

SCREENING FOR SEX TRAFFICKING WITHIN CHILD WELFARE: ADDRESSING THE
CHALLENGES BY CONSTRUCTING A CHILD WELFARE SPECIFIC SCREENING TOOL

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ABSTRACT

Strong evidence suggests that children and youth in care of the child welfare system have a particularly high risk of being trafficked for sex. Accordingly, child welfare workers are likely to encounter individuals at a greater risk of sex trafficking and therefore have a greater responsibility in identifying and supporting these victims. While the literature suggests challenges and barriers to the identification of sex trafficking, little is known about the experience of child welfare workers when assessing youth in their care, especially compared to frontline workers in other human service sectors. Furthermore, few validated screening tools comprehensively assess risk, and none are specifically targeted for youth in the child welfare system. The present dissertation sought to address challenges related to the screening of sex trafficking in partnership with child welfare experts. Chapter 1 introduces the issue of sex trafficking amongst youth in child welfare through a brief review of the relevant literature. Chapter 2 draws on interviews with child welfare experts to uncover challenges experienced during their assessment of sex trafficking risk and involvement. Findings revealed challenges unique to the child welfare context highlighting the transactional nature of the Social Ecological Model. Chapter 3 focuses on the construction of a sex trafficking screening tool in partnership with child welfare experts. This study also explores preliminary validation of the items included using interviews with survivors of sex trafficking as minors. Based on feedback obtained from child welfare experts, items were deleted, added, and modified. Child welfare experts were supportive of the screener. Survivors endorsed 40 of the items included in the screening tool when describing their experience of being trafficked. The interim version of the York Sex Trafficking Screening Tool used for this study includes 52 indicators of sex trafficking that are relevant to the child welfare context. Chapter 4 concludes the dissertation through a review of the study findings, integrative summary, review of the theoretical models, and clinical implications.

In summary, this dissertation contributes to clinical research and current practice by investigating ways to support child welfare workers, and youth involved in the system, when screening for sex trafficking.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Sex trafficking is amongst the most common forms of human trafficking with most cases in Canada and the United States involving domestic residents (Baird et al., 2020; Kotrla, 2010). Moreover, the majority of victims being recruited are minors between the ages of 12-14 (Greenbaum et al., 2013). Strong evidence suggests that children and youth in care of the child welfare system have a particularly high risk of being trafficked for sex (Baird et al., 2020; Fong & Berger Cardoso, 2010). Despite this occurrence, identification of sex trafficking risk and involvement for this population of youth is challenging and there is a strong need for a child welfare specific screening tool. The present dissertation sought to better understand the assessment experience for child welfare workers and to construct a specialized sex trafficking screening tool specific to the child welfare system. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain insight from child welfare experts by experience in order to understand challenges experienced during the assessment process. Furthermore, additional insight was gained from child welfare experts, as well as survivors, regarding use of previously validated items within the literature in order to develop a child welfare specific screening tool. The present chapter introduces sex trafficking, explores the continuum of risk, risk factors and warning signs which heighten vulnerability for youth, the intersection between child welfare and sex trafficking, and discusses the current research related to the assessment of sex trafficking and the associated challenges.

Human Trafficking

Human trafficking, also referred to as “trafficking in persons” and “modern slavery”, is defined as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons, through

force fraud, or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit” (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], n.d.). Human trafficking is recognized as one of the most commonly occurring and fastest growing criminal activities (Goździak & MacDonnell, 2007). While it is difficult to know the exact number of trafficking victims due to the covert nature of this crime, it has been estimated that approximately 49.6 million trafficking victims exist globally, with one in four being children and 54% percent being comprised of women or girls (Walk Free Foundation, 2023).

In the year 2000, the United Nations ratified the Palermo Protocol to prevent and punish human trafficking and exploitation, particularly involving children and women (UNODC, 2000). This protocol also signified the first internationally agreed-upon definition of human trafficking (Zhang, 2022). Since the passing of the Palermo Protocol, the last two and a half decades have seen a rise in anti-trafficking movements worldwide (Zhang, 2022). Following the passing of the Palermo Protocol, the US Congress passed the U.S Trafficking Victim Protection Act (TVPA), which provided a framework for protecting victims of human trafficking rather than criminalizing them as perpetrators (U.S Department of Justice, 2023). The TVPA draws on a “3P” paradigm framework to combat human trafficking by focusing on 1) Prosecution of traffickers through effective law enforcement action, 2) Protection of victims and provision of supports, and 3) Prevention by addressing the tactics used by traffickers directly through policy implementation. The “3Ps” are understood to be interconnected concepts that are essential to one another. A “4th P”, also known as “Partnership,” has also been included within this framework which calls upon the support of all members of society in the fight against human trafficking (U.S Department of State, n.d). According to the U.S Department of State, the identification of victims by frontline workers is a critical first step in ensuring that victims receive the necessary

resources and supports. The present dissertation introduces research that falls under the TVPA framework, particularly emphasizing the “Prevention” and “Partnership” pillars. More specifically, this research involves the construction of a sex trafficking screening tool, developed in partnership with child welfare experts, with the aim of identifying and protecting vulnerable youth.

Sex Trafficking of Underage Youths

According to the UNODC, the most common form of human trafficking involves sexual exploitation. Sex trafficking is defined as the recruitment and exploitation of an individual through the use of threats, force, deception, coercion or abuse of power for the purpose of a commercial sex act (UNODC, 2007). The majority of sex trafficking cases in Canada and the United States involve domestic residents, with minors 12-14 years old accounting for most of the victims being recruited (Baird et al., 2020; Greenbaum, 2017; Kotrla, 2010). Several risk factors have been noted to increase a youth’s vulnerability of being trafficked, including systemic factors extending beyond the youth’s control. For example, higher rates of sex trafficking have been noted amongst females compared to males, and amongst racial and ethnic minorities, and members of the LGBTQ population (Fedina et al., 2019; Hardy et al., 2013; Hogan & Roe-Sepowitz, 2023). Researchers have also focused on environmental and trauma-related risk factors that render a youth more vulnerable to entry (Choi, 2015; Elwood et al., 2022; Reid et al., 2019). For example, research suggests that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as undergoing a traumatic event, childhood abuse, familial instability and dysfunction, as well as a lack of parental supervision, are strongly associated with sex trafficking involvement (Baird et al., 2020; Choi, 2015; Clawson & Grace, 2007; Elwood et al., 2022; Fong & Berger Cardoso, 2010; Franchino-Olsen, 2021; Landers et al., 2020; Merrick, 2019).

Pathway of Entry into Sex Trafficking for Youth

Adolescence encompasses the phase of life that occurs between childhood and adulthood (Sawyer et al., 2018). Adolescence presents as an important developmental period characterized by identity formation, the need for acceptance and belonging by peers, a desire for romantic relationships, as well as a lack of fully developed cognitive skills necessary for problem-solving (Schwartz, 2015). As such, it is during this time when youth are particularly vulnerable to the psychological coercion and manipulation carried out by traffickers (Schwartz, 2015). For this reason, the pathway into sex trafficking for youth is quite different compared to the pathway of entry for adults (Dank et al., 2017). Baird and Connolly (2023) explain that exploitation of sex trafficked youth occurs on a continuum of stages defined by the strategies used by the trafficker to recruit youth and to prolong their exploitation. This process is characterized by the recruitment, entrapment, and enmeshment stages which are known to be sequential (Baird & Connolly, 2023). The process of sex trafficking involvement begins with the youth's *recruitment*, defined as the point at which the youth is being lured into sex trafficking. Traffickers successfully recruit youth into sex trafficking during this stage through the identification and manipulation of presenting risk factors and vulnerabilities (Baird & Connolly, 2023). For example, exposure to compromised parenting practices, including parental substance use, parental challenges with mental health, witnessing caregiver arrests, and/or family violence or crime, can leave the youth more vulnerable and therefore increase a youth's risk for being recruited. Following the recruitment of youth comes the *entrapment stage*, characterized by the use of methods considered to be either romantic, such as grooming, false promises of love and manipulation, or aversive tactics, such as violence and blackmail, used to keep the youth immersed. The final stage of involvement is known as *enmeshment* and signifies the point at

which the youth has become involved in sex trafficking (Baird & Connolly, 2023; Tyldum & Brunovskis, 2005). It is characterized by use of dependency strategies and control tactics by the trafficker, such as providing a need including drugs (Baird & Connolly, 2023).

Social Ecological Model for Understanding Sex Trafficking Risk and Involvement

The Social Ecological Model suggests that an individual is embedded within several systems and environments, including their school, home, as well as their socio-cultural context (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Their involvement and interactions within these systems can impact their development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The Social Ecological Model has been adapted and used as a framework for understanding sex trafficking involvement and how specific factors can increase risk for recruitment and involvement of sexual exploitation.

Finigan-Carr and colleagues (2019) proposed the “Traumagenic Social Ecological Framework”, an adaptation of Bronfenbrenner’s Social-Ecological Systems model, which provides a multi-level approach to understanding sex trafficking involvement by examining how risk factors at various levels exist and interact to help shape the youth’s social ecology. Within this model, social norms exist and interact at all levels. This framework draws on Belsky’s (1980) understanding of child maltreatment as a social-psychological phenomenon, with multiple factors including the individual’s personal history, contributing to their vulnerability. It also draws on Finkelhor and Browne’s (1985) traumagenic model which suggests that experiences of childhood sexual abuse damages a child’s emotional, cognitive, and rational development through four main factors including traumatic sexualization, betrayal, powerlessness, and stigmatization. Lastly, this framework draws on the General Strain Theory which suggests that an individual’s choices and behaviours, including offending behaviour, is influenced by their broader environment and can be viewed as a stress response (Agnew, 2006).

Finigan-Carr and colleagues' (2019) "Traumagenic Social Ecological Framework" describes how risk factors at four levels contribute to increased vulnerability for youth sex trafficking: 1) societal level, 2) community level, 3) relationship/interpersonal level, and 4) individual/intrapersonal level. The *societal level* involves broader macro-level processes, such as health, economic, educational, and social policies, that either promote or inhibit the sex trafficking of minors. For example, vulnerability to sex trafficking is shaped by federal and state legislation and policy regarding trafficking, societal and community awareness, as well as the culture of capitalism. The *community level* encompasses the community contexts whereby social relationships that impact vulnerability to sex trafficking exist, including neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. Factors at the community level can include social values and norms, socioeconomic status, and involvement in child welfare and juvenile justice systems, all of which are largely influenced by policies at the societal level. The *relationship/interpersonal level* captures relationships across various microsystems that can be impacted by individual or intrapersonal factors. These relationships and experiences can increase risk of sex trafficking involvement. For example, a youth's ability to develop healthy romantic and sexual relationships is often damaged if they have been maltreated or have experienced increased levels of dysfunction at home. As such, these youth may be more susceptible to the manipulative tactics used by traffickers, such as the use of attention and affection prior to being exploited (Finigan-Carr et al., 2019). Furthermore, parents', guardians', or peers' involvement in sex trafficking can also increase risk of involvement for youth by normalizing exploitative behaviours (Finigan-Carr et al., 2019). Lastly, the *individual/intrapersonal level* includes personal factors that influence how the youth behaves and therefore potentially increases their risk of involvement. This includes factors related to the youth's personal history, as well as psychological and biological

factors such as ACEs (e.g., being a victim of child abuse and experiencing homelessness), as well as background characteristics such as being African American or belonging to other minority races, identifying as female, and being a member of the LGBTQ community (Fedina et al., 2019; Hardy et al., 2013; Hogan & Roe-Sepowitz, 2023). The interaction amongst multiple risk factors at the individual level can increase the youth's vulnerability to sex trafficking (Finigan-Carr et al., 2019). While the presence of one or more risk factors does not guarantee a negative outcome for the youth, experiencing multiple risk factors increases the likelihood of such outcome taking place (Connolly et al., 2010).

The Intersection Between Sex Trafficking and Child Welfare

Strong evidence suggests that children and youth in care of the child welfare system have a particularly high risk of being trafficked for sex (Baird & Connolly, 2023; Fong & Berger Cardoso, 2010). More specifically, approximately 30% of sex trafficking victims are minors within the child welfare system at the time of recruitment (Baird & Connolly, 2023). Youth within child welfare present with multiple risk factors which increases their vulnerability to becoming involved in sex trafficking.

There are two pathways that describe the intersection between child welfare and sex trafficking. Firstly, some children may be involved in child welfare as a result of experiencing ACEs, such as problematic familial relationships and having their basic needs unmet by caregivers (Fedina et al., 2019; Landers et al., 2017). The deleterious effects of these experiences leave youth vulnerable to being targeted and exploited by traffickers (Fedina et al., 2019; Landers et al., 2017). For these children, recruitment into sex trafficking is subsequent to their child welfare placement (Rosenblatt & Murphey, 2014). Conversely, youth may become involved in sex trafficking due to a lack of parental supervision or the illegal nature of associated

activities (e.g., truancy and prostitution) and as a result, are later referred to the child welfare system (Biehal & Wade, 2000; Fong & Berger Cardoso, 2010; O'Brien, 2017; Tyler et al., 2000). As such, children and youth in care of the child welfare system have a particularly high risk of being trafficked for sex (Baird & Connolly, 2023; Fong & Berger Cardoso, 2010).

Once exploited, youth are often placed in group homes or in secure settings as they are more likely than non-exploited peers in the foster care system to report mental health difficulties, demonstrate externalizing behaviours, and report runaway behaviours (O'Brien, 2017). These settings often have a negative impact on one's ability to develop positive relationships as youth often report experiencing these settings as being disciplinary rather than therapeutic. This negative experience can result in an increased risk of further sexual exploitation (Beckett, 2011; Shuker, 2015). It is also important to note that recruitment of these youth often occurs directly from foster care or group homes (Baird & Connolly, 2023; Fong & Berger Cardoso, 2010). Given the significant medical, mental health, and social difficulties experienced by youth involved with sex trafficking, including increased risk of suicide and depression, early identification is necessary.

Challenges Identifying Sex Trafficking

Sex trafficking often occurs through transient criminal networks that operate "underground" (Baird & Connolly, 2023; Duger, 2015; Franchino-Olsen et al., 2022). Identifying those involved with sex trafficking can be a difficult undertaking due to its covert nature (Duger, 2015; Franchino-Olsen et al., 2022). As such, the identification process relies largely on the self-reports of victims, which is problematic as many individuals do not wish to identify as a "victim" or "survivor" for several reasons. Individuals often experience feelings of shame, guilt, and fear of stigma that is associated with identifying as a victim or survivor

(Brunovskis & Surtees, 2013; Choi, 2015; Kandemir et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2011).

Furthermore, fears surrounding contact with the legal system can prevent a victim from disclosing their involvement as it is not uncommon for victims of sex trafficking to also be involved in other types of illegal behaviours (i.e., theft and drug trafficking) (Jordan et al., 2013). Lastly, there is often a trauma bond that is developed between the trafficker and the victim, creating a sense of loyalty and trust, despite the dangerous nature of the relationship. The development of this bond makes it difficult for victims to self-report their sex trafficking involvement and to trust institutional systems that can provide support (Casassa et al., 2024; Hardy et al., 2013).

Assessment Challenges Encountered by Frontline Workers

Frontline workers in human service sectors are optimally situated to identify and support youth who are at risk or involved in sex trafficking; however, research also suggests that frontline workers often encounter challenges when identifying trafficking involvement. For example, frontline workers in law enforcement have identified the need for additional training regarding commonly encountered warning signs, as well as the need for increased communication across institutions, such as law enforcement agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGO), and prosecutors, that could facilitate further training. Furthermore, the need for consistent definitions of human trafficking, as well as available resources, such as assessment protocols necessary to facilitate appropriate interviewing, has also been noted (Dianiska et al., 2023; Fordyce, 2012; O'Brien, 2017). While the literature highlights some of the challenges experienced by frontline workers, particularly those within law enforcement, when identifying trafficked individuals, much less is known about the experience of child welfare workers when assessing youth for sex trafficking risk and involvement. To date, the majority of

the current research aimed at understanding the experience of child welfare workers focuses on understanding the barriers that impede the provision of treatment once the youth has been identified (Macias-Konstantopoulos et al., 2015; Macy & Graham, 2012; O'Brien, 2017). While the need for additional sex trafficking training has been previously identified in the literature (Burruss-Cousins et al., 2023; Elwood et al., 2022; Gonzalez-Pons et al., 2020; Harmon-Darrow et al., 2023; Jordan et al., 2013), it is important to further understand the experience of child welfare workers in order to identify whether there are other factors impeding the identification of youth at risk of sex trafficking. This is particularly important given that child welfare workers are optimally situated to assess for sex trafficking involvement. Therefore, understanding the perspectives of child welfare workers will allow the opportunity to address existing challenges that may be impeding the assessment process. This is a crucial step given that the ability to properly identify children and youth in need of support will aid in reducing the number of individuals being victimized by traffickers (Jordan et al., 2013; Macy & Graham, 2012).

Assessment of Sex Trafficking

Increasing research has highlighted the importance of screening for sex trafficking in order to identify individuals who are either being trafficked or are at risk of being victims of trafficking. Following the anti-trafficking movement after the passing of the Palermo Protocol, screening tools were developed that were general in focus and aimed at the trafficking of adults, especially women (Zhang, 2022). As a result, several screening tools were created that were broad in coverage with the intention of being used across various settings. While the use of assessment tools that are broad in coverage can be beneficial within certain circumstances, they may not be relevant for use within specific contexts given that they may not capture the vulnerabilities that are present within particular groups (Pate et al., 2021). Various context-

specific assessment tools have also been developed by practitioners and researchers, including the criminal and juvenile legal contexts, as well as emergency departments, in order to identify victims of human trafficking (Pate et al., 2021). These screening tools highlight the context-specific vulnerabilities with which they are intended for by including indicators that individuals working within these settings would be most able to identify (Pate et al., 2021). For example, there is a greater focus on identifying physical signs of abuse for tools developed for use within medical fields (Pate et al., 2021).

