



Reducing Vulnerability of Foster Youth to Predators and Sex Trafficking

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Overview

The National Foster Care Youth & Alumni Policy Council has been exploring the issue of vulnerability to sexual abuse and crimes among foster youth, and how this issue can be better addressed by adults who are stakeholders in child welfare and in the wellbeing of foster youth across the nation. The following recommendations have been compiled using the results of a poll administered to youth volunteers. A small focus group was established by the Council in order to discuss survey results and to identify policy recommendations.

Past studies examining the prevalence of sexual abuse among youth in foster care have long shown that youth in care are more vulnerable than their peers in the general population, and the Council's poll had similar findings:

- Over half of the poll respondents indicated being confronted with inappropriate sexual advances prior to entering foster care or while outside of the system.
- Almost 40 percent of respondents had been confronted while in foster care.
- 20 percent of respondents reported being approached by their foster parent in a sexually inappropriate manner.

With so many youth in care vulnerable to sexual abuse, it is necessary that adults working in the child welfare system ensure that appropriate services are available for youth, and that youth in care know what their resources are and feel empowered to utilize the services available to them. One youth participant in our poll phrased the need for intervention quite simply: "Just help the foster youth to understand that they deserve to be treated appropriately and that people are there to listen."

Any child entering the foster care system has already experienced the trauma of living with an abusive or neglectful family, as well as the instability of being involuntarily removed from the family they have always known and placed in the care of a stranger. Both of these are factors that render one particularly vulnerable to detrimental outcomes later in life. Further trauma experienced while in care only increases the likelihood that youth will age out of the foster care system without the opportunity to process these experiences or build an arsenal of skills and connections that will keep them safe as a young adult.

Not only does providing effective services to youth in foster care who have been exposed to sexual abuse help them overcome the trauma of these experiences, but it may serve as an important protective factor as they age out of foster care and become responsible for their own sexual wellbeing. Youth who age out of care often lack the resources to transition into a stable living situation and are therefore more likely to be vulnerable to being targeted by recruiters in the sex industry.

In examining past studies on foster youth who experienced sexual trauma, as well as the findings from our own poll, the Council has compiled the following list of priorities for action. The following eight priorities encompass resources necessary to support youth who are survivors of sexual abuse as well as preventative measures that would help empower foster youth to take action, leaving them less vulnerable to predators and sex trafficking.

PRIORITIES

- **Make sure we know our rights and resources.** It is important that foster youth know their rights and what resources are available to them so that they feel more empowered to report abuse and find assistance. Not only will this help youth feel able to respond proactively, but also ensure that legal intervention can be taken and the abuser meets with harsh consequences. Our survey found that over one-third of respondents would not have known where to turn for help had they been approached by a sexual predator while in care. It is important that they know how to take action when confronted with inappropriate or abusive behavior while in care, such as being given information on how to contact their state's ombudsman or other such reporting service. Every state should have a youth bill of rights, and this document should include information on reporting resources. Youth must have easy access to their bill of rights.

Youth voice: "I reported the abuse by the staff member, but was punished and isolated for a week by the program manager until I recanted and then put into inpatient under false pretenses."

- **Educate us about why and how these experiences impact (and will continue to impact) our lives.** Giving youth the support to process experiences of sexual abuse not only helps them address these symptoms, but may also prevent them from being re-victimized. Foster youth are particularly vulnerable to becoming victims of predators and the sex trade industry due to factors such as a lack of supportive services while in care and post-care, and psychological vulnerabilities that make them easier to recruit. We must ensure foster youth know that simply being in care can leave them more vulnerable, especially if they run away or age out of the system without finding permanence. Education should be broached in state sponsored youth conventions as well as in Independent Living Programs. Workshops or classes could include topics

such as what constitutes sexual harassment, violence or assault, learning about commercial sexual exploitation (sex trafficking) and knowing what to do if one is a bystander or witness to sexual abuse.

Youth voice: "I did get sexual predator awareness information, but even when it was in a group in foster care, it was always about how to handle the risks from the outside....dating violence, stranger danger, etc. No one ever gave me a roadmap for what to do if a professional in care violated my boundaries or sexually abused me."

- **Give us more ready access to therapy; ensure services are trauma informed and address sexual abuse.** Foster youth often experience multiple traumas simply entering the system: the initial abuse or neglect that brought them into the foster care system, and the trauma of being removed from their biological families. Further exposure to traumatizing experiences, like sexual abuse, compound on the negative effects of trauma on youth and often result in the delayed development of adult skills and maturity.

