, homophobia/transphobia were specifically noted. Within these discussions it was noted that Labradorians and the Labrador region experience these systems issues on an amplified scale. Many participants living and working in Labrador noted the lack of investment in ensuring high quality and responsive services within the region.

“

**We don't have the capacity or mandate to address youth sexual exploitation, other than the normal Duty to Report.**

”

## What are the strengths in addressing youth sexual exploitation in your community?

Now that we have a better understanding of the challenges and gaps, we asked community participants what was going well in their communities in terms of addressing youth sexual exploitation.

Participants in the sharing circles identified a number of strengths across the province. Three common themes emerged, (1) collaboration, (2) providing safer spaces for young people, and (3) community-led responses to community-identified problems.

**COLLABORATION:** Collaboration was highlighted as important and necessary for ensuring strong youth support. Participants identified the need for a circle/continuum of care surrounding youth. Many identified collaborations within their communities as a strength in preventing and addressing youth sexual exploitation.

Another form of collaboration highlighted was collaboration with the young person being supported. Participants we spoke with identified seeing the young people as experts in their experiences and thus support approaches that increase their feelings of self-efficacy and autonomy. Further, service providers discussed the importance of respectful, trusting, trauma-informed relationship building with youth.

Many identified that relationship building can mirror the grooming process when done without careful consideration for power imbalances and the approaches exploiters take to gain the trust of youth. Thus, they discussed the importance of strong boundaries, shared decision-making, supporting decisions of the youth even when the service provider do not feel it's the best decision, and being predictable and accountable. Additional collaborations with youth included engaging youth leaders in peer support spaces and supporting youth-led educational initiatives. All of these actions/steps foster trust in a safe way between support staff and youth and hope to shape youth culture.

Finally, collaboration with the families of youth impacted was identified as very important for service providers. Participants noted wanting to run caregiver information sessions about the signs of youth sexual exploitation as well as skill development with caregivers on responding to disclosures of sexual exploitation. Further, they highlighted the need for services that allow caregivers to maintain a supportive role with the youth as they move through their healing experience.

**PROVIDING SAFER SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE:** As important as forming relationships with young people and their support network, is youth having safe and non-judgmental spaces where they can connect with peers and safe adults. Participants in the sharing circles discussed community youth spaces as places where youth can access resources, receive support with advocacy activities, access to basic needs such as safe drug use equipment, food, and in some cases transportation.

Staff skills were highlighted as a major component of success with creating safer community youth spaces. Participants discussed the importance of operating from a trauma-informed lens. This allows staff to engage empathetically with youth, connect with youth who are marginalized, and identify signs and symptoms of trauma that may be impacting the youth. Additionally, being trauma-informed allows staff to create non-judgmental spaces where youth experience a sense of belonging, which is a protective mental health factor.

**COMMUNITY-LED RESPONSES TO COMMUNITY-IDENTIFIED PROBLEMS:** Finally, participants in the sharing circles spoke about the importance of the community identifying concerns and trends, and leading the responses to these concerns. For example, folks in the Labrador region discussed the lack of sexual health information available in the region. Two community-led initiatives closing this gap in service are the Raise Youth Voice campaign (specifically addressing youth sexual exploitation), and SHIELD (Sexual Health Information Exchange Labrador District). When communities are supported in leading initiatives that are responsive to what they see and experience, the impacts are far greater. Programs tend to provide individual supports, engage effectively online, and often are more flexible and responsive to needs as they arise. Another example shared during the circles was an initiative to provide access to healthcare and counsellors at no cost. Folks availing of this service do not need an MCP (provincial health plan card), which was identified as a major barrier in the community.

# Recommendations – To Build Local Capacity

There is a strong interest from local organizations, parents/caregivers, and the general community to work collaboratively to address the sexual exploitation of youth. In fact, 95% of all participants said they would be interested in working with local service providers to build local capacity.