Current Screening of Sex Trafficking for Children and Youth

Over the past few years, there has been a growing number of child and youth victims identified, resulting in the awareness that youth can be victims of sex trafficking as well (U.S Department of State, 2019). This has signified the need for child and youth focused screening tools that consider important developmental factors that are specific to their experiences. Romero and colleagues (2021) identified four sex trafficking screening tools that are available for use with children and adolescents, including 1) the Commercially Sexually Exploited Children screening tool, a universal screening tool intended to identify sexual exploitation of at risk youth between the ages of 11-18 (CSEC; Collaborative Response Team, 2015), 2) the Commercial Sexual Exploitation Identification Tool, used to identify current or previous involvement of sex trafficking amongst youth ages 18 and younger within a general setting (CSE-IT; Basson, 2017), as well as the 3) 6-item screening tool (Greenbaum, Dodd, & McCracken, 2018) and, 4) 17-item Screening Questionnaire (Greenbaum, Livings, et al., 2018), intended for identification of sexual exploitation of high risk youth ages 12-18 seeking medical services. While unpublished, the CSE-IT is a publicly available screening tool that provides preliminary evidence of construct validity (CSE-IT; Basson, 2017). Greenbaum and colleagues' (Greenbaum, Dodd, &

McCracken, 2018; Greenbaum, Livings, et al., 2018) 6- and 17-item screening tools are published measure that have undergone some item and structural analyses demonstrating their utility for measuring sex trafficking within the medical context. These validated screening tools include important risk factors and warning signs of sex trafficking involvement pertaining to children and youth. When used within their intended contexts, these screening tools can provide valuable information regarding the presentation of sex trafficking indicators.

Given the overlap amongst child welfare and sex trafficking involvement, there is a need for a specialized screening tool developed for use within the child welfare context that captures the unique experiences of these youth. It is necessary to pursue community-based research with child welfare experts that will inform the development of a screening tool in which the ultimate users of the screening tool (i.e., those working with the youth) will be involved in the design of the measure (Luchenski et al., 2018; Videmšek, 2017). Child welfare experts are optimally positioned to validate this screening tool by providing expert insight to ensure that all risk factors and warning signs relevant to the child welfare context have been captured. Child welfare experts are also best positioned to ensure that the proposed screening tool is both user friendly and can also be applied meaningfully within the child welfare context.

Current Dissertation

The sex trafficking of minors is a significant growing concern globally, with child welfare involved youth being at an increased risk of recruitment. Child welfare presents as a key avenue to screen for youth who are at risk or involved in sex trafficking. For this reason, child welfare workers are likely to come in contact with these youth and are in a critical position when it comes to screening of youth. There is also a need for a child welfare specific screening tool that takes into consideration the risk factors and warning signs that are more relevant to the child

welfare population. Through collaboration with three child welfare agencies across Ontario, this dissertation addresses important gaps in the literature related to the screening of sex trafficking for youth at risk and involved in sex trafficking within the child welfare system.

This dissertation includes two studies. The first study (Chapter 2) utilizes qualitative data from interviews with child welfare experts to explore their insights regarding the challenges associated with screening for sex trafficking. The second study (Chapter 3) builds upon previous research to create a child welfare specific screening tool using insight obtained from child welfare and survivor experts regarding the content, usability, and application of the screening tool. The final chapter (Chapter 4) includes a general discussion of the main findings across studies as well as practice implications, limitations, and future directions.

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Chapter 2: Multilevel Challenges to Identifying Sex Trafficking Amongst Child Welfare Involved Youth: A Social Ecological Systems Perspective of Child Welfare Workers

Abstract

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2007), sex trafficking is the most common form of human trafficking. Approximately 30% of sex trafficking victims are minors within the child welfare system at the time of recruitment (Baird & Connolly, 2023). Given the high prevalence rates, child welfare involvement has been identified as a key risk factor (Baird et al., 2020). Accordingly, those working with child welfare involved youth have a greater responsibility in identifying and supporting these victims (Burruss-Cousins et al., 2023). While the literature suggests existing challenges and barriers to the identification of sex trafficking, particularly for frontline workers in law enforcement, little is known about the experience of child welfare workers when assessing youth in their care. Therefore, the goal of this study is to explore the experiences of child welfare workers, focusing on challenges faced, when assessing for sex trafficking amongst youth. A secondary goal is to locate these challenges within the Social Ecological Model to identify the levels that are most represented and relevant to the experience of child welfare workers. Participants included 24 child welfare workers with lived experience supporting youth at risk or involved in sex trafficking. Semi-structured interviews were analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis. Results indicated one meta-theme, “we’re all in this together”, along with three themes and nine subthemes related to challenges experienced. Furthermore, these challenges were located within all levels of the Social Ecological Model, highlighting the transactional nature of risk embedded within this model. The majority of challenges identified for child welfare workers were located within the individual and community levels of the Social Ecological Model. Findings from this study provide insight

into the challenges experienced by child welfare workers when assessing for sex trafficking and provide relevant policy as well as clinical implications.

Sex Trafficking of Underage Youths

Sex trafficking, defined as the recruitment and exploitation of an individual through the use of threats, force, deception, coercion or abuse of power for the purpose of a commercial sex act, is the most common form of human trafficking (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2007). The majority of sex trafficking cases in Canada and the United States are domestic residents, with minors 12-14 years old accounting for a majority of the victims being recruited (Baird et al., 2020; Greenbaum, 2017; Kotrla, 2010).

Several risk factors have been linked to a youth's vulnerability of being trafficked. These risk factors are often systemic and occur beyond the youth's control. Firstly, increased rates of sex trafficking have been identified amongst females compared to males, as well as amongst racial and ethnic minorities and members of the LGBTQ communities (Fedina et al., 2019; Hardy et al., 2013; Hogan & Roe-Sepowitz, 2023). Secondly, researchers have focused on identifying environmental and trauma-related risk factors that render a youth more vulnerable to entry (Choi, 2015; Elwood et al., 2022; Reid et al., 2019). For example, research suggests that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as experiencing a traumatic event, childhood abuse, familial instability and dysfunction, as well as a lack of parental supervision are strongly associated with sex trafficking involvement (Baird et al., 2020; Choi, 2015; Clawson & Grace, 2007; Elwood et al., 2022; Fong & Berger Cardoso, 2010; Franchino-Olsen, 2021; Landers et al., 2020; Merrick, 2019).

The Intersection Between Sex Trafficking and Child Welfare

Children and youth very often become involved with child welfare as a result of experiencing ACEs, such as problematic familial relationships and having their basic needs unmet by caregivers (Fedina et al., 2019; Landers et al., 2017). The deleterious effects of these experiences leave youth with deep feelings of emotional deprivation and vulnerable to being

targeted and exploited by traffickers (Fedina et al., 2019; Landers et al., 2017). Research suggests that approximately 30% of sex trafficking victims were minors within the child welfare system at the time of recruitment (Baird et al., 2020).

There are two pathways that describe the intersection between child welfare and sex trafficking. Firstly, some children may be involved in child welfare as a result of experiencing ACEs. For these children, recruitment into sex trafficking is subsequent to their child welfare placement (Rosenblatt & Murphey, 2014). Conversely, youth may become involved in sex trafficking and as a result, are subsequently referred to child welfare (O'Brien et al., 2017). As such, children and youth in care of the child welfare system have a particularly high risk of being trafficked for sex (Baird et al., 2020; Fong & Berger Cardoso, 2010).

Challenges Identifying Sex Trafficking

Sex trafficking often occurs through transient criminal networks that operate “underground” (Baird et al., 2020; Duger, 2015; Franchino-Olsen et al., 2022). Due to its covert nature, identifying those involved with sex trafficking can be a difficult undertaking (Duger, 2015; Franchino-Olsen et al., 2022). As such, this process of identifying victims relies largely on their self-reports, which is problematic as many individuals do not wish to identify as a “victim” or “survivor” given the feelings of shame, guilt, and fear of stigma that is associated with identifying in this way (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2013; Choi, 2015; Kandemir et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2011). Being involved in illegal behaviours, such as theft and drug trafficking, is also not uncommon for victims of sex trafficking (Jordan et al., 2013). Fears surrounding contact with the legal system further reduces willingness to self-report (Jordan et al., 2013). Furthermore, a victim’s relationship with their trafficker may impact their willingness to self-report. Traffickers often play the role of a loving, romantic partner in order to lure the youth before switching to use of fear and manipulation as a control tactic (Baird & Connolly, 2023). Luring the youth in this

way is used to create a sense of loyalty and trust between the trafficker and the victim despite the dangerous nature of the relationship, also known as trauma bonding (Casassa et al., 2024). The development of this bond can result in the victim's unwillingness to report their trafficker in order to maintain that bond. Trauma bonds can also leave the youth feeling confused and unaware of the problematic and dangerous nature of the relationship, making it difficult for them to self-report their sex trafficking involvement and to trust institutional systems that can provide support (Casassa et al., 2024; Hardy et al., 2013).

Frontline workers in the human service sectors, are optimally situated to identify and support youth who are at risk or involved in sex trafficking as they are more likely to encounter youth who are at greater risk of involvement. However, despite being optimally situated to do so, research suggests that frontline workers encounter challenges when identifying individuals who may be involved or at risk of sex trafficking. For example, the literature suggests that lacking sufficient knowledge regarding commonly encountered warning signs as well as a lack of communication across institutions that could facilitate further training, including law enforcement agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGO) and prosecutors, have been identified as challenges commonly encountered by frontline workers in law enforcement (Fordyce, 2012). Additionally, varying definitions of human trafficking, and a lack of available resources necessary to facilitate appropriate interviewing procedures (e.g., assessment protocols) have also been identified as challenges that are commonly encountered by frontline workers within the legal system (Dianiska et al., 2023; Fordyce, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2017). While the literature highlights some of the challenges experienced by frontline workers in law enforcement when identifying trafficked individuals, much less is known about the experience of child welfare workers when assessing youth for sex trafficking risk and involvement. Instead, the current child welfare research focuses on understanding the barriers that impede the provision of

treatment once the youth has been identified (Macias-Konstantopoulos et al., 2015; Macy & Graham, 2012; O'Brien, 2017). A study by Burruss-Cousins et al. (2023) that aimed to better understand child welfare workers' perspectives on child sex trafficking training groups revealed that child welfare workers reported lacking the training and knowledge necessary to properly identify and assess risk factors and warning signs. While the need for additional sex trafficking training has been identified in the literature (Elwood et al., 2022; Gonzalez-Pons et al., 2020; Harmon-Darrow et al., 2023; Jordan et al., 2013), it is important to further understand the experience of child welfare workers in order to identify whether there are other context-specific factors impeding the identification of youth at risk of sex trafficking. Given the intersection between child welfare and sex trafficking involvement, child welfare workers are well-positioned to identify youth who are at risk or may already be involved in sex trafficking. Without the ability to properly identify children and youth in need of support, their victimization will only continue (Jordan et al., 2013; Macy & Graham, 2012). Therefore, understanding the perspectives of child welfare workers will allow the opportunity to address these challenges that may be impeding the assessment process.

Social Ecological Model for Understanding Sex Trafficking Risk and Involvement

The Social Ecological Model provides a framework to explain how interactions between a child and their environment can influence their growth and development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). This model has been widely used to explain both normative and atypical development and has been extended for use across various disciplines and domains, including child welfare (Jack, 1997; Richardson et al., 2018). Furthermore, this model has been adapted and used as a framework for understanding sex trafficking of youth and how factors across contexts can increase risk. Finigan-Carr and colleagues (2019) proposed the "Traumagenic Social Ecological Framework", an adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Model,

which provides a multi-level approach to understanding sex trafficking involvement by examining how risk factors at four levels contribute to increased risk of youth sex trafficking: 1) *societal level* involving macro-level processes such as health, economic, educational, and social policies, 2) *community level* involving community contexts where social relationships occur, 3) *relationship/interpersonal level* which captures the impact of individual factors on relationships, and 4) *individual/intrapersonal level* involving individual factors that influence how the youth behaves, with social norms existing and interacting at all levels. It is necessary to consider all levels of this model due to the interconnectedness that is inherently present between levels; however, it is also possible for certain levels to hold greater significance depending on the context being examined (Rozsahegyi, 2017). Multiple risk factors are often present across complex social ecological levels with the interaction amongst these levels further increasing vulnerability of sexual exploitation (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Finigan-Carr et al., 2019). Therefore, while the presence of one or more risk factors does not guarantee a negative outcome for the youth necessarily, experiencing multiple risk factors increases the likelihood of negative outcomes taking place (Connolly et al., 2010).

We proposed that the Social Ecological Model can be used to further understand the challenges that child welfare workers face when assessing youth for sex trafficking risk and involvement. Adopting this framework allows researchers to consider where these challenges are situated across complex social ecological systems and to identify and address the levels that are most impacted by these challenges.

The Current Study

Given the alarmingly high rates of sex trafficking involvement of youth within child welfare, it is critical for frontline workers to be well equipped to identify those involved and in need of support. Given that challenges exist, particularly for frontline workers in law

enforcement assessing for trafficking involvement, it is also important to further understand the experiences of child welfare workers identifying youth at risk and involved in sex trafficking. As such, the aim of this current study was to examine the challenges encountered by child welfare workers identifying youth who are at risk or involved with sex trafficking. A secondary goal of this study was to locate these challenges within the Social Ecological Model to identify the levels most impacted.

Method

Study Design

This study was designed through a university community partnership that involved a university research team and three child welfare agencies within a large urban area in northeast Canada. The current analysis was completed using semi-structured interviews with child welfare workers as part of a larger project aimed at developing the York Sex Trafficking Screening Tool (YST), a screening tool developed for the child welfare context. The YST Screening Tool contains risk factors and warning signs of sex trafficking adapted to the experiences of child welfare involved youth.

Participants

Participants for this study included twenty-four child welfare workers with lived experience with sex trafficking as service providers. Child welfare workers were from three child welfare agencies serving a rural community, an urban/suburban community, as well as a multi-service Indigenous well-being agency supporting Indigenous children, youth, and their families. Child welfare personnel included an Intake Assessment Worker ($n = 1$), Kinship/ Family Service Workers ($n = 6$), Child Protection Workers ($n = 14$), a Legal Support Worker ($n = 1$), a Family Finder Worker ($n = 1$), and a Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions Worker ($n = 1$). Child welfare workers reported having a combined average of 12 years in the field. Ninety-two

percent ($n = 22$) of participants reported having prior training in the area of sex trafficking. In order to protect the identity of the child welfare workers involved in the study, additional demographic information was not collected.

With respect to the recruitment of child welfare workers, researchers carried out information sessions at each child welfare agency in order to share information about the project with prospective participants. Eligibility to participate included having lived experience supporting a youth at risk or involved with sex trafficking. Individuals eligible and interested in participating were asked to provide their contact information and consent to be contacted by researchers. Ethics approval was obtained by the ethical research committee at York University as well as from the ethical committees and legal counsels of each aforementioned child welfare agency.

Procedure

The current analysis was completed using semi-structured interviews as part of a larger project aimed at developing the York Sex Trafficking Screening Tool (YST). Interviews were conducted by the first author of this study using a secure video platform and were audio recorded. The interview consisted of open-ended questions. Participants were asked to comment on the risk factors and warning signs of sex trafficking of youth, including which risk factors and indicators are easy and difficult to assess for. Throughout the interview, participants spontaneously commented on their experiences of assessing for sex trafficking and shared their insight regarding challenges encountered.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and were reviewed in their entirety. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify themes regarding the challenges encountered by child welfare workers when assessing for sex trafficking (Braun & Clarke, 2019). A challenge was

defined as a factor or situation that makes it difficult or prevents access needed to properly and accurately assess risk factors and warning signs of sex trafficking.

Interview data was examined through a post-positivist lens which recognizes objective knowledge as the ultimate goal while also taking into consideration the imperfect nature of observations that are influenced by the values and culture of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p.177-178). This method acknowledges the authors' pre-existing theoretical knowledge regarding sex trafficking, associated challenges and barriers, and the social ecological framework (Braun & Clarke, 2021). As such, adopting a post-positivist lens allowed for reflexivity, transparency, and mindfulness regarding the researcher's unintentional influence during the coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Codes examined semantic and latent meanings that captured both explicitly expressed and more implicit levels of meaning, including positive and negative experiences related to the assessment of sex trafficking risk and involvement. Data was coded inclusively in order to preserve the context within which it was provided. The initial set of codes were developed using an inductive approach by investigating themes in the data, and the code list was reviewed by the authors to create a "working" codebook. A flexible coding system was employed that allowed for open engagement with the literature and data (Braun & Clarke, 2019) as well as open discussions between the authors throughout the data analysis process. This resulted in the frequent renaming, combining, and removing of codes, leading to refinement of codes and themes. Codes were collapsed into higher level themes and discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved using a consensus-based deductive process.