Our poll indicates that foster youth are more likely than not (66 percent) to have experienced sexual abuse or inappropriate sexual advances, and we believe estimates of sexual abuse is underreported for young people in foster care. Youth have insufficient access to services to help them process past abuse experiences or report current incidences. Therefore, therapists trained in trauma focused therapy (such as Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, or TF-CBT) to support youth in disclosing sexual abuse, whether previously disclosed or not. It is important that foster youth seeking therapy be able to access this resource with or without a formal DSM-IV diagnosis, overriding the current provision that Medicaid can only reimburse states that get a DSM-IV diagnosis for clients.

Youth voice: "My therapists were strong advocates for me in reporting the abuse and followed through in regards to legal actions."

- **Criminalize the act of allowing known sexual offenders into our foster homes or housing facilities.** Youth in care need to feel that their homes are safe and secure. Foster parents, in turn, need to be held accountable for keeping youth safe to the best of their ability. Knowingly allowing a sex offender into a foster home, group home, or living area of a foster youth should be considered a criminal act punishable by federal law enforcement.
- **Provide a youth-friendly resource for reporting abuse.** Foster youth already experience stigmatization simply by being in the foster care system. Often, they do not report sexual abuse for reasons such as: fear that their foster parents will not like them

or want them in their home, fear of getting other foster youth in trouble, learned distrust of the foster system, doubt that adults will believe their story or take action. It is crucial that foster youth have access to a youth friendly, anonymous resource that can help them to take action in the wake of sexual abuse. In addition, youth should be given the opportunity to report inappropriate sexual activity by being asked regularly if any sexual misconduct has occurred in their foster home or group facility. The council would like to connect with existing support organizations to help them develop and implement training that would allow counselors to better respond to youth in care.

- **Train foster parents to help them care for vulnerable youth.** Many youth enter the foster care system having already witnessed or experienced violence in the home and/or inappropriate sexual advances or contact. Education for foster parents should include strategies for helping youth who have been exposed to sexual abuse before entering the system. Topics may include:
 - Identifying possible physical or behavioral signs that a youth has experienced abuse
 - Identifying triggers in youth that may be caused by traumatic experiences
 - Adjusting rules or expectations in the house, such as touching, hugging or making eye-contact, if youth are uncomfortable.

Poll results also suggest that foster parent education must be carefully crafted so as not to become a source of “tips” for foster parents who may have bad intentions, resulting in increased vulnerability for youth in care. Foster parent licensure should require training on parenting survivors of CSA and domestic sex trafficking, and training hours must be enforced.

Youth voice: “The change has to start with the foster parents. The conversations about sex have to happen... how to protect yourself during, how to protect yourself against predators when no one is around, the importance of reporting... The genuine open line of communication is what its all about.”

- **Provide us with mentors and peer support groups — people we can trust.** Formal mentoring programs have shown evidence of helping foster youth seek pro-social support and it is important that youth in foster care have access to mentors who have received training on responding to youth who have experienced sexual abuse. Forming a positive relationship with a mentor may also provide a sense of permanency that serves as a protective factor in keeping youth from feeling vulnerable or putting themselves at risk by assenting to dangerous sexual acts as a means of seeking affection and security while in care.

Existing programs, such as post-secondary institutes, 4H programs, and other non-profits, should be incentivized to provide mentoring programs and to incorporate

curriculum to train mentors to work with sexually exploited youth. Additionally, peer-led mentoring programs provide benefits both for mentees and mentors. Foster youth who have been exposed to sexual abuse will benefit specifically from groups of peers who may share similar experiences. Peer groups will provide youth with a sense of solidarity, the knowledge that they are not alone in these experiences, and a resource to find out what options they have to report abuse.

- **Require more in-home visits, some of which should be surprise visits.** Foster care is meant to provide a safe place for youth when their families do not have the means or capability of doing so. Nevertheless, over 20 percent of our poll respondents reported being approached with inappropriate sexual activity by a foster parent. Another 22 percent met the same behavior coming from another youth in the system, such as an older youth in a group home or the adult child of a foster parent. These occurrences are unacceptable, and states may be able to better intervene by enforcing regular home visits from caseworkers. Our focus group pointed out that often adults, besides the foster parents, might reside in the home, although they are not on record as adult residents. Unplanned visits to foster homes may be necessary to discover these situations and help ensure that foster parents are providing a safe and stable home environment for youth.

About the Council: The National Foster Care Youth and Alumni Policy Council convenes to provide federal stakeholders with relevant and timely information as policies and procedures are created that will affect children and families throughout the country. The Council represents a collective viewpoint of youth and alumni who have personal experience in the child welfare system. The Council is a partnership between Foster Care Alumni of America and FosterClub, with generous support from Casey Family Programs.

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