## How CASEY could help build provincial capacity:

As referenced earlier, CASEY currently has one full time staff person, therefore CASEY's resources are very limited. During this assessment we were very transparent about our capacity and not to create an expectation that CASEY could respond or deliver on the recommendations that were brought forward. However, we did want to identify some key strategic priorities that would assist individuals and agencies to increase the overall capacity throughout the province.

Based on the feedback and discussions, the key recommendations for CASEY to support provincial capacity are:

**TRAINING:** Increase access to CASEY's current training programs. It was also suggested that CASEY consider a Train the Trainer program to increase access to regional facilitators.

**PROVIDE ACCESS TO INFORMATION & RESOURCES:** Suggestions included using CASEY's current website presence to ensure up to date resources; creating print materials to be distributed; utilizing social media to share information.

## What do we need to do to address YSE in NL?

The recommendations have been compiled based on the above data analysis. They are informed by the voices of lived experience, sharing circles, and survey respondents.

**PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP & MANDATE:** The Provincial Government needs to identify a lead department and create a mandate to address and work towards the prevention of sexual exploitation. This should include the development of a cross-government working committee that would include representation from the community-based sector, individuals with lived experience, and folks representing rural/remote, 2SLGBTQIA, Indigenous, racialized communities, and folks with disabilities.

**The Provincial Government needs to commit resources to ensure our province has a strategy and specialized services to prevent and support folks who experience exploitation.**

**EDUCATION & AWARENESS:** While CASEY can play a role in increasing access to training and awareness materials it is not practical for one Coalition, with limited resources, to meet this provincial need.

Therefore, it is recommended that the Provincial government lead and/or fund training and awareness raising activities. This should include the development of resources and training for care providers including parents/caregivers, justice & police, health care, educators and social serving agencies.

Specific resources needed include professional development opportunities, a centralized website with access to resources, the development of a capacity building toolkit, and a social media campaign.

**PROVIDE LONG TERM SUSTAINABLE FUNDING FOR SPECIALIZED STAFFING/SUPPORTS:** There is clearly a recognition of the widespread problem of youth exploitation, and a strong willingness for service providers to actively engage in this work, but it cannot be done without funding.

People with lived experience spoke candidly about not having anywhere to reach out to for support and 57% of service provider/ community members said their communities do not have the tools to respond to sexual exploitation of youth – we have to do better!

The Provincial Government must provide funding to build our provincial capacity, with a specific focus on rural/remote, 2SLGBTQIA, Indigenous, racialized communities, and folks with disabilities.

**EFFECTIVE ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGIES & POLICIES:** Ensuring youth and/or their families have access to a basic income that ensures they are able to meet their needs, including having access to safe, affordable housing; transportation; nutritional food; & clothing.

Poverty was widely recognized as a significant risk factor for exploitation; therefore, it is critical that all governments act to reduce poverty.

**TRAUMA INFORMED JUSTICE & POLICING:** While there was a recognition of the need for training in both Anti-Exploitation and Trauma Informed Care across all sectors, it was specifically noted as a need within the policing and justice services. It is recommended that all police officers, judges, prosecutors, crown attorney's, legal aid & victim services staff receive these trainings.

**There needs to be a trauma-informed process in place to ensure the youth impacted are not re-traumatized or subject to emotionally or psychologically harmful lines of questioning. Youth should be able to choose the level of involvement they have with any trials and/or legal proceedings when charges are laid by police. Youth should be able to exercise agency and informed consent at every step in the process.**

**ENGAGING, SUPPORTING AND EMPLOYING FOLKS WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE:** We heard specifically from folks with lived experience the value of peer support and connecting with others who have experienced sexual exploitation. The expertise and insight people with lived experience can bring to our collective education and service provision needs to be recognized and prioritized.