Following this, challenges identified by child welfare workers were located within the appropriate social ecological levels, adapted from Finigan-Car et al., (2019), in order to assess the levels most represented and relevant to the experience of child welfare workers. Challenges

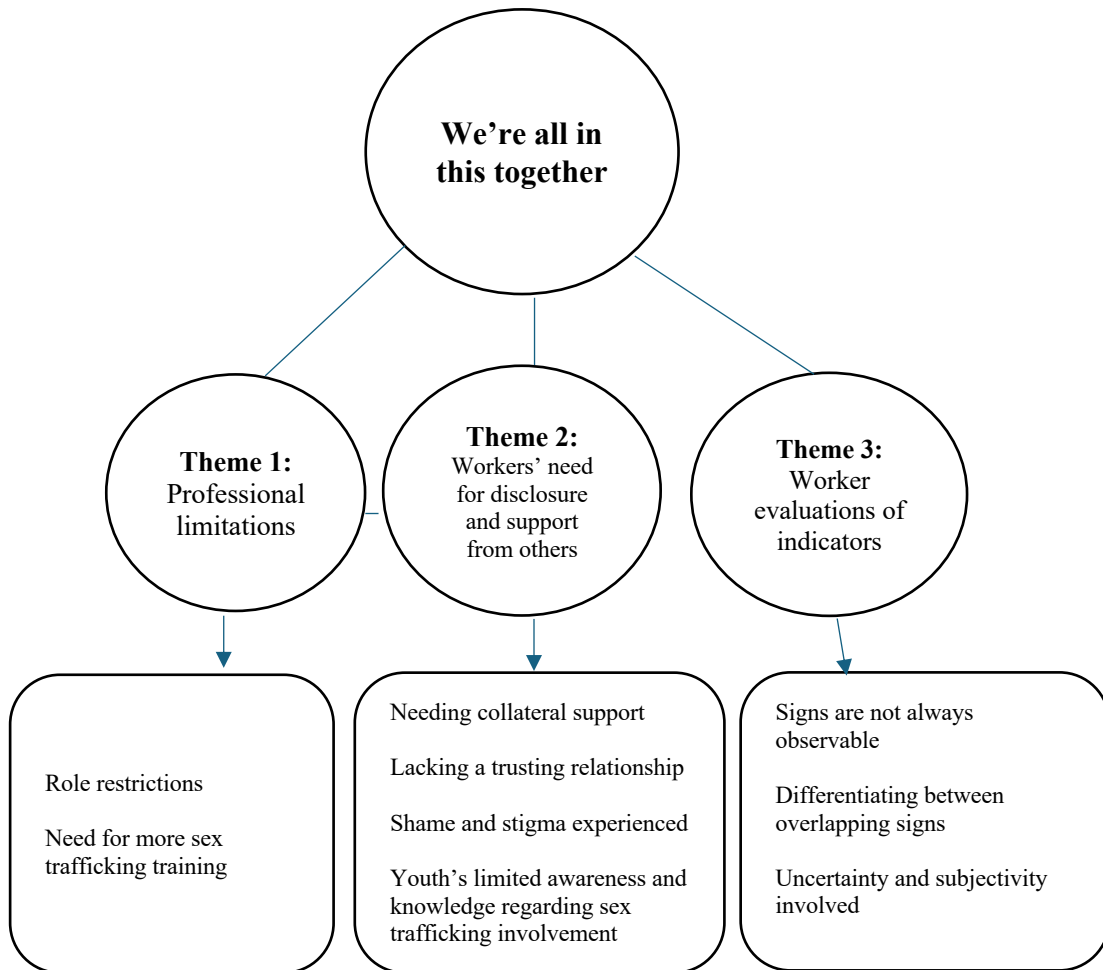
describing the assessment of individual/intrapersonal characteristics, such as personal history, psychological, and biological factors that can increase a youth's vulnerability to sex trafficking, were located within the intrapersonal/individual level. Challenges describing factors related to the impact of relationships with individuals from various microsystems were located within the interpersonal/relational level. Challenges related to the contexts within which social relationships take place, including schools, placement settings, and workplaces, were located within the community level. Lastly, challenges describing the broader societal factors that contribute to creating an environment that perpetuates sex trafficking involvement, including societal and community awareness of child sex trafficking, were located within the societal level. Challenges were first reviewed and located within the social ecological levels by the first author and reviewed by the second author in order to ensure accuracy. Discrepancies regarding the placement of challenges within the Social Ecological Model were discussed amongst the authors and resolved using a consensus-based deductive process.

Results

Results from the reflexive thematic analysis yielded one meta-theme (we're all in this together), three themes, and nine subthemes (see Figure 1). The meta-theme "we're all in this together" highlighted the underlying view that the assessment process is complex and requires involvement and support from several sources in addition to the youth themselves, including the child welfare agencies, captured in theme 1: "professional limitations", the individuals that know the youth well, including themselves, their families and other community members, captured in theme 2: "workers' need for disclosure and support from others", as well as the child welfare worker, captured in theme 3: "worker evaluations of indicators".

Figure 1.

Thematic Map of Child Welfare Workers' Perceptions Regarding the Challenges Faced When Assessing for Sex Trafficking



Meta-theme: We're All in This Together

When sharing their assessment experiences, child welfare workers spoke about the challenges they face directly when evaluating the indicators of sex trafficking and also discussed the indirect challenges that are faced when professional and relational limitations exist. Child welfare workers described the assessment of sex trafficking as being a complex and multifaceted

process that extends far beyond their screening of visible risk factors and warning signs as frontline workers. They described the need for taking a collaborative approach when assessing for sex trafficking, including involvement from the youth, their families, community members, and their agencies in order to navigate through challenges and barriers faced.

Theme 1: Professional Limitations

This theme captures the limitations encountered by child welfare workers when their own agencies unintentionally restrict their ability to successfully assess for sex trafficking involvement. This theme was supported by two subthemes, one in which professional roles are restricting, and another in which lack of training in sex trafficking is limiting.

Subtheme 1.1 Role Restrictions

Participants spoke about their professional role within their agency as either limiting or providing access to information needed to properly assess youth. Participants discussed the ways in which their professional role determines the capacity within which they interact with the youth, which further impacted their ability to gather information that would indicate whether a youth was at risk of being trafficked for sex. When discussing whether the assessment of risk factors and indicators of sex trafficking is possible for child welfare workers, one participant responded, *“Depends on the role I have at the time. If I’m working with a youth, as a family worker, I would definitely be working with their family, whatever their family consisted of, so it would be easy to get information from parents or kin or people who knew the youth about what they thought was going on, or how they thought the youth was doing. So, that’s definitely a factor that would be a given.”* (P20, Family Worker). Participants also discussed how their professional role within their agency can limit access to necessary documents, records, and assessments. As noted by another child welfare worker, *“I mean, I see the youth or children that are placed there, and I have conversations, but I wouldn’t delve into this type of information I guess with them,*

unless it was flagged as something that, you know, they were struggling with, and we would have those conversations. So, it would probably be ... less applicable to my role right now. Unless they're flagging things, they aren't necessarily talking to me about it and I'm not interviewing children the way a Protection Worker would. I guess is really the piece, so I might not, I might not have the same detailed information.” (P02, Family Worker). Conversely, another participant spoke about the benefits of having access to information through their agency records, *“The absolute easiest [indicator to assess for] would be experience of injury and I guess mostly just because we would hopefully have that on our files, we wouldn't need to have to talk to anyone, get information from the teen themselves, we can just review or files.”* (P09, Family Service Worker).

Subtheme 1.2 Need for More Sex Trafficking Training

Participants stated that lacking knowledge about the warning signs and indicators of sex trafficking can make it very difficult to know which indicators to look for when assessing a youth and highlighted the need for more training. As one participant noted, *“Mind you, there might be, maybe my lack of knowledge, you know, maybe I'm not realizing that maybe even though the word, or the association hasn't been brought up, there's still a risk involved based off this stuff ...this isn't something that we're as well-versed in as other people are.”* (P05, Kinship Worker). Child welfare workers also spoke about their need for specific training to increase their knowledge of the specific language used by sex trafficked youth. As one participant noted when discussing the challenges faced when assessing for sex trafficking related language, *“I mean obviously if we're not trained in terms of what language we need to be looking for, and I know that the language is ever changing, so making sure that we're keeping up to date on the terms that are being used right?”* (P13, Child Protection Worker).

Theme 2: Workers' Need for Disclosure and Support from Others

This theme captures child welfare workers' need for input from individuals who know the youth well when assessing for sex trafficking. This theme was supported by four subthemes, all of which limit the child welfare worker's ability to accurately assess for sex trafficking. The first reflected the need for collateral support, the second reflected the challenges that arise without a trusting relationship with the youth, the third reflected feelings of shame and stigma associated with sex trafficking, and the final subtheme reflected the youth's lack of awareness regarding sex trafficking.

Subtheme 2.1 Needing Collateral Support

Participants referenced the importance of obtaining collateral support by working with family and community contacts when assessing for sex trafficking. They also discussed the challenges that emerge when this is not possible. Participants mentioned the role teachers, police, community leaders, and both immediate and non-immediate family members play in providing necessary information about possible involvement. As noted by one participant, *"How their appearance might be or how it's changing, is going to be asking questions to wherever they're staying, whatever caregiver or guardian is looking after them, right? To see what they notice on a daily basis, we're not necessarily going to see that, on a daily basis. And I think the same with their personal belongings, we would have to be having more contact with the person that's caring for them to know what are they bringing home"* (P23, Child Protection Worker). Another child welfare worker supporting Indigenous youth spoke about the need for collateral support when assessing for risky behaviors, such as traveling in cars with unknown individuals. They shared, *"We can learn through word of mouth, but youth would often not disclose."* (P16, Family Support Worker).

Subtheme 2.2 Lacking a Trusting Relationship

Child welfare workers discussed the importance of interpersonal connections and developing relationships with the youth and their families when assessing for sex trafficking. They also discussed the challenges that arise when this is not present. Firstly, participants explained that without a trusting relationship, youth will not disclose information, which further complicates their ability to assess for sex trafficking. This is particularly true for entrenched youth as disclosing information can result in consequential outcomes for the youth, their caregivers, as well as their traffickers. As described by one child welfare worker, *“It’s all about relationship building- depends on what you will be able to answer.”* (P22, Child Protection Worker). Participants also discussed the factors that contribute to developing a positive and trusting relationship with the youth, including the length of time they have known the youth as well as the youth’s level of transparency. As noted by one child welfare worker supporting Indigenous youth, *“If we’re relying on youth to share information, especially if it’s painful information, or related to their upbringing or parenting history and things like that, this won’t come on the first day, off the bat.”* (P19, Child Protection Worker). Secondly, participants discussed the importance of developing a trusting relationship with the youth’s caregivers when assessing for level of risk. One child welfare worker shared, *“The mom was unwilling to give us information... and it all stemmed back from mom's own experiences with the society and everything so just they're putting a wall up - they weren't as trusting and comfortable in working with me in the beginning. It took a lot more rapport building to be able to get to talk about those things.”* (P09, Family Service Worker).

Subtheme 2.3 Shame and Stigma Experienced

Participants spoke about the feelings of shame and stigma associated with being identified as a victim of sex trafficking that limits a youth’s willingness to disclose information.

As noted by one participant, *“I would imagine that if they know they are involved in something sexually that isn’t what it should be, they would feel ashamed and wouldn’t want to share.”*

(P20, Child Protection Worker). Another child welfare worker also discussed the stigma associated with being in child welfare and the fear of being taken away from their families if identified as being involved, *“Me coming in as an investigator... are they going to tell me everything? Chances are no, because, also, upon first contact, most clients and most children are fearful of CAS, the stigma of “they’re going to take me away, send me away to foster care”, that kind of thing.”* (P05, Intake Assessment Worker). Similarly, families of the youth experience feelings of shame and stigma and thus also avoid disclosing information to child welfare workers. As noted by one participant, *“for families, one thing I find specifically is that if they think they can be found at fault for why their child is involved with sex trafficking, that often already builds a bit of a barrier in working with them.”* (P09, Family Service Worker).

Subtheme 2.4 Youth’s Limited Awareness and Knowledge Regarding Sex Trafficking Involvement

Child welfare workers spoke about the youth’s awareness and knowledge regarding sex trafficking during the assessment process. More specifically, when youth present with limited knowledge regarding the dangers of sex trafficking and the associated warning signs, this creates a significant barrier for the assessment process. Lacking knowledge of the warning signs negatively impacts the youth’s ability to recognize grooming behaviours that require reporting. As mentioned by one participant *“One thing I found that was really challenging with clients is their own willingness to want to see the risk, because they don’t see it as risk”.* (P01, Child Protection Worker). This point was also highlighted by another child welfare worker supporting Indigenous youth who shared, *“Regarding youth having been or are being abused, romantic*

partners too, can be hard to confirm, sometimes youth are very honest and sometimes in denial.”
(P16, Family Support Worker).

Theme 3: Worker Evaluations of Indicators

The third theme captures challenges faced by frontline workers when assessing level of risk and degree of enmeshment in sex trafficking. This theme was supported by three subthemes. The first includes limitations due to a lack of observable warning signs. The second and third subthemes include key signs of sex trafficking overlapping with other circumstances, and the uncertainty and subjectivity that is involved when child welfare workers are required to make decisions about risk factors and warning signs.

Subtheme 3.1 Signs are Not Always Observable

Participants described the challenges associated with identifying indicators that are less observable, for example, details about the youth’s peer and romantic relationships while highlighting the ease of identifying indicators that are more easily observable such as tattoos, changes in behaviour, and material goods. One participant mentioned, *“The engagement in risky behaviours, the youth’s personal appearance and affect, and personal belonging, that’s like tangible evidence, it’s there, it’s materialistic, it’s obvious.”* (P27, Child Protection Worker). Noticing changes in the youth’s presentation can be determined by how long a child welfare worker has known the youth as there is a “baseline” regarding the youth’s typical behaviour or appearance. One participant shared, *“For those who have been working with the youth for some time and has a good relationship with the youth, it will be easier for them because they have seen some of these behaviours and shifts.”* (P07, Child Protection Worker). Another child welfare worker supporting Indigenous youth noted, *“The engagement in risky behaviours, I think that over time you’re going to start to see a pattern of those things. And the longer that we’re*

involved with a specific child or youth, you're going to see those things either start or continue, right?" (P23, Child Protection Worker).

Subtheme 3.2 Differentiating Between Overlapping Signs

Child welfare workers commented on the challenges associated with needing to differentiate between signs of sex trafficking and signs of other situations that might present with similar indicators, such as abuse, or substance use unrelated to sex trafficking. One participant mentioned, *"Substance abuse, I would say it used to be a red, it is still like a red flag and a risk factor but now that we've moved and shifted to a time where it's readily available for youths, so some of them I know be into sex trafficking but it's just difficult. They have substance abuse issues.... Youths have a sign of branding and gang affiliation, to me that's a risk factor too but there are other complicating factors, because some of the youths join a gang just because they need protection from their fellow peers, or because they want to act strong. So, it could be anything, they might not be sexually exploited."* (P01, Child Protection Worker). Participants also highlighted the importance of assessing for sex trafficking through a developmental lens that considers the various experiences associated with adolescent development, such as experimenting with sexuality or substances, and changes in appearance. As noted by one participant, *"Kids often change and go through phases, it's difficult to judge and make harsh judgements Especially nowadays with kids that are like identifying within the LGBT community or they're going through all these phases and dyeing their hair and doing all these different things trying to like find themselves, and we label it as like they're in distress or they're involved in something negative. Or, you know, because they were blonde and dyed their hair black and are wearing all black and going into this goth phase and we're thinking, we can easily kind of take that route, then you have a kid coming back to us being like, "no, I just, I'm trying something out, like I want to dye my hair, I want to do something different. And we oftentimes*

are able to differentiate that and have that perspective ...and it's like, well we can't just like launch investigations and label people as being involved in like criminal activity just because they're dressed a bit different than what you think your average 12-year-old dresses like.” (P09, Family Service Worker).

Subtheme 3.3 Uncertainty and Subjectivity Involved

Participants described the uncertainty that is involved when having to make judgements about the youth's personal experiences. As noted by one child welfare worker, *“Sometimes I would say what I think can be challenging is that kids at this age are generally secretive, so we might not know all of it. Or, we may have a suspicion but when you get to click something off, I can't prove that this is going on, but this is what I feel is happening. There's a level of subjectivity, you get a feeling that something's off”* (P33, Kinship Worker). Participants mentioned the importance of being mindful of each youth's individual experience in order to avoid making biased assumptions about them. As noted by one participant who spoke about the challenges when assessing for systemic risk factors, *“I think it's hard to talk about the cultural piece because it's so important to know that about someone you are working with but to get at it from how they see themselves versus like maybe they don't identify how you are seeing them”* (P08, Family Finder Worker).

Challenges Located Within the Social Ecological Model

Findings from this study revealed that challenges involved in the assessment process from the perspective of child welfare workers were present across all levels of the Social Ecological Model. Nine challenges were identified in total with sixty-seven percent of the challenges identified being located within the individual/intrapersonal ($n = 3$) and community level ($n = 3$), while the remaining thirty three percent of the challenges identified were located

within the relationship/interpersonal level ($n = 1$) as well as the societal attitudes and influences level ($n = 2$).

Three of the identified challenges were located within the *intrapersonal/individual level* including signs not always being observable, needing to differentiate between overlapping signs of non-related situations, and the uncertainty and subjectivity experienced by child welfare workers. One identified challenge was located within the *interpersonal/relational level*, namely, lacking a trusting relationship with the youth. Three of the identified challenges were located within the *community level* which included professional role restrictions, feelings of shame and stigma, and needing collateral support. Lastly, two of the identified challenges were located within the *social attitudes and influence level* which included the need for more sex trafficking training and the youth's limited knowledge regarding signs of involvement.

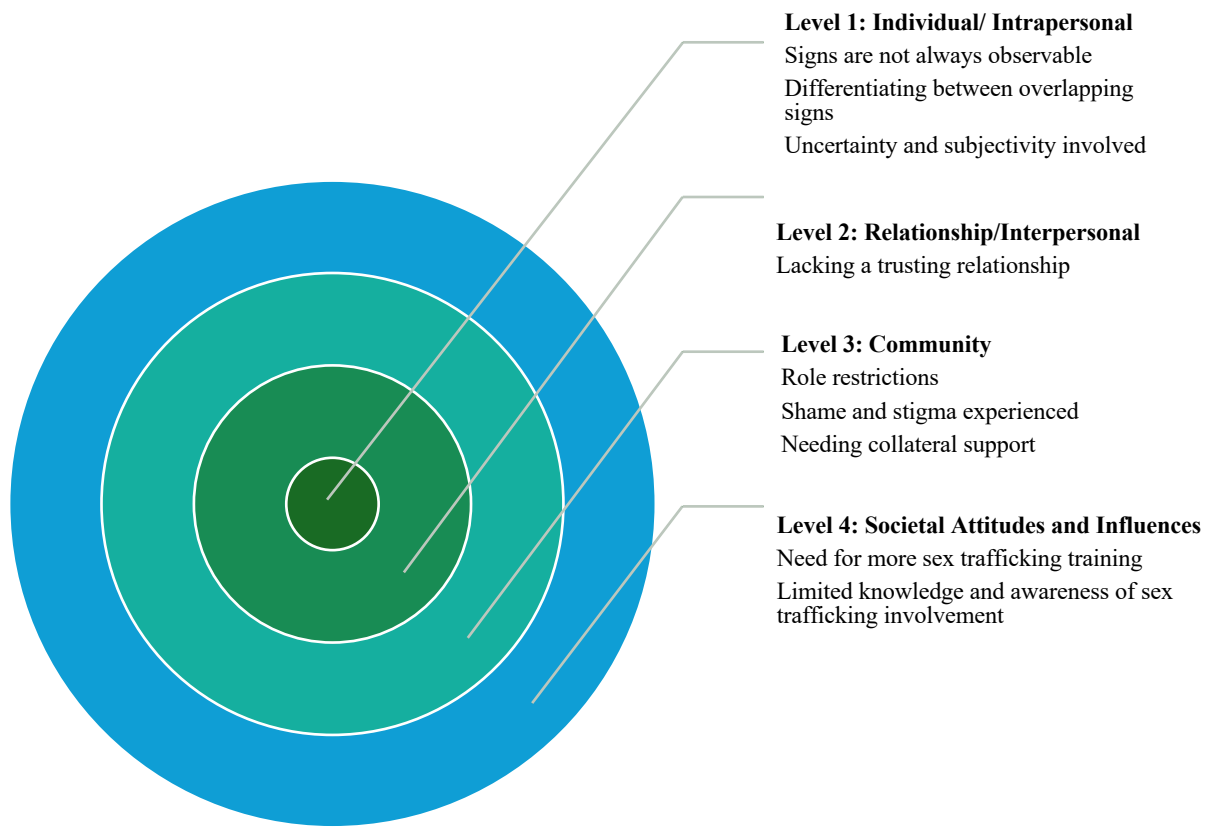
Discussion

Frontline workers supporting child welfare involved youth are optimally positioned to assess risk and involvement with sex trafficking as they are more likely to encounter youth at a greater risk of sex trafficking involvement. For this reason, child welfare workers can play a central role in identifying and supporting child and youth victims (Burruss-Cousins et al., 2023). Despite being optimally positioned, there are challenges encountered that complicate their ability to do so. Understanding the challenges present in this process is a key step in being able to provide timely access to services and appropriate support. Overall, results from this study support findings in the literature that suggest the presence of challenges for frontline workers when assessing for sex trafficked youth and extend these findings to the experiences of child welfare workers. This study also provides insight into new challenges not previously identified in

the literature. Furthermore, findings from this study suggest that child welfare workers experience challenges that are located across all levels of the Social Ecological Model.

Figure 2.

Challenges Associated with Assessing Sex Trafficking from the Perspective of Child Welfare Workers Located Within an Adapted Social Ecological Model.



Challenges Experienced by Child Welfare Workers

Findings from this reflexive thematic analysis indicated nine challenges experienced by child welfare workers when identifying youth involved in sex trafficking. Of the challenges identified, four reflect previous findings within the literature. These challenges include limited training regarding the signs of sex trafficking involvement, lack of youth self-disclosing due to

limited awareness regarding their involvement (i.e., trauma bonding with their traffickers), the stigma associated with being identified as a victim, and the covert nature of sex trafficking. In addition to supporting challenges noted within the literature, this study also sheds light on unique challenges that should also be considered when understanding the experiences of child welfare workers assessing for sex trafficking involvement. Child welfare workers spoke about the following context-specific challenges including needing to make assumptions regarding the youth's experience, differentiating between overlapping signs representing other situations, need for collateral support, developing relationships with the youth to facilitate disclosure, and restricted access to information as a result of their role within their agency.

Being inadequately trained to identify and deal with domestic sex trafficking cases has been identified as a barrier by child welfare workers within the literature (Burruss-Cousins et al., 2023; Hardy et al., 2013). Key training components needed for frontline workers include recognition of the signs of involvement, availability of practical assessment tools, as well as resources for youth once they have been identified (Burruss-Cousins et al., 2023; Schwarz, 2019). Without adequate knowledge regarding the indicators of sex trafficking, identification is unlikely to occur given its covert nature. In addition to the challenges that exist when child welfare workers present with limited knowledge regarding the risk factors and warning signs of sex trafficking, participants in this study also identified the youth's lack of awareness regarding their involvement as being a barrier to the assessment process. As suggested by child welfare workers in this study, this lack of awareness impacts the youth's ability to self-identify and therefore self-disclose. This experience is not uncommon for sex trafficked youth as the literature suggests that it is very rare that a youth involved in sex trafficking is able to recognize their own experience as sex trafficking (Bromfield, 2016; Busch-Armendariz et al., 2011; Kotrla, 2010).

Sex trafficked victims also experience stigmatization in various forms, including unfair treatment within the justice system and access within the healthcare system (Dellinger Page, 2010; Gray et al., 2012; Lazarus et al., 2012). Stigmatization from the public can impact a youth's willingness to disclose information about themselves to their child welfare workers (Tyldum & Brunovskis, 2005) and as mentioned earlier, without the youth disclosing information about their personal experience, the assessment process becomes more complicated.

The covert nature of sex trafficking presents a significant challenge in being able to identify at-risk and involved youth for child welfare workers. While youth presenting in emergency department settings are more likely to display overt signs of trauma, such as physical injuries, signs of torture, presenting multiple times with a sexually transmitted infection or for abortion care (Balasa et al., 2024), it is likely that child welfare involved youth engaging with child welfare workers do not present in the same way given the capacity within which they work with the youth. Moreover, as suggested by child welfare workers, when indicators are less visible or overlap with other situations, such as other forms of abuse, workers must rely on their own judgements and assumptions regarding the youth's experience. Doing so can often result in unintended biases. This point was further highlighted by participants in this study who mentioned that warning signs often go unnoticed due to the lack of observable indicators present amongst sex trafficked youth. According to the literature, when warning signs are not accurately identified, the youth's experience is often misidentified as other forms of abuse (i.e., physical or sexual), leading to improper and inappropriate treatment that does not consider the severity of the abuse experienced by a sex trafficked victim (Clawson & Grace, 2007; Fong & Berger Cardoso, 2010). To prevent making assumptions about the youth, child welfare workers also

indicated the benefits of engaging in full transparency when working with youth in order to obtain and incorporate the youth's perspective as part of the decision-making process.

Participants also spoke about the overlap that exists between indicators of sex trafficking involvement and normative developmental behaviours, such as experimenting with substances, sexuality, and physical appearance. Adolescence is an important stage in an individual's life that often involves the development of new peer and romantic relationships, as well as the exploration of the boundaries and limits within these relationships. The indicators of sex trafficking present differently for minors compared to adults given the developmental stage of these youth and the exploration of these boundaries. The assessment of sex trafficking of minors must take into consideration a developmental approach in order to ensure that appropriate warning signs are being identified and indicators typical of normative developmental behaviors are not being over pathologized. Overlapping risk factors and warning signs, such as changes in physical appearance, may not necessarily indicate sex trafficking involvement on their own but rather present a concern in combination with other factors. Furthermore, as noted by O'Brien et al., (2019), sex trafficked youth are often identified by frontline workers through varying definitions of sex trafficking due to the lack of widely validated screening instruments available for use that could provide a standardized protocol. For this reason, the identification process relies heavily on frontline workers being well versed in understanding and recognizing the discrete signs of sex trafficking.

The relationship between the child welfare worker and the youth was also recognized as an essential component in being able to facilitate the information gathering process. Our findings replicated findings in the literature that underscore the role of interpersonal relationships in promoting protection against sex trafficking involvement for minors. Participants emphasized the

importance of building a trusting relationship with the youth in order to create an environment that promotes self-disclosure. O'Brien et al., (2018) examined the protective role that interpersonal relationships can serve for victims who are contemplating re-entry and found that having a strong interpersonal relationship with the professionals working with them, such as house staff, advocates, and mental health providers, can serve as a protective factor and foster resilience against re-entering the sex trade. This was also found to be true for youth who had experienced negative relationships early on as a result of being sexually abused as children (O'Brien, 2018). Furthermore, findings from this current study support previous research suggesting that the presence of a trusting relationship between a child welfare worker and youth is a critical component needed for establishing an environment that promotes self-disclosure from the youth (Augsberger & Swenson, 2015). Augsberger and Swenson (2015) found that child welfare involved youth described their worker as being trustworthy when they were able to share information with the worker, engage in collaborative decision making, and when they felt their worker was actively creating a nonjudgemental space that promoted self-disclosure. Conversely, when these qualities were not met, youth described their workers as being untrustworthy. Additionally, Augsberger and Swenson (2015) noted that the development of a trusting relationship between a child welfare worker and their youth emerges overtime, often requiring 2-3 years of knowing each other. Nonetheless, it is also important to recognize the presence of certain factors embedded within the child welfare system that can limit a worker's ability to develop these relationships, despite their willingness to want to do so. These factors may include having high caseloads, time constraints with the youth, and frequent caseworker turnovers, all of which can limit the ability to develop a strong bond with the youth.

Lacking collateral support when gathering necessary information that is unknown to child welfare workers can also present a challenge. FitzGerald and Hurst (2017) define implicit bias as “associations outside conscious awareness that lead to a negative evaluation of a person on the basis of irrelevant characteristics such as race or gender”. While less is known about the impact of implicit bias when assessing for sex trafficking of minors, a systematic review conducted by FitzGerald and Hurst (2017) found that even amongst highly trained professionals, such as individuals working in health care, implicit bias often exists when dealing with patients. Implicit bias is problematic as it can impact one’s perceptions about an individual based on irrelevant characteristics which can negatively alter the results of an assessment. This is particularly troublesome given that the sex trafficking assessment process often involves having to piece together limited amounts of information in order to determine possible involvement. According to the results of this study, professional limitations which can restrict access to necessary information can also contribute to this. One way to circumvent having a child welfare worker fill in the gaps using their own assumptions is by having multiple informants, including support from collaterals and the youth, involved in the assessment process. To prevent making assumptions about the youth, child welfare workers also indicated the benefits of engaging in full transparency when working with youth in order to obtain and incorporate the youth’s perspective as part of the decision-making process. While studies in the past have provided support for screening tools that do not require youth involvement (Armstrong, 2017), this study suggests that there may be a benefit to including youth in the assessment process after a trusting relationship has been developed between the child welfare worker and the youth.

Contextualizing Identified Challenges using the Social Ecological Model

Findings from the present study contextualize the identified challenges experienced by child welfare workers within the larger social ecological system that contributes to sex trafficking. Informed by this framework, nine subthemes describing the challenges encountered by child welfare workers were located within all four levels of the Social Ecological Model, including the individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels. Our findings contribute to the existing literature by demonstrating new insights into the levels most impacted for child welfare workers. More specifically, the individual and community levels were most referred to compared to findings in the literature which largely refer to challenges occurring at the societal, particularly by frontline workers within law enforcement. As noted by Finigan-Carr et al., (2019), the individual and community level capture factors related to the youth as well as the community environment they are located within, both of which are fundamental components of the child welfare system. This information provides a starting point for addressing the challenges faced by child welfare workers in order to better support them.

By applying the social ecological framework, the experiences of child welfare workers can be understood more comprehensively by going beyond the individual factors typically outlined in the literature and instead considered through an understanding of broader relational and macrosocial processes. Consistent with the Social Ecological Model, we can infer that the challenges experienced by child welfare workers are situated across complex ecological systems that interact and overlap with one another. As such, this model demonstrates how challenges experienced at one level will inadvertently impact other levels within the system. Factors involved in the assessment process can further perpetuate a youth's vulnerability for sexual exploitation by creating barriers to the assessment process or can provide opportunities for

intervention that can facilitate the assessment process. Our findings shed light on the several challenges faced by child welfare workers during the assessment process that exist within and can interact across the various ecological levels. For example, stigmatization of victims is often the result of social values and norms existing at the community level, which further perpetuate the belief that youth involved in the justice system or child welfare due to involvement in commercialized sexual activity are “bad” for deviating from normative sex roles. This has been found to be especially true for youth from BIPOC communities (Menaker & Franklin, 2013). When these beliefs are internalized, the youth’s own self-view is further damaged (Menaker & Franklin, 2013), and youth may avoid developing a trusting relationship with their child welfare worker due to fears of being further judged and stigmatized. Without this relationship present, the youth’s worker will have limited access to information needed to confirm the youth’s involvement in sex trafficking, therefore leaving the youth without access to necessary support. This example highlights the importance of contextualizing the assessment experiences of child welfare workers within their larger social ecological system and investigating the systemic interactions at play given that these challenges cannot be addressed in isolation.

Limitations

Findings from the current study should be considered in light of their limitations. Firstly, challenges mentioned by child welfare workers were located into appropriate social ecological levels as determined by the authors of this study. While this process was completed objectively using the definitions provided by Finigan-Carr et al., (2019), it would be beneficial to also include the perspectives of the child welfare workers when examining the placement of these challenges within these levels. Future studies should consider including the perspective of child welfare workers when reflecting on the levels captured by the challenges described. Similarly, it would be beneficial for future studies to also include the perspective of child welfare involved

survivors of sex trafficking. Doing so would provide additional insight into the challenges impacting self-disclosure that can further impact the assessment process for child welfare workers.

Clinical Implications and Next Steps

Although a strong link exists between child welfare involvement and sex trafficking amongst youth, there is a paucity of empirical research necessary for informing anti-sex trafficking initiatives (Baird et al., 2020). More specifically, there is a lack of research regarding the challenges that child welfare workers experience when assessing for sex trafficking involvement, a crucial step in addressing this public health issue. For this reason, the aim of this study was to identify the challenges encountered by child welfare workers when assessing for sex trafficking involvement for child welfare involved youth. Adopting a social ecological framework demonstrates how challenges are situated within ecological systems that interact with one another to further perpetuate a youth's vulnerability for sexual exploitation. It also highlights the significance of the individual and community level for frontline workers within child welfare. At the same time, use of this model showcases how addressing these challenges requires taking a systemic approach as challenges experienced at one level will inadvertently impact other levels within the system.

This study highlights the importance of the assessment process as a first step in protecting children and youth against sex trafficking involvement. These findings are important as they provide insight into potential areas of challenge experienced and ways of improving the assessment process for child welfare workers that could lead to more accurate identification of youth who are at risk or involved in sex trafficking. Agencies working to support child welfare involved youth should continue to provide training opportunities aimed at enlightening staff on the risk factors and warning signs that they are likely to encounter when working with their

youth. Ensuring that child welfare workers have proper access to agency-specific resources, including access to records and documents, as well as encouraging collaboration amongst child welfare workers in various professional roles to facilitate the assessment process will be important. Furthermore, efforts should be placed to encourage the development of relationships with the youth and their families and to promote transparency when conducting sex trafficking assessments.

In addition to providing further training opportunities, an additional way to support child welfare workers in this process would be to develop a systematic approach for screening for sex trafficking that considers these context specific challenges while also giving attention to the unique experiences of child welfare involved youth. Similarly, assessment tools must also take into consideration a developmentally appropriate lens that captures the unique experiences of sex trafficked minors.

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Chapter 3: Screening for Sex Trafficking in Child Welfare Agencies: Tool Development with Experts by Experience

Abstract

Sex trafficking is the most common form of human trafficking with minors between the ages of 12-14 accounting for a majority of the victims being recruited (Greenbaum et al., 2013; UNODC, 2007). Detection of youth at elevated risk of trafficking is vital to the prevention of this crime, yet few validated screening tools comprehensively assess risk, and none are specifically targeted for child welfare involved youth (Romero et al., 2021). The goals of this study are to develop a sex trafficking screening tool for youth at risk of, or involved in, sex trafficking within child welfare and to explore preliminary validation of the items using interviews with survivors of sex trafficking as minors. **Study one:** A protocol version of the screening tool was developed following completion of a literature review to identify previously validated risk factors and warning signs of sex trafficking for minors. Next, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 27 child welfare experts-by-experience with lived experience with sex trafficking as service providers regarding item relevance, additional risks specific to the child welfare context, usability, application, and overall impressions of the screening tool. Based on feedback obtained by experts, items were deleted, added, and modified. **Study two:** Preliminary validation was further examined by completing the screening tool using secondary analysis of interviews with survivors of sex trafficking as youth ($n = 6$). Survivors endorsed 40 out of 52 items included in the screening tool when describing their experiences of being trafficked. This screening tool will offer an evidence-based method for identifying risk and involvement of sex trafficking specific to the child welfare context.