**It was also noted as critical that any engagement of people with lived experience is not tokenistic, but rather recognizes the expertise people have, gives access to meaningful decision-making opportunities, provides support effectively, and are compensated appropriately for their expertise.**

## Conclusion

**The reality and rates of youth sexual exploitation in Newfoundland and Labrador are alarming. The disturbing truth is that YSE has been ongoing and mostly unaddressed for generations. As a province we have not been forthright in breaking these cycles of violence and cultures of silence. That must change. We can and must do better. From our data collection work, we see clearly that YSE is a prevalent issue in all areas of our province.**

**Our approaches to addressing, preventing, and responding to sexual exploitation of the young people in NL must be thorough, immediate, and ongoing. This will take commitments from community, agencies and service providers, and all levels and types of governments (Federal, Provincial, Municipal, and Indigenous). This includes government services, departments, and systems. Intentional work must be done to educate and support all in our communities to break the entrenched cycle of violence and culture of silence that is making young people more vulnerable, and exploiters feel protected.**

**As the author, I've looked through all the notes and listened to many voices of service providers, community residents, and those with lived experiences. There is one universal commonality to everyone's perspective – they all know of youth who've been exploited or are adults who were exploited as young people, me included. This exploitation is intertwined into our culture and changing that trajectory is on all of us. We can all play a part in addressing YSE in Newfoundland and Labrador.**

**And yes, I'm aware of how big this problem is. It is so big; we cannot turn away from it. Instead, we must gather our resources and face it head on. Working together and moving away from blaming and into proactive action is needed. I believe we can do this. We must do this. Ask within your circles and you'll find out that YSE is everywhere. Once we are aware, we cannot plead ignorance. There are things we can do. So, let's get to it.**

**I'm choosing to end this report in the same way I ended all the sharing circles and lived experience discussions, with a mindfulness activity. I've been smudging and holding ceremony for what has been months of learning, listening, writing, grieving, healing, and now concluding my work here.**

**I pass it on now to all of you, hold it in a sacred way. Walk the path that we are being called to by our young people and for our young people.**

**Nakummek (thank you), it's been an honour and a privilege to sit in circles, share one on one, and listen to all the thoughts from those who have participated in this assessment. I'm so grateful to THRIVE and the funding agency that made this assessment possible. It's a powerful journey. Thank you to all reading this and for joining this long walk.**

**I will continue to walk my path of intention, being guided by my ancestors, and moving forward with my responsibilities to the next generations. I trust I'll see you along the way.**

Denise Cole

**“ Stop victim blaming, reduce the stigma, ensure that perpetrators are held accountable for their actions. ”**

## MY INTRODUCTION TO THE EXERCISE:

**Please, if you're comfortable, close your eyes and picture yourself outside in a favorite place in nature. You can stand or imagine yourself standing. Picture the floor as the ground, water, or wherever that safe space for you is. Allow yourself to go on a journey through my words:**

**This exercise came from: Mindfulness exercises and meditations (extended version): Change for the Better (4th edn) by Elizabeth Wilde McCormick (2012, SAGE).**

## GROUNDING EXERCISE:

**Remove your shoes. Stand with your bare feet firmly on the ground, legs slightly apart, and allow your feet to really feel the support of the earth underneath you. Take a few moments to find a relaxed posture – you may find that gently swaying around your hips helps you to settle into a relaxed upright posture. Make sure that your head is resting in a relaxed way upon your shoulders, just move the head around the shoulders slowly to find a relaxed position. Allow your back to relax. Allow your in-breath and out-breath to fill your chest and abdominal area. Rest your gaze at about 45 degrees or just ahead. Now place your attention firstly on your feet, and then on the earth beneath your feet. Just feel the earth. Imagine that your feet have invisible roots pushing down into the earth. Push these roots as far as you can go. Imagine now that your roots are contacting the fresh green energy of the earth. Allow this fresh energy to rise up through the roots into your feet. Now allow the earth energy up through your feet into your legs, up into your pelvis, belly and abdomen. And then allow the earth energy to course through your chest, heart and neck and shoulder area. Cup your hands together at the area of your heart and allow it to be refreshed. You may wish to leave this exercise there. If you wish to continue, one option is to remain standing with your hands cupping your heart area and to focus your attention at the top of your head. Now imagine the energy from above entering through the top of your head into your face, neck and shoulders, then flowing down into your chest and meeting up with the earth energy at the place of the heart. Just spend a few minutes being aware of the connection between the energies of above and below.**



**thrive**

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