Sex trafficking is the most common form of human trafficking. It is defined as the recruitment and exploitation of an individual using threats, force, deception, coercion or abuse of power for the purpose of a commercial sex act (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2007). The majority of sex trafficking cases in North America are domestic instances involving residents (Baird et al., 2020; Kotrla, 2010). Moreover, minors between the ages of 12-14 account for a majority of the victims being recruited into sex trafficking (Greenbaum et al., 2013). Strong evidence suggests that youth in care of the child welfare system have a particularly high risk of being trafficked for sex (Baird et al., 2020; Fong & Berger Cardoso, 2010). More specifically, it is estimated that approximately 30% of sex trafficked youth have had prior experience with child welfare (Baird et al., 2020).

Despite this risk, identification of sex trafficking risk and involvement for this population of youth is challenging as few child welfare specific screening tools are available for use. Therefore, the aims of this study are to build upon prior research and previously validated risk factors and warning signs to construct a specialized sex trafficking screening tool specific to the child welfare system. This was completed using insight obtained from child welfare experts-by-experience to validate the use of these items for this population. Feedback regarding the usability and application of the screening tool within a child welfare context was also examined. A final aim of this study is to further explore preliminary validity by applying this screening tool to interviews conducted with survivors of sex trafficking.

Sex Trafficking of Child Welfare Involved Youth

The literature suggests that there is a strong link between child welfare and sex trafficking involvement. More specifically, approximately 30% of sex trafficking victims who are minors are also involved within child welfare (Baird et al., 2020). Child welfare involved

youth often experience childhood adversities and problematic familial relationships leaving them more vulnerable to being targeted and exploited by traffickers (Fedina et al., 2019; Landers et al., 2017). It is the unmet needs associated with child welfare involvement that are often identified and exploited by traffickers (Landers et al., 2017).

There are different pathways that explain the intersection between child welfare and sex trafficking involvement. Firstly, some children may already be involved in child welfare due to the presence of childhood adversities. For these children, recruitment into sex trafficking can occur directly from foster care settings or group homes (Rosenblatt & Murphey, 2014). Conversely, youth may become involved in sex trafficking as a result of other circumstances, including homelessness and runaway behaviours, and are subsequently referred to child welfare after being identified as being involved (O'Brien et al., 2017). Accordingly, those working with child welfare involved youth are more likely to encounter individuals at a greater risk of sex trafficking involvement and for this reason can play a central role in identifying and supporting child and youth victims (Burruss-Cousins et al., 2023).

Despite these pathways of entry, it is important to note that not all child welfare involved youth are considered to be high-risk for sex trafficking. In fact, several youth within the child welfare system go on to experience successful life trajectories characterized by 'resilience' rather than risk. These youth are well prepared for success as they transition out of the child welfare system and into adulthood on their own (Jones, 2012; Nuñez et al., 2022; Yates & Grey, 2012). For example, many child welfare involved youth continue to attend school during their time in care and pursue further education upon leaving the child welfare system (Jones, 2012). Furthermore, studies have shown that for some youth, resilience extends beyond

academic achievement to include high self-esteem and the avoidance of homelessness (Yates & Grey, 2012; Shpiegel et al., 2021).

Risk Factors and Warning Signs along the Pathway of Sex Trafficking Involvement

Exploitation of sex trafficked youth occurs on a continuum of stages defined by the strategies used by the trafficker to recruit youth and to prolong their exploitation. This process is known to be sequential and is characterized by the recruitment, entrapment, and enmeshment stages (Baird & Connolly, 2023). A multitude of risk factors and warning signs for sex trafficking involvement have been identified within the literature which can be located across these stages.

There are several systemic, familial, and individual background characteristics that can increase risk of entry into the pathway of sex trafficking involvement for youth prior to their recruitment by traffickers. For example, higher rates of sex trafficking have been noted amongst females compared to males, as well as amongst racial and ethnic minorities, and members of the LGBTQ population (Fedina et al., 2019; Hardy et al., 2013; Hogan & Roe-Sepowitz, 2023). Involvement in the juvenile justice system has been associated with higher risk of involvement (Fedina et al., 2019; Fong & Berger Cardoso, 2010; Greenbaum, Livings, et al., 2018; Lanctôt et al., 2020; Landers et al., 2017; Panlilio et al., 2019; Reid, 2018). Experiencing childhood adversities (ACES), such as problematic familial relationships, poverty, and prior experience of abuse have also been reported as key risk factors (Choi, 2015; Fedina et al., 2019; Landers et al., 2017). Sexual abuse is one of the most commonly identified risk factors for entry into sex trafficking (Choi, 2015; Elwood et al., 2022; Fedina et al., 2019; Franchino-Olsen, 2021; Reid, 2011; Reid & Piquero, 2016). Furthermore, presenting with a history of mental health challenges, including anxiety and depression, can also leave youth more vulnerable to being

targeted by traffickers (Cole & Sprang, 2015; Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Franchino-Olsen, 2021; Reid, 2014; Reid & Piquero, 2016).

The process of sex trafficking involvement begins with the youth's recruitment, defined as the point at which the youth is being lured into sex trafficking. The *recruitment stage* is characterized by current concerns or risks that leave youth more vulnerable to their traffickers (Baird & Connolly, 2023). It is through the identification and manipulation of these risk factors and vulnerabilities that traffickers can successfully recruit youth during this stage (Baird & Connolly, 2023). For example, exposure to compromised parenting practices, including parental substance use, parental challenges with mental health, witnessing caregiver arrests, and/or family violence or crime, can increase a youth's risk for being recruited (Choi, 2015; Elwood et al., 2022; Franchino-Olsen, 2021). Being in contact with individuals who are involved in sex trafficking, including family members or peer influences, can serve to normalize the industry and can increase the likelihood of contact with a trafficker (Chohaney, 2016; Fedina et al., 2019). Youth who experience homelessness, frequent relocations as well as financial instability, are also more likely to be recruited (Choi, 2015; Elwood et al., 2022; Franchino-Olsen, 2021; Hogan & Roe-Sepowitz, 2023). Concerning behaviours related to one's romantic relationships, including dating violence, having a much older romantic partner, or earlier engagement in sexual activities, have also been recognized as risk factors (Elwood et al., 2022; Franchino-Olsen, 2021; Panlilio et al., 2019; Reid, 2011; Reid & Piquero, 2016). Additionally, the presence of current mental health challenges, such as suicidal ideation, can make a youth appear more vulnerable to their trafficker (Hogan & Roe-Sepowitz, 2023; Sanchez et al., 2019). Child welfare involved youth are targeted by traffickers due to their increased vulnerabilities to common risks (Baird & Connolly, 2023). The presence of one or more of these risk factors does not guarantee

involvement in sex trafficking; however, experiencing multiple risk factors can increase the likelihood of becoming recruited (Landers et al., 2017).

Following the recruitment of youth comes the *entrapment stage*, characterized by the use of methods considered to be either romantic, such as grooming, false promises of love and manipulation, or aversive tactics, such as violence and blackmail, used to keep the youth involved. The final stage of involvement is known as the *enmeshment stage* and is characterized by dependency strategies and control tactics used by the trafficker, for example providing a need such as drugs. This stage signifies the point at which the youth has become involved in sex trafficking (Baird et al., 2020; Tyldum & Brunovskis, 2005). Clear warning signs often represent a youth's involvement in the entrapment and enmeshment stages. Whereas many of the risk factors noted above can be covert, warning signs are obvious and strong indicators of a youth's involvement in sex trafficking. Warning signs include more noticeable behaviors, such as truancy, hitchhiking, and engagement in substance use (Chohaney, 2016; Choi, 2015; Elwood et al., 2022; Fedina et al., 2019; Greenbaum, Livings, et al., 2018; Panlilio et al., 2019). Involvement with organized crime and/or gangs has also been identified as a warning sign amongst youth with sex trafficking involvement (Elwood et al., 2022; Franchino-Olsen & Martin, 2022). Furthermore, concerning internet behaviours, such as having sexually explicit photos or videos taken by another person, have also been recognized as warning signs of involvement (Elwood et al., 2022). Finally, drug and substance abuse have also been tied to sex trafficking involvement (Franchino-Olsen, 2021; Panlilio et al., 2019; Reid, 2011; Reid & Piquero, 2016).

Not all child welfare involved youth at risk of recruitment reach the entrapment or enmeshment stages. While it is still necessary to consider the warning signs that are indicative of

involvement, these indicators are observed less frequently compared to risk factors (McDonald et al., 2024). Therefore, as a proactive measure, it is important to also identify youth at risk of becoming involved, given that they are easily targeted due to their increased vulnerabilities.

This suggested pathway of exploitation can be used as a framework to identify the indicating signs that are present at each stage that signifies a youth's placement along this pathway. Understanding the trajectory and associated stages of sex trafficking involvement is a crucial step in identifying the risk factors and warning signs specific to each stage. Defining these stages is also important given that youth within child welfare can become involved in sex trafficking prior to, during, or after their involvement with the system. As such, child welfare agencies offer a unique opportunity to identify youth along the trajectory, including those who are not yet involved in sex trafficking but may be at risk.

Assessment of Sex Trafficking Risk

In the year 2000, the United Nations ratified the Palermo Protocol to prevent and punish human trafficking and exploitation, particularly involving children and women (UNODC, 2000). This protocol also signified the first internationally agreed-upon definition of human trafficking. Following this, the US Congress passed the U.S Trafficking Victim Protection Act (TVPA), which provided a framework for protecting victims of human trafficking rather than criminalizing them as perpetrators (U.S Department of Justice, 2023). Since then, the last two and a half decades have seen a rise in anti-trafficking movements worldwide, including research aimed at better understanding human trafficking (Zhang, 2022).

Increasing research has highlighted the importance of the assessment and screening of sex trafficking to identify individuals who are being trafficked or, in the case of youth, are at risk of being victims of trafficking. Initially, the screening tools that were developed were general in

focus and aimed at the trafficking of adults, especially women. Various context-specific assessment tools have also been developed by practitioners and researchers, including the criminal and juvenile legal contexts, as well as emergency departments, in order to identify victims of human trafficking (Pate et al., 2021). While the use of assessment tools that are broad in coverage can be beneficial within certain circumstances, they may not be relevant for use within other contexts given that they may not capture the specific vulnerabilities that are present within particular groups of youth (Pate et al., 2021). Context-specific screening tools focus on key settings where victims are likely to be seen, either because they are accessing medical support or have become involved with police or the legal systems. As such, context-specific screeners of sex trafficking include indicators that individuals working within these settings would be most able to identify. These screening tools highlight vulnerabilities that are based on the contexts with which they were intended for example, focusing on physical signs of abuse for tools developed for use within medical fields (Pate et al., 2021). Finally, there has been a growing number of child and youth victims identified, resulting in the awareness that youth can be victims as well (U.S Department of State, 2019). This has signified the need for screening tools for children and youth that consider important developmental factors specific to their experiences.

Current Screening of Sex Trafficking Within Child Welfare

Currently four sex trafficking screening tools are publicly available for use with children and adolescents: 1) the Commercially Sexually Exploited Children screening tool, a universal screening tool intended to identify sexual exploitation of at-risk youth between the ages of 11-18 (CSEC Collaborative Response Team, 2015), 2) the Commercial Sexual Exploitation Identification Tool, a universal screening tool used to identify current or previous involvement of

sex trafficking amongst youth ages 18 and younger (CSE-IT; Basson, 2017), as well as the 3) 6-item screening questionnaire (Greenbaum, Dodd, & McCracken, 2018) and, 4) 17-item screening questionnaire (Greenbaum, Livings, et al., 2018), both of which are intended for identification of sexual exploitation of high risk youth ages 12-18 seeking medical services. Of these four screening tools, aspects of validity have been reported for the CSE-IT and Greenbaum and colleagues' 6- and 17-item screening tools (CSE-IT; Basson, 2017; Greenbaum, Dodd, & McCracken, 2018; Greenbaum, Livings, et al., 2018). Although not published, the CSE-IT screening tool provides value given that it has undergone extensive item analysis and offers preliminary evidence of construct validity. More specifically, the development of the CSE-IT involved obtaining input from experts and key stakeholders with previous sex trafficking experience regarding the relevance of the items included. In order to examine concurrent validity, the CSE-IT was also compared to the exploitation section on the Crisis Assessment Tool/Childhood Severity of Psychiatric Illness (CAT/CSPI; Lyons et al., 1996), a commonly used measure for assessing exploitation risk amongst youth. Results indicated a correlation of 92%, suggesting high concurrent validity. In terms of reliability, internal consistency of items was also examined. The reported Cronbach's alpha for the CSE-IT subscales ranged from 0.65 to 0.87, indicating moderate to high reliability. Greenbaum and colleagues' (Greenbaum, Dodd, & McCracken, 2018; Greenbaum, Livings, et al., 2018) 6- and 17-item screening tools have also undergone some item analyses, demonstrating their utility relevant to the medical context of the emergency room. This was accomplished by highlighting the types of presentations underaged youth might present within this context. The 6-item screening tool (Greenbaum, Dodd, & McCracken, 2018) has a sensitivity of 92%, specificity of 73%, positive predictive value of 51%, and a negative predictive value of 97% for a cutoff score of two. Similarly, the 17-item screening

tool (Greenbaum, Livings, et al., 2018) has a sensitivity of 84.4%, specificity of 57.5%, a positive predictive value of 19.9%, and a negative predictive value of 96.7%. These findings suggest that approximately 84% of victims within an emergency room setting would be identified using this screening tool. Overall, these findings are important given that victims often move through healthcare facilities largely unidentified due to the lack of a context-specific screening tool available for use within this setting (Greenbaum, Livings, et al., 2018). Furthermore, findings also highlight the importance of having a context-specific screening tool and the minimal ramifications associated with identifying a false positive case within this context. Greenbaum, Livings, et al., (2018) explain that patients deemed high risk using this screener would then undergo further assessment before being referred for further intervention. Overall, both screening measures provide strong item analyses and validation of the included items. These screening tools provide measures that include key risk factors and warning signs of sex trafficking involvement pertaining to children and youth. When used within their intended contexts, they can provide valuable information regarding the presentation of sex trafficking indicators.

With a specialized screening tool, context-specific indicators that child welfare workers would be aware of will be captured, and the identification of sex trafficking by child welfare workers will not be so heavily reliant on youth who do not self-report (Greenbaum, 2017). Substantial literature has identified pertinent risk factors and warning signs which have been well validated and included as part of assessment measures used to identify children and youth involved in sex trafficking. It is necessary to build on this prior research to construct a screening tool that is targeted towards the identification of children and youth within the child welfare system that are both high risk and/or involved in sex trafficking. It is also important that the

screening measure is valid and follows a framework for establishing validity (Flake et al., 2017).

Validating a Measure for Sex Trafficking

As stated by Flake et al., (2017), “Measurement is at the foundation of the scientific process: If a study’s measures are not valid then the conclusions have questionable meaning” (Flake et al., 2017, p.370). Flake goes on to note that when developing a measure, establishing construct validity, defined as the process of gathering evidence in order to ensure that scores obtained reflect the construct that is being measured, is essential, and they (Flake et al., 2017) outline three phases that encompass the recommended best practices for obtaining construct validity: the 1) substantive, 2) structural, and 3) external phase. In the *substantive phase*, the construct is defined, and its scope is outlined to identify the content or items that tap into certain dimensions. This step is necessary for accurately measuring the construct. In this phase, validity is obtained through literature reviews and construct conceptualizations, item development, and scaling selection, as well as examinations of content relevance and representativeness. The inclusion of key service users or “experts by experience” has also been noted as a crucial component of the substantive phase, particular for item development. The inclusion of experts provides researchers with the opportunity to situate relevant findings from the literature into practical context through expert reviews of the content (Flake et al., 2017; Luchenski et al., 2018; Videmšek, 2017; Videmšek & Fox, 2018). Next, the *structural* phase involves use of quantitative analyses to examine the psychometric properties of the measures including reliability, examination of the factor structure, as well as internal consistency. Lastly, in the *external phase*, the construct’s ability to predict criteria or similar constructs is examined.

The majority of research exploring new scales is situated within the structural and external phases and are often developed without reference to validity in its complete form (Flake et al., 2017). This also seems to be the case for sex trafficking screening tools, which are developed without much focus on the substantive phase. Focusing on the substantive phase and involving experts in the process is necessary as doing so ensures that the ultimate end users of the screening tool, are also involved in the design of the measure (Luchenski et al., 2018; Videmšek, 2017; Videmšek & Fox, 2018). Obtaining substantive validity is an important first step in creating a screening tool, followed by establishing structural and external validity.

Constructing a Screening Tool for Child Welfare

Following the framework suggested by Flake and colleagues' (2017), it is necessary to develop a screening tool that takes into consideration all aspects of validity, including substantive, structural, and external validity. To the best of our knowledge, there are no currently published sex trafficking screening measures for use within child welfare that address these components of validity, particularly substantive validity, which are necessary when developing a measure for a specific population. Important risk factors and warning signs of sex trafficking have been identified in the literature; however, substantive validity is a missing component that addresses whether these risk factors and warning signs are encountered by child welfare workers. Evaluating substantive validity is an important first step in the development of such measure. As such, this study is unique in that it follows a specific framework for establishing validity. In particular, we emphasize substantive validity with attention to aspects of structural and external validity. Given that this screening tool is being developed with the aim of being implemented within child welfare, it is important to emphasize substantive validity and the feedback that is provided by experts within the child welfare system.

Child welfare workers, through their lived experiences supporting sex trafficked youth, are experts by experience who can confirm previously validated risk factors and warning signs of sex trafficking by verifying their relevance for the child welfare context. Doing so involves gathering insight from experts with first-hand experience supporting youth within child welfare regarding risk factors and warning signs that are relevant to the child welfare context. Child welfare experts are best positioned to provide insight regarding the screening tool's content validity, including whether the content of a proposed screening tool is relevant for identifying sex trafficking amongst the child welfare. They are also best positioned to ensure that a screening tool is both user friendly and that it can be applied in a meaningful way to further support the current assessment process within child welfare agencies, namely face and utility validity.

Additionally, when conducting research related to sex trafficking, it is also important to incorporate the lived experiences and insights of survivors, given that screening tools which do not include their perspectives may not accurately represent their unique experiences, further misrepresenting and compromising the assessment of sex trafficking involvement. Insight from survivors provides further validation regarding the relevance and appropriateness of risk factors and warning signs of sex trafficking for youth. Moreover, the psychosocial realities of survivors of sex trafficking, including marginalization and associated stigmas, emphasize the need to protect the values, beliefs, and worldviews of survivors when completing research that pertains to them. Therefore, obtaining insight from survivors with lived experiences of sex trafficking regarding the items selected will provide a necessary perspective and serve as a second form of validation, known groups validation from a confirmed group of survivors.

The Current study

This current study was undertaken with the aim of developing a child welfare specific sex trafficking screening tool that would serve as a key starting point for the identification of at risk and involved youth who would benefit from further assessments or referrals for follow up. This was done by building on the extensive prior research identifying risk factors and warning signs and using insight obtained from experts-by-experience in the child welfare system, survivors of sex trafficking, as well as service providers who support sex trafficking victims, in order to refine these items for use within the child welfare context. This study serves as an important first step in the development of a context-specific screening tool. This research was conducted across two studies:

1) Study one: Substantive Validity of the York Sex Trafficking Screening Tool (YST) with Experts by Experience involving screening tool generation using previously validated risk factors and warning signs of sex trafficking for minors in the literature, followed by semi-structured interviews with experts by experience to obtain insight regarding: content validity: item relevance to the child welfare context, face validity: screener usability for the child welfare context, and utility validity: application of the screening tool along the pathway of involvement.

2) Study Two: Preliminary Structural and External Validation of the YST with Survivors involving the application of the YST to further explore preliminary construct validity, namely inter-rater reliability and known-groups validity. This was completed by a) assessing inter-rater reliability amongst independent coders who completed the YST items on previously acquired interviews with a second group of experts, survivors of sex trafficking, and b) assessing known-groups validity through confirmation of the relevance of the YST items for trafficked individuals.

Study One: Construction of the York Sex Trafficking Screening Tool (YST) Using Experts by Experience

The present study was approved by the ethical research committee at the university (#2021-073), the ethics committees of each agency, as well as the legal counsel of each agency involved.

Method

Literature Review, Item Selection, and Screening Tool Generation

Validated risk factors and warning signs included in published peer reviewed sex trafficking screening tools currently being used with children and adolescents were reviewed. In order to ensure that all relevant risk factors and warning signs were considered and captured, an additional scan of the literature was conducted with the aim of identifying any risk factors and warning signs of sex trafficking in children and adolescents that were missing from these screening tools. A final search of relevant grey literature, including government documents, as well as screening tools that had not yet been published or validated, was also conducted. Documents outlining risk factors and warning signs of sex trafficking for youth in general as well as those specific to the child welfare context were considered. Identified articles and screening tools were published between 2009-2024. The literature search included combinations of the following search terms: sex, traffick*, human traffick*, commercial sexual exploitation, sex work, domestic minor sex traffick*, sex*, exploit*, child*, youth*, adolesc*, minor, risk factor, warning sign, indicator, screening tool, instrument, survey, questionnaire, measure, and assessment. These search terms were developed in collaboration with an expert librarian. Twenty-nine documents were reviewed in total, including three validated screening tools (CSE-IT; Basson, 2017; Greenbaum, Dodd, & McCracken, 2018; Greenbaum, Livings, et al., 2018)

(see Appendix A for an overview of documents reviewed). All published articles and screening tools were reviewed, and relevant risk factors and warning signs were selected from these documents through discussions with members of the research team. Items consistent in content were combined when appropriate and items taken underwent a slight edit to ensure consistent formatting. The final protocol version of the YST included 46 items that captured risk factors and warning signs of youth sex trafficking across eight categories. A 4-point rating scale was used to capture the level of concern regarding the presence of the risk factor and warning sign (see Appendix B).

Gaining the Insights of Experts by Experience

Next, semi-structured interviews with child welfare experts-by-experience (i.e., child welfare workers and senior supervisors) were conducted in order to elicit insight regarding the items included on the screening tool. Further interviewing was conducted with child welfare workers regarding the usability and application of the screening tool. This information was used to examine content, face, and utility validity.

Participants. Experts-by-experience included twenty-seven child welfare personnel with previous or current experience supporting a youth (i.e., 12-24 years old) with sex trafficking involvement. Child welfare personnel were from three child welfare agencies across Ontario, serving a rural community, urban/suburban community, as well as a multi-service Indigenous Child Well-Being Agency. Participants were Senior Agency Supervisors ($n = 3$), as well as child welfare workers ($n = 24$) which included an Intake Assessment Worker ($n = 1$), Kinship/ Family Service Workers ($n = 6$), Child Protection Workers ($n = 14$), Legal Support Worker ($n = 1$), Family Finder Worker ($n = 1$), and Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions Worker ($n = 1$). Child welfare workers reported having a combined average of 12 years in the field. Ninety-

two percent ($n = 22$) of child welfare workers reported having some form of prior training in the area of sex trafficking.

To recruit child welfare workers, researchers carried out information sessions at each agency to share information regarding the project with prospective participants. Individuals interested in participating were asked to provide their contact information and consent to be contacted by researchers.

Interviews. A semi-structured interview was used to allow a fluid method of data collection that enabled flexibility when responding to in-depth personal accounts (Willig, 2013). Participants were presented with an electronic version of the screening tool. A script was used that asked participants, using their experiences, to comment on the content and relevance of risk items and warning signs, including whether any items are missing, need to be modified, or removed, as well as overall impressions. Child welfare experts were also asked to comment on the usability of the screening tool, including what they liked and disliked more generally, as well as its application, including which point along the pathway of involvement they could foresee this screening tool being used. Experts were asked to review the items on the screening tool with one of their confirmed or suspected cases in mind. The interviews generally lasted for 45 mins and participants were given an opportunity to ask any questions or provide additional information at the end. All interviews were conducted over a secure virtual platform.

Data Analysis

Interviews were conducted by the first author of this study. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and coded for main topics regarding risk factors and warning signs, usability, and application. Transcripts were coded independently by a graduate student and senior

research assistant. Codes were collapsed into categories and discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved using a consensus-based deductive process. Responses regarding the content of the screening tool were organized using the following categories: a) inclusion of missing items, b) modification to current items, as well as c) removal of current items. Feedback regarding the general usability of the screening tool was organized into two overarching categories: 1) preferred aspects, with the following subcodes: a) usefulness, b) layout/formatting, c) general content, d) length, e) scoring, and f) terminology, and 2) suggestions for improvement. Lastly, feedback regarding the application of the screening tool was organized using the following codes: a) as a universal screening tool for all child welfare involved youth, b) for youth at-risk/flagged, and c) for youth involved in sex trafficking.

Suggested revisions were reviewed and incorporated through group consensus by means of discussions amongst the research team and senior managers from the child welfare agencies. Inter-rater reliability was calculated for 22.2% of the sample ($n = 6$) (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). On average, the inter-coder agreement was 91% (range 80%-100%), with an agreement of 80% or higher being considered acceptable (Lombard et al., 2002). Variability in coding was noted to be greatest amongst usability codes, specifically, usefulness and general content of the screening tool.

Results

Screening Tool Content

Feedback elicited from the interviews were organized into three categories: 1) inclusion of missing items ($n = 16$), 2) modifications to validated items ($n = 28$), and lastly, 3) removal of items ($n = 1$).

Inclusion of Additional Items. Child welfare experts indicated the need for the inclusion of sixteen additional items that they felt were missing. These included risk factors and warning signs pertaining to physical and mental health ($n = 3$), self-esteem ($n = 1$), knowledge regarding sex trafficking and safe sex practices ($n = 2$), caregiver supervision and turnaround rate ($n = 1$), experiencing loss/death of caregiver/family member ($n = 1$), disclosure regarding romantic partners ($n = 1$), self-disclosure regarding sex trafficking involvement ($n = 1$), and unmet basic needs ($n = 1$). Suggestions regarding the addition of items that captured challenges with mental health and knowledge regarding sexual education were provided by experts from the Indigenous Child Well-Being Agency. Five background characteristic items, relating to cultural, gender, and sexual identity, were developed in collaboration with the senior supervisor from the Indigenous child well-being agency in order to ensure items were culturally sensitive. Items regarding culture, gender, and sexuality were first obtained from the literature and used as a starting point.

Modifications to Current Items. Modifications were of three categories: 1) item refinement to ensure previously validated indicators captured relevant information pertaining to the child welfare context ($n = 14$), 2) the addition of examples to existing items for further clarification, such as adding “the game” as an example of language used related to sex trafficking ($n = 9$), and 3) modification to the language used to make items more accessible and consistent with the language being used in the field ($n = 12$), such as changing the term “unwilling” to “unable.”

Figure 1 shows the modifications suggested by experts.

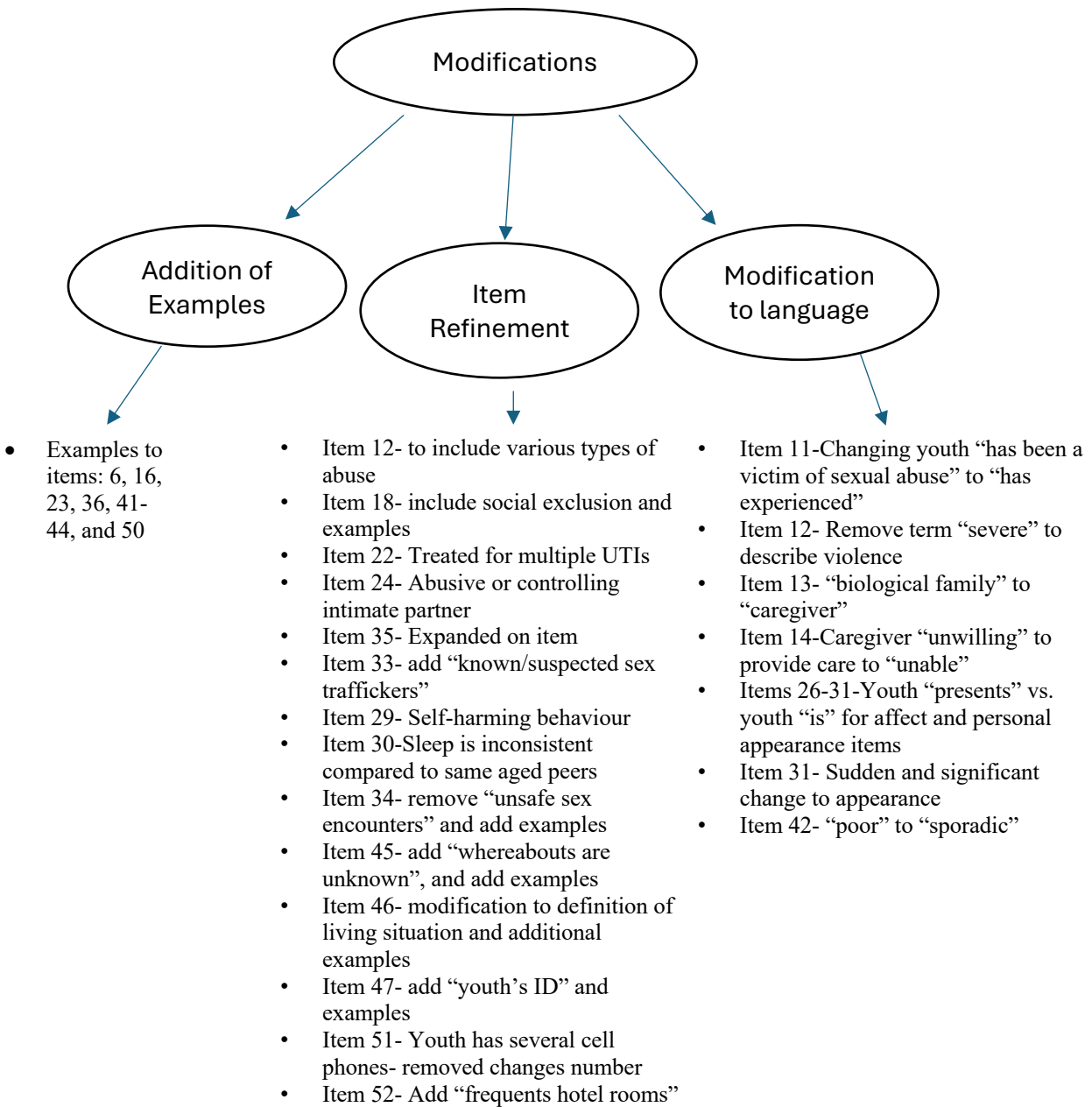
Item Removal. Regarding the removal of items, one original item related to cultural heritage was removed from the screening tool (i.e., Youth identifies with Indigenous heritage) following

discussions amongst the research team and agencies in order to be more inclusive. This item was replaced with culture items mentioned above from our partnering Indigenous agency.

Post Hoc Validation Confirmation. Following the interviews with child welfare experts, additional confirmation regarding the relevance of the items selected for the screener was obtained by seeking insight from three independent groups with lived experience of sex trafficking as service providers or survivors, including community-based trauma therapists providing therapeutic support to survivors, survivor advocates from a community-based agency serving sex trafficked, and street-involved youth, as well as three survivors with lived experience of sex trafficking as a youth.

Figure 1

Item Modification Suggested by Child Welfare Experts



Trauma therapists, survivor advocates, and survivors were presented with the protocol version of the screener and were asked to provide their insight regarding the relevance of the items included. Overall, feedback provided was positive and in support of the risk factors and warning signs included. Feedback included modifications to the language used for three items to ensure inclusivity and accuracy. This included the removal of the term “deviant” when describing risky peer groups, inclusion of the terms “emotionally estranged” when describing familial relationships, as well as changing substance “abuse” to “use”. Lastly, suggestions provided resulted in the removal of “engagement in pornography” as an example of risky sexual behaviour and the inclusion of an additional risk item, namely, someone else controlling the youth’s identification documents, such as their driver’s license.

Lastly, the Diversity, Ethics, and Inclusion (DEI) committees from the aforementioned agencies were also consulted to ensure the revised screening tool included wording that was sensitive to equity-deserving groups (i.e., BIPOC communities). Feedback provided by the DEI committees included item modifications pertaining to the language used to describe one item related to sexual health as well as the rewording of six background characteristic items and one risk factor to represent protective factors. These items were also reworded from “youth struggles with” to “you feels” in order to capture the youth’s perspective when answering questions related to their background characteristics and identity. As per the recommendation of the DEI committees, an additional example was added to an existing item to include living with a romantic partner as an example to the item capturing the youth’s current living situation. Table 1 denotes changes suggested through this post hoc analysis.

Table 1

Item Modifications from Post Hoc Analyses

Items from Protocol Version of YST	Items from Modified Version of YST	Modifications after Post Hoc Analyses
Youth has unhealthy peer relationships, including deviant friends and/or experiences social exclusion		Youth has peer relationships that appear unsafe <i>(e.g., peers who are a negative influence, significantly older peers, unstable peer group)</i> and/or experiences social exclusion.
Youth feels abandoned by biological family		Youth feels abandoned/ emotionally estranged by someone they felt connected to <i>(e.g., biological/adoptive/foster family).</i>
Youth presents with substance abuse difficulties <i>(e.g., appears to be under the influence, found with alcohol/ drugs)</i>		Youth presents with substance use difficulties <i>(e.g., appears to be under the influence, found with alcohol/ drugs).</i>
Youth engages in concerning internet behaviour <i>(e.g., “sexting”, looking at porn, chatting or meeting with strangers online possibly for sexual purposes)</i>		Youth engages in concerning internet behaviour <i>(e.g., posting, “sexting”, chatting or meeting with strangers online possibly for sexual purposes, has been watched, filmed, or photographed in a sexually explicit manner)</i>
Someone else is controlling the youth’s contact with family or friends, leaving the youth socially isolated		Someone else is controlling the youth’s ID documents and/or contact with family or friends, leaving the youth socially isolated <i>(i.e., controlling cell phone and social media use)</i>
Youth has had multiple sexual partners in the last year <i>(e.g., 4 or more)</i>	Youth has had multiple sexual partners in the last year <i>(e.g., 4 or more).</i>	Youth has had multiple sexual partners in the last year <i>(4 or more).</i>
Youth feels disconnected from cultural community	Youth struggles with their racial background.	Youth positively identifies with their racial background.

Youth struggles with their cultural identity	Youth struggles with their ethnic and/or ancestral background.	Youth positively identifies with their ethnic and/or ancestral background.
	Youth struggles with or is disconnected to their cultural community.	Youth positively identifies with or is well connected to their cultural community.
Youth struggles with their gender identity	Youth struggles in their gender identity.	Youth feels supported in their gender identity.
	Youth struggles in their sexual identity.	Youth feels supported in their sexual identity.
Youth is distrusting of adults (<i>e.g., will not disclose information to adults, very secretive</i>)	Youth is distrusting of adults/caregiver (<i>e.g., biological/adoptive/foster family or adult within community</i>)	Youth is trusting of at least one adult/caregiver (<i>e.g., biological/adoptive/foster family or adult within community</i>)
Youth struggles financially	Youth struggles financially (<i>e.g., does not have stable housing, caregiver is unable to provide, children, pets, family obligations are unmet, is being forced to give their money to someone</i>).	Youth is financially stable (<i>e.g., has stable housing, caregiver is able to provide, children, pets, family obligations are met, is not being forced to give their money to someone</i>).
Youth lived outside of the home with friends (<i>e.g., stays over night at friends for extended time or periods of homelessness</i>)	Youth lives outside of family/caregiver home (<i>e.g., stays overnight at friends for extended time, periods of homelessness, unstable housing</i>), lives independently, and/or is being housed by someone who is paying for their living expenses.	Youth lives outside of family/caregiver home (<i>e.g., stays overnight at friends for extended time, periods of homelessness, unstable housing, with a boy/girlfriend</i>), lives independently, and/or is being housed by someone who is paying for their living expenses.

Screening Tool Usability

Child welfare workers ($n = 24$) also provided feedback regarding the usability of the screening tool, including aspects they liked as well as suggestions for improvement. Overall, the screening tool was well received by participants. When asked to comment on its usability, 23 experts spoke positively about the usability of the screening tool while one participant did not provide any comments.

Feedback regarding the aspects of the screening tool that were well received generally fell within the following six categories: a) usefulness, b) layout/formatting, c) general content, d) length, e) scoring, and f) terminology. Child welfare experts generally commented positively on the usability of the screening tool. Experts described the screening tool as being “user-friendly”, inclusive in its terminology, comprehensive in content covered, short in length, easy to score, and capturing relevant content that aligns with their current field of work. Eighty three percent of experts ($n = 20$) provided positive feedback regarding the general content of the screening tool, describing it as comprehensive and capturing of the risk factors that they commonly encounter with child welfare involved youth. Seventy-five percent of experts ($n = 18$) also provided positive feedback regarding the layout/formatting of the screening tool, describing it as being easy to follow, clear, and finding the sections useful for organizational purposes. Fifty percent of experts ($n = 12$) commented positively on the terminology being used to describe the risk factors and warning signs and described the screener as being inclusive and appropriate. Twenty-nine percent of experts ($n = 7$) also commented positively on the length of the screening tool describing it as being an appropriate number of items to screen for. Lastly, 17% of experts ($n = 4$) described the screening tool as being useful and adding value to their day-to-day screening practices.

Child welfare experts also provided suggestions for improving the usability of the screening tool. Suggestions generally fell within five categories related to a) usefulness, b) layout/formatting, c) length, d) mode of delivery, and e) scoring. Suggestions for improving the usefulness of the screening tool indicated the need for a companion document and resources to go along with the screener ($n = 4$). Regarding the layout/formatting, experts suggested the addition of more space for taking notes and use of a larger font size ($n = 10$). Suggestions regarding the length of the screener indicated the need to reduce the number of pages ($n = 2$). Experts also discussed the need to have an electronic version of the screening tool available for use ($n = 5$). Lastly, suggestions regarding the scoring of the screener included providing a cutoff score to indicate level of risk upon completion of the screening tool ($n = 6$). Suggestions related to terminology and content modification were reviewed and incorporated separately (see modifications to current items).

Screening Tool Application

Child welfare experts were also asked to provide feedback regarding the application of this screening tool within their agencies. Sixty-seven percent of experts ($n = 16$), spontaneously commented on their desire to have this screening tool available for use when identifying youth in need. More specifically, experts mentioned wanting to use this screener to help systematize their current assessment process, which currently relies heavily on their clinical intuition. Furthermore, they envisioned the screener as a way to help bring awareness to context specific risk factors and warning signs that need to be considered when screening youth within child welfare.

Child welfare experts were also asked to comment on the points along the pathway of involvement for which they anticipate the screening tool being most useful within their agencies.

Overall, support was provided for use of this screening tool across the pathway of involvement. Seventy-five percent of experts provided comments related to the application of the screening tool while twenty-five percent did not provide any comments ($n = 6$). Of the 18 experts that provided comments, over half of them ($n = 10$) envisioned this screener being used to identify high risk youth, youth flagged at intake for being at risk, and/or youth presenting with early sex trafficking concerns, in order to provide early prevention support. Sixteen percent of participants ($n = 3$) commented on envisioning this tool being used to identify youth involved in sex trafficking. Lastly, twenty-eight percent of participants ($n = 5$) commented on envisioning this screening tool being used broadly as a screener for all child welfare involved youth and did not specify a specific point along the pathway of involvement.

Finalizing the York Sex Trafficking Screening Tool (YST)

Taken together, the feedback received from experts in this study resulted in the creation of the interim version of the YST screening tool used for this study, which includes 52 items capturing risk and warning signs of sex trafficking involvement amongst youth within child welfare. Items capture the full pathway of sex trafficking involvement, including background characteristics, risk factors indicative of the recruitment stage, and significant warning signs indicative of the entrapment and enmeshment stages. Level of risk is captured using a 4-point scale. Table 2 shows the final items that were added and/or modified.

Study Two: Preliminary Structural and External Validation of the YST with Survivors

The aim of study two was to a) assess inter-rater reliability amongst independent coders who completed the YST items on previously acquired interviews with a second group of experts, survivors of sex trafficking, and b) to assess known-groups validity through confirmation of the relevance of the YST items for trafficked individuals.

Table 2

Item Modifications and Additions from Child Welfare Experts

CATEGORY A: Background Characteristics and Protective Factors

1. Youth positively identifies with their racial background.~!
2. Youth positively identifies with their ethnic and/or ancestral background.~!
3. Youth positively identifies with or is well connected to their cultural community.~!
4. Youth feels supported in their gender identity.~!
5. Youth feels supported in their sexual identity.~!
6. Youth is financially stable (e.g., has stable housing, caregiver is able to provide, children, pets, family obligations are met, is not being forced to give their money to someone).*!
7. Youth has been diagnosed with a developmental (e.g., Autism Spectrum Disorder, Intellectual Disability) or learning disability/ADHD.^
8. Youth has been diagnosed with a physical disability.~
9. Youth struggles with their mental health.~
10. Youth feels disconnected, isolated or lacks supports related to their disability or mental health. ~
11. Youth has experienced sexual abuse.*
12. Youth has experienced other forms of abuse (physical, emotional, financial) or neglect. Includes exposure to intimate partner violence.*
13. Youth has experienced loss/death of a family member/caregiver.~

CATEGORY B: Risk Factors for Recruitment

14. Parent/caregiver is unable to provide adequate supervision.^
15. Youth has had unstable caregivers (i.e., high turnaround).~
16. Youth is trusting of at least one adult/caregiver (e.g., biological/adoptive/foster family or adult within community).*!
17. Youth feels abandoned/ emotionally estranged by someone they felt connected to (e.g., biological/adoptive/foster family).*
18. Youth has peer relationships that appear unsafe (e.g., peers who are a negative influence, significantly older peers, unstable peer group) and/or experiences social exclusion.*!
19. Youth's first sexual experience occurred at 14 years or younger.^
20. Youth has had multiple sexual partners in the last year (4 or more).^!
21. Youth is non-disclosing when it comes to sharing about their romantic partner.~

22. Youth has been treated or tested for having multiple STIs/UTIs (e.g., kidney infections).*
23. Youth has romantic partners who are significantly older (e.g., significant age gap between youth and romantic partner-4 or more years).*
24. Youth has been exposed to an abusive or controlling intimate partner.*
25. Youth has had limited education/ knowledge of safe sex practices (e.g., sex education, contraceptives).~
26. Youth presents with low self-esteem.~
27. Youth presents as fearful, withdrawn, depressed, submissive, unemotional, or flat.*
28. Youth presents on edge, preoccupied with safety, or hypervigilant.*
29. Youth presents with self-harming behaviour and/or expresses suicidal ideation (i.e., thoughts about dying or ending life).*
30. Youth appears sleep deprived, or sleep is inconsistent compared to same-aged peers.*
31. Youth presents a significant and sudden change in appearance, (e.g., dress, hygiene, weight, tattoos).*
32. Youth shows signs of physical trauma (e.g., black eyes, cigarette burns, or broken bones).^

CATEGORY C: Warning Signs of Entrapment and Enmeshment

33. Youth is connected to people who are exploited (i.e., trafficked), who buy or sell sex or who are known/suspected to be sex traffickers.*
34. Youth has gang affiliation/contact (e.g., tattoos suggestive of branding or gang insignia).*
35. Youth is exposed to drugs/alcohol, and/or the buying and selling of drugs.*
36. Youth spends time in locations that are known as venues for sex trafficking (e.g., physical or online spaces where youth congregate without caregiver supervision).*
37. Youth's answers to questions about their age, whereabouts, residence, or relationships are vague or misleading.^
38. Youth describes their basic needs as being unmet (e.g., financially and/or emotionally).~
39. Youth has past or current involvement with the justice system (e.g., contact with police, involvement with criminal activities).^
40. Youth presents with substance use difficulties (e.g., appears to be under the influence, found with alcohol/ drugs).^!
41. Youth hitch-hikes or travels in cars with unknown individuals (e.g., receives or solicits drives from unknown individuals/strangers, has Ubers sent to them, has a driver).*
42. Youth has sporadic school attendance (e.g., skips multiple days or is not attending, attends to solicit other youth).*
43. Youth engages in concerning internet behaviour (e.g., posting, "sexting", chatting or meeting with strangers online possibly for sexual purposes, has been watched, filmed, or photographed in a sexually explicit manner).*!
44. Youth uses language related to sex trafficking (e.g., "the game").*
45. Youth runs away/is gone and their whereabouts are unknown (e.g., for long periods of time, frequently for short durations, unexplained absence).*

46. Youth lives outside of family/caregiver home (e.g., stays overnight at friends for extended time, periods of homelessness, unstable housing, with a boy/girlfriend), lives independently, and/or is being housed by someone who is paying for their living expenses.*!
47. Someone else is controlling the youth's ID documents and/or contact with family or friends, leaving the youth socially isolated (i.e., controlling cell phone and social media use).*!
48. Youth reports exchanging sex for money or material goods.~
49. Youth is aware that sex trafficking is a crime.~
50. Youth has large amounts of unexplained cash, or expensive items (e.g., new purses, shoes, technical devices, gift cards, groceries being assisted by strangers).*
51. Youth frequents hotel rooms and/or has hotel key cards in their possession.*
52. Youth has several cell phones.*

Note. Original items are denoted by “^”, new items are denoted by “~”, modified items are denoted by “*”, and items further modified through post hoc analyses were denoted by “!”.

Method

The current analysis was completed using secondary data analysis of semi-structured interviews with survivors of sex trafficking as part of a larger project investigating risk and recruitment for youth involved in sex trafficking. Sex trafficking of these individuals was confirmed by police records. Interviews consisted of 20 questions related to survivors' experience with sex trafficking recruitment and prevention.

Participants

Experts included survivors of sex trafficking as youth who were removed from those environments by police who initiated prosecution of the traffickers based on the survivor reports ($n = 6$). The ages of survivors ranged from 22-29 years at the time of the study. Half of the sample ($n = 3$) had direct child welfare involvement.

Participants were identified as potential interview candidates by the detective sergeant who oversaw the local Human Trafficking unit at a local police department in the Greater Toronto Area. Eligible participants for this study included survivors between the ages of 13-30 years old at the time of the study, who were not involved in the court process and had less than seven years since extraction from the sex trade. The study was introduced to potential participants using a standardized script and participants interested in learning more about the study provided their consent to be contacted by researchers. For those that wished to proceed, a mutually preferred and safe location was chosen for the interview. Further details regarding the recruitment process for this project can be found in McDonald et al., 2024.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were used for the purpose of this study (McDonald et al., 2024). All interviews were reviewed in their entirety as survivors spoke about relevant risk factors and

warning signs of sex trafficking when discussing various topics ranging from their own experience with sex trafficking as well as prevention and intervention. Some questions posed by researchers, including mental health, child welfare and justice system involvement, as well as living situation, were directly related to items on the YST screening tool. For this study, only information regarding the survivors' experience prior to and during their involvement in sex trafficking was used. As outlined by the scoring instructions, information that clearly captured an indicator was scored as either a "yes" or "no" depending on the information provided. Responses were analyzed using frequency counts. Interviews were scored by the principal researcher along with a senior research assistant. After scoring the first interview, researchers met to review and discuss the scoring approach. Following this, the remaining five interviews were scored individually, with a discussion after each to explore the coding approach and to ensure conservative and consistent scoring. These interviews were used to calculate inter-rater reliability at the test and item level. At the test level, inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa coefficient, by comparing scores for YST items reported, per survivor interview ($n = 6$), across both coders. Item level reliability was examined by comparing the number of scores agreed upon for each item, across survivors ($n = 6$), across both coders. After inter-rater reliability had been calculated, discrepancies in scoring were discussed after each interview and resolved using a consensus-based deductive process in order to determine final scoring of indicators used to calculate baseline scores for this sample.

Reportable Items

Twelve YST items were not asked about directly during the interview and therefore could not be scored. This included items regarding use of language related to sex trafficking, gender and cultural identity, self-reporting of exchanging sex for money during involvement, as well as

willingness to disclose information regarding their romantic partners prior to and/or during involvement. However, survivors discussed information related to 40 out of 52 YST items while sharing their experiences of being sex trafficked. Of these items, seven were asked directly by the interviewers and included questions about previous diagnosis of a developmental or learning disability/adhd, parental/caregiver supervision, involvement with the justice system, schooling, and living situation prior to and during their involvement, while 33 items were mentioned spontaneously by survivors during the interviews.

Results

Reliability

The inter-coder agreement at the test level, as measured by Cohen's kappa coefficient, was 74%, with an agreement of 70% or higher considered substantial (Knapp & Brown, 1995). In terms of inter-rater reliability at the item level, 77.5% of the items ($n = 31$) indicated excellent reliability ranging from 0.83 to 1. The remaining 22.5% of items ($n = 9$) indicated slight to moderate reliability ranging from 0.16 to 0.67. Of these nine items, the following two items demonstrated inter-rater reliability ranging from 0.16 to 0.33 (i.e., slight to fair): youth presents with low self-esteem and youth presents as fearful, withdrawn, depressed, submissive, unemotional, or flat. The remaining items ($n = 7$) demonstrated moderate reliability ranging from 0.50 to 0.67, and include youth feels abandoned by someone they felt connected to, youth appears sleep deprived, youth has past or current involvement in the justice system, youth has gang affiliation or contact, youth has had unstable caregivers, youth presents a significant and sudden change in appearance, and youth presents on edge, preoccupied with safety or hypervigilant.

Item Analysis

Forty YST items were endorsed overall by survivors. Table 2 shows the YST items reported by survivors. Survivors endorsed six out of the 13 background characteristics and protective factors related to financial instability, mental health challenges, and history of abuse. Notably, 100% of survivors indicated being financially unstable and 83% reported struggling with their mental health prior to their involvement. Additionally, 67% reported having had a history of physical, emotional, financial abuse, neglect or exposure to intimate partner violence.

Survivors endorsed 17 out of the 19 risk factors for recruitment including items pertaining to their relationship with family members/caregivers and peers, romantic relationships and sexual health, as well as their affect and personal appearance at the time of involvement. Notably, 100% of the sample reported having exposure to an abusive or controlling intimate partner and having had multiple sexual partners while being trafficked. Furthermore, 50% of survivors reported presenting with low self-esteem prior to and/or while being trafficked. Eighty three percent of survivors reported having peer relationships that appeared unsafe and presented as fearful, withdrawn, depressed, submissive, unemotional, or flat while being trafficked.

Lastly, survivors endorsed 17 out of the 20 warning signs of entrapment and entrenchment. Notably, 100% ($n = 6$) of the sample spontaneously endorsed the following four items: being connected to people who were exploited, or who buy or sell sex, exposure to drugs/alcohol, presenting with substance use difficulties, and spending time in locations known as venues for sex trafficking. Eighty-three percent ($n = 5$) of survivors described their basic needs as being unmet and indicated involvement with the justice system. Sixty-seven percent of survivors ($n = 4$) also indicated hitch-hiking or traveling in cars with unknown individuals, engaging in concerning internet behaviour, and living outside of their family/caregiver home

(i.e., living independently, homelessness, being housed by someone else). Furthermore, 50% of survivors ($n = 3$) indicated frequenting hotel rooms while being trafficked.

Table 3

YST Items Endorsed by Survivor Experts

CATEGORY A: Background Characteristics and Protective Factors

6. Youth is financially stable (e.g., has stable housing, caregiver is able to provide, children, pets, family obligations are met, is not being forced to give their money to someone).
7. Youth has been diagnosed with a developmental (e.g., Autism Spectrum Disorder, Intellectual Disability) or learning disability/ADHD.
9. Youth struggles with their mental health.
10. Youth feels disconnected, isolated or lacks supports related to their disability or mental health.
11. Youth has experienced sexual abuse.
12. Youth has experienced other forms of abuse (physical, emotional, financial) or neglect. Includes exposure to intimate partner violence.

CATEGORY B: Risk Factors for Recruitment

14. Parent/caregiver is unable to provide adequate supervision.
15. Youth has had unstable caregivers (i.e., high turnaround).
16. Youth is trusting of at least one adult/caregiver (e.g., biological/adoptive/foster family or adult within community).
17. Youth feels abandoned/ emotionally estranged by someone they felt connected to (e.g., biological/adoptive/foster family).
18. Youth has peer relationships that appear unsafe (e.g., peers who are a negative influence, significantly older peers, unstable peer group) and/or experiences social exclusion.
19. Youth's first sexual experience occurred at 14 years or younger.
20. Youth has had multiple sexual partners in the last year (4 or more).
23. Youth has romantic partners who are significantly older
24. Youth has been exposed to an abusive or controlling intimate partner.
25. Youth has had limited education/ knowledge of safe sex practices (e.g., sex education, contraceptives).
26. Youth presents with low self-esteem.
27. Youth presents as fearful, withdrawn, depressed, submissive, unemotional, or flat.
28. Youth presents on edge, preoccupied with safety, or hypervigilant.
29. Youth presents with self-harming behaviour and/or expresses suicidal ideation (i.e., thoughts about dying or ending life).
30. Youth appears sleep deprived, or sleep is inconsistent compared to same-aged peers.

31. Youth presents a significant and sudden change in appearance, (e.g., dress, hygiene, weight, tattoos).
32. Youth shows signs of physical trauma (e.g., black eyes, cigarette burns, or broken bones).

CATEGORY C: Warning signs of entrapment and enmeshment

33. Youth is connected to people who are exploited (i.e., trafficked), who buy or sell sex or who are known/suspected to be sex traffickers.
 34. Youth has gang affiliation/contact (e.g., tattoos suggestive of branding or gang insignia).
 35. Youth is exposed to drugs/alcohol, and/or the buying and selling of drugs.
 36. Youth spends time in locations that are known as venues for sex trafficking (e.g., physical or online spaces where youth congregate without caregiver supervision).
 37. Youth's answers to questions about their age, whereabouts, residence, or relationships are vague or misleading.
 38. Youth describes their basic needs as being unmet (e.g., financially and/or emotionally).
 39. Youth has past or current involvement with the justice system (e.g., contact with police, involvement with criminal activities).
 40. Youth presents with substance use difficulties (e.g., appears to be under the influence, found with alcohol/ drugs).
 41. Youth hitch-hikes or travels in cars with unknown individuals (e.g., receives or solicits drives from unknown individuals/strangers, has Ubers sent to them, has a driver).
 42. Youth has sporadic school attendance (e.g., skips multiple days or is not attending, attends to solicit other youth).
 43. Youth engages in concerning internet behaviour (e.g., posting, "sexting", chatting or meeting with strangers online possibly for sexual purposes, has been watched, filmed, or photographed in a sexually explicit manner).
 45. Youth runs away/is gone and their whereabouts are unknown ((e.g., for long periods of time, frequently for short durations, unexplained absence).
 46. Youth lives outside of family/caregiver home (e.g., stays overnight at friends for extended time, periods of homelessness, unstable housing, with a boy/girlfriend), lives independently, and/or is being housed by someone who is paying for their living expenses.
 47. Someone else is controlling the youth's ID documents and/or contact with family or friends, leaving the youth socially isolated (i.e., controlling cell phone and social media use).
 49. Youth is aware that sex trafficking is a crime.
 50. Youth has large amounts of unexplained cash, or expensive items (e.g., new purses, shoes, technical devices, gift cards, groceries being assisted by strangers).
 51. Youth frequents hotel rooms and/or has hotel key cards in their possession.
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Discussion

Child welfare youth are at an increased risk of being recruited for sex trafficking and there is an urgent need for a specialized screening tool for the child welfare context. As such, the first aim of this study was to construct a sex trafficking screening tool specific to the child welfare context using validated items from the literature, pre-existing screening tools confirmed with insight obtained from child welfare experts-by-experience. The second aim of this study was to explore preliminary validation of the screening tool using interviews conducted with survivors, a second group of experts-by-experience. This study contributes to the existing literature through its unique use of child welfare experts to develop this context specific screener and to ensure substantive validity for this measure. The YST was first developed by building upon prior research identifying previously validated risk factors and warning signs of sex trafficking amongst minors. Feedback obtained from child welfare experts provided support for the relevance and appropriateness of screening for previously validated risk factors and warning signs that have been identified in the literature. Feedback received from child welfare experts also indicated the need for the inclusion of new items and modifications to previously validated items for the child welfare context. Results yielded a 52-item screening tool based on feedback elicited from experts regarding the relevance of validated risk factors and warning signs of sex trafficking for the child welfare context. Items represent risk factors and warning signs along the pathway of involvement. Overall, results indicated support suggesting face, content, and utility validity for this screening tool.

Findings from this study indicated the need for context specific indicators that should be taken into consideration when screening child welfare involved youth. Experts suggested the inclusion of 16 new indicators that were missing from the original protocol using validated items

from the literature. These additions included items pertaining to the youth's background characteristics, mental and physical health, environment and exposure, caregiver history, disclosure regarding their romantic partners and involvement in sex trafficking, basic needs being unmet, as well as their awareness and knowledge regarding safe sex practices and sex trafficking. Suggestions to include these additional items provides insight into the context-specific indicators that are relevant for child welfare involved youth. For example, items related to mental and physical health as well as self-esteem are not typically included in child and adolescent specific sex trafficking screening tools; however, according to the experts in this study, these indicators are important to consider when screening for sex trafficking within the child welfare context. Youth in child welfare are more likely to present with greater mental health challenges due to the trauma and maltreatment that is often experienced (Bronsard et al., 2016; Romanelli et al., 2009). As such, supporting the mental health of youth in care is considered an important aspect of child welfare initiatives that is embedded at the federal and state levels (Romanelli et al., 2009). Furthermore, child welfare workers often have the opportunity to get to know the youth they are supporting in a different capacity compared to frontline workers in health care settings, who may face time constraints. As such, child welfare workers are likely to gather more substantial information regarding these risk factors, including the youth's mental health, as well as their self-esteem.

These valuable insights were brought to the attention of researchers through an experts by experience approach which aimed to obtain the insights of child welfare experts. Neglecting to include these context specific indicators as part of the screening process would result in potential victims not being identified. While the use of general screeners can be beneficial in certain circumstances, context specific screeners provide valuable information. Furthermore, the

literature on implementation science suggests that practitioners are unlikely to utilize psychometrically strong measures if they are not also pragmatic (Barwick et al., 2023; Glasgow & Riley, 2013). For example, if a screener is perceived as being too lengthy, irrelevant, or difficult to utilize, it will likely be considered unrealistic for use within a specific practice setting (Stanick et al., 2021). Therefore, by incorporating the feedback provided by the ultimate end users of the screening tool, namely the child welfare workers, the YST screening tool provides a measure that will be implemented within the specific context it was intended for.

Notably, item suggestions from experts included the addition of indicators across the pathway of involvement, including background characteristics and protective factors, risk factors, and warning signs of involvement. This finding suggests that experts working with child welfare youth are likely to come in contact with youth at both the earlier stages of involvement as well as those who are entrenched. Therefore, it is important for child welfare specific screening tools to take into consideration both risk factors and warning signs that are present across the pathway of involvement. These findings also provide support for using the pathway of involvement as a framework to guide the screening process by outlining the indicators that can be present across each stage.

A second unique feature of the YST, initiated based on feedback provided by the Diversity, Ethics, and Inclusion committee of the agencies involved the reframing of seven risk items to capture protective factors. While the literature examining risk factors related to sex trafficked youth is extensive, much less is known about the protective factors that combat these risks (Middleton, 2021). A study conducted by Middleton et al., (2021) comparing child trafficking screening tools used by child welfare workers across the United States found that of the 29 screening tools that were evaluated as part of their study, only 22.6% ($n = 7$) included at

least one question that addressed a protective factor. Despite the limited research on protective factors, studies have shown the significant impact of positive interpersonal relationships and systemic supports. For example, having positive and stable peer relationships can help to mitigate the negative impact of trauma experienced by exploited youth (Landers et al., 2020; O'Brien, 2018). This need was further echoed through the feedback obtained from workers and senior supervisors indicating a need for the consideration of protective factors, in addition to risk factors, when screening for sex trafficking.

Given that the presence of key protective factors can play an important role in reducing risk by building resilience for youth at risk of involvement (McDonald et al., 2023), it is necessary to consider both protective and risk factors that can inform treatment planning for the youth. As such, seven items on the YST specifically relating to racial, cultural, ethnic, gender, and sexual identity, financial stability, and the presence of a trusting relationship with an adult were reframed from risk to protective factors. Research suggests that youth from racial and ethnic minorities, and members of the LGBTQ population are more likely to experience discrimination, violence, and economic instability compared to their peers (Countryman-Roswurm, 2024; Fedina et al., 2019; Hardy et al., 2013; Hogan & Roe-Sepowitz, 2023). These barriers can significantly impact access to resources necessary for meeting one's basic needs. When youth are unable to meet their basic needs, they must resort to alternate solutions, such as the selling of sex (Hogan & Roe-Sepowitz, 2023). Conversely, youth who feel supported by their community, families, and peers are less likely to experience these types of challenges and discriminations, reducing their risk of being trafficked. Similar to findings within the literature, experts from this study also highlighted the importance of capturing positive systemic

interpersonal relationships and self-perceptions of background characteristics as important protective factors for these youth.

A second goal of this study was to explore preliminary structural and external validation of the YST by examining endorsement rates of risk factors and warning signs. This was completed through use of semi-structured interviews conducted with a second group of experts (i.e., survivors) regarding their experience prior to and during trafficking. Qualitative research provides the opportunity to obtain first-hand accounts from sex trafficking survivors; however, there are several ethical and legal considerations to interviewing survivors that create barriers (Baird & Connolly, 2025). Firstly, it is important to recognize the significant challenges and barriers that exist with identifying trafficked youth due to the transient and covert nature of sex trafficking. Individuals who have been trafficked often experience stigmatization from others as well as privacy and safety concerns which often impacts their willingness to participate in research (Baird et al., 2020; Tyldum & Brunovskis, 2005). Secondly, concerns regarding re-traumatization as well exposure to increased legal risk for survivors with traffickers who are facing criminal prosecution need to be considered (Baird & Connolly, 2025). Therefore, the vast majority of research that includes survivors of sex trafficking tends to include small samples of adults ranging in age from 20s to 60s, with the majority of participants falling toward the end of this range (Baird & Connolly, 2025). From a research perspective, survivors that have recently exited are best positioned to provide first-hand accounts of their trafficking experience that has been least altered or influenced due to the passing of time. Therefore, this study is unique in that preliminary validation of the YST was explored using information obtained from confirmed and police referred survivors with recent lived experience of sex trafficking as minors.

Results indicated substantial inter-rater reliability at the test level at 74%. This percentage indicates that the degree of agreement amongst independent users of the YST was reliable and strong, providing support for its reliability when used across multiple assessors. It is also important to consider that inter-rater reliability for this study was strong despite use of secondary data that was limited in available information used for scoring purposes. It is likely that inter-rater reliability would be even stronger when completed by assessors who know the youth personally and have access to more definitive information. Nevertheless, inter-rater reliability was strong, suggesting that results yielded by this screening tool are consistent across users. Similarly, reliability examined at the item level was also strong for 31 out of 40 reportable YST items, ranging from 0.83 to 1 overall. Items with lower reliability included terms such as “feels” or “presents”. It is likely that items that require the assessor to perceive how the youth is feeling or presenting are more challenging to rate compared to items that are more objective in nature.

YST data obtained from the survivor interviews was promising as it indicated the presence of several risk factors and warning signs across the pathway of involvement for this confirmed sample of survivors. Forty YST items representing background characteristics, risk factors, and warning signs of sex trafficking were endorsed by survivors while sharing information regarding their experience prior to and during their involvement in sex trafficking. Furthermore, seven of the items endorsed by survivors were added to the YST as a result of the feedback obtained from the child welfare experts from study one.

It is also important to note that survivors spontaneously spoke about 33 items, including risk factors and warning signs, on the YST screening tool during the interviews. Indicators that were spontaneously endorsed by experts are important to consider as they provide insight into the risk factors and warning signs deemed relevant and important to survivors when reflecting on

their personal lived experiences. Item endorsements by a confirmed group of survivors provides further support for the construct validity of the screening tool. Taken together, findings from study two provide support regarding the preliminary construct validation of the YST, including substantial inter-rater reliability as well as preliminary external validation using a sample of confirmed survivors.

Limitations

Findings from the current study should be considered in the context of certain limitations. Firstly, an overall limitation of this study is the exploratory nature of this work and the need for additional research to further validate this screening tool. This study is a first step in examining the validity of a child welfare specific screening tool. Additional examination related to other aspects of validity, including structural and external, as well further examination related to the sensitivity, specificity, negative and positive predictive values for this screener, is required before being implemented within child welfare. Secondly, in order to examine preliminary validation, the screening tool was completed using pre-collected data (study two) that did not allow the opportunity to obtain and score information pertaining to all 52 YST items. As such, the rate of several indicators on the YST were under-reported in these interviews. Thirdly, it is likely that some risk factors and indicators were underreported or misrepresented by survivors due to the passing of time since their involvement and their current participation in the interviews. Fourthly, while all participants in study two had lived experience with sex trafficking as a minor, three out of the six survivors did not have child welfare specific experience. Future studies should consider comparing the perspective of child welfare involved survivors to that of survivors without child welfare experience. Lastly, item level reliability was noted to be weaker for nine items on the YST. Due to the importance of including these items, as suggested by the

experts in this study, additional research examining the reliability of these items when examining high risk youth is needed.

Next Steps and Conclusion

The literature suggests the need for sex trafficking screening tools that capture the relevant risk factors and warning signs of involvement specific to the experiences of minors (Romero et al., 2021). More specifically, given the intersection between child welfare involvement and sex trafficking, child welfare presents as an important avenue for screening youth across all stages of involvement in order to identify those who are at risk and those who would most benefit from specialized placements and support (McDonald et al., 2024). There is a need for a child welfare specific screening tool that takes into consideration the unique experiences of these youth. For this reason, the aim of this study was to develop a screening tool using expert feedback to identify youth within child welfare who are at risk of involvement or are involved in sex trafficking. While the typical approach taken for developing a screening tool often relies heavily on psychometric analyses, the YST was developed using feedback obtained from experts by experience that allowed for the lived experiences of front-line workers and survivors to guide the development of this screening tool. Collaborating with various agencies and experts by experience ensures that this screener is both meaningful in its content and is both user-friendly and relevant to the child welfare system. Most importantly, findings from this proposed study will aid in reducing the number of youths involved in sex trafficking within child welfare.

While the preliminary validation data obtained in this study is promising as it indicates support for the context-specific items included, additional psychometric testing is needed to further validate this measure for use within the child welfare context before it can be

implemented. An important next step in this process will be to validate this screening tool through in-depth psychometric analyses by completing the YST screening tool on a sample of child welfare involved youth, including those with suspected and confirmed involvement compared to those who do not. Upon obtaining further psychometric testing, a next step in the development of this screener is to provide cut off scores that can indicate level of risk, indicating one's placement along the pathways of involvement. Once a youth is identified as high-risk, this information can help guide next step decisions including the need for further assessment and/or referrals necessary to confirm risk or involvement. This screening tool will help with early identification of these high-risk individuals, allowing for prevention and early intervention against possible exploitation

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Chapter 4: Discussion

This dissertation consists of two comprehensive studies that significantly contribute to the literature on the identification of sex trafficking risk and involvement for youth in the child welfare system. Study 1 (Chapter 2) presents a thematic analysis examining the challenges faced by child welfare workers when assessing for sex trafficking. Challenges revealed were further contextualized within the Social Ecological Model to better understand the existing interactions amongst the levels that perpetuate or negate these challenges. Study 2 (Chapter 3) presents the construction of a child welfare specific sex trafficking screening tool by building upon extensive prior research identifying risk factors and warning signs and using insight obtained from child welfare experts by experience to fine tune these items for use within the child welfare context. Preliminary validation of the screener was additionally obtained by conducting a secondary analysis of semi-structured interviews with sex trafficking survivors to further examine the appropriateness of the items included. The following sections provide a review of the results of these studies, followed by an integrative summary, clinical implications, future directions, and limitations.

Multilevel Challenges to Identifying Sex Trafficking Amongst Child Welfare Involved

Youth: A Social Ecological Systems Perspective of Child Welfare Workers: Study 1

Child welfare workers play a significant role in the identification of youth who are at risk or involved in sex trafficking, yet little is known about their assessment experiences including the challenges faced during this process. The goal of Study 1 was to explore the challenges experienced by child welfare workers when assessing for sex trafficking using a qualitative interview design. A secondary goal of this study was to locate these challenges within the Social

Ecological Model to identify the levels that were most represented and relevant to the experience of child welfare workers.

Central to our findings was the underlying belief that the assessment process is complex and requires involvement and support from several sources in addition to the youth themselves, including the child welfare agencies, the individuals that know the youth well, such as their families and community members, as well as the child welfare worker. Child welfare workers spoke about challenges previously noted in the literature, including the need for more sex trafficking training, the youth's limited knowledge and awareness of sex trafficking involvement, shame and stigma experienced with identifying as a survivor, and the covert nature of sex trafficking which renders the identification process of indicators challenging. Child welfare workers also spoke about five challenges unique to their experiences, including making assumptions regarding the youth's experience, differentiating between overlapping signs, need for collateral support, needing to develop relationships with the youth to facilitate self-disclosure, and restricted access to information as a result of their role within their agency. Furthermore, challenges noted by child welfare workers were located across the Social Ecological Model, highlighting the complexity of the assessment process, with the majority of challenges located within the individual and community levels. Findings from this study provide insight into the unique challenges faced by child welfare workers when assessing for sex trafficking and the interconnectedness of these challenges that can eliminate or perpetuate risk of involvement for youth.

Screening for Sex Trafficking in Child Welfare Agencies: Tool Development with Experts by Experience: Study 2

Detection of youth at elevated risk of trafficking is vital to the prevention of sex trafficking, yet few validated screening tools comprehensively assess risk, and none are specifically targeted for youth in the child welfare system (Romero et al., 2021). Therefore, the goal of study 2 (Chapter 3) was to construct a child welfare specific sex trafficking screening tool by following the framework outlined by Flake et al., (2017). Building on the extensive prior research identifying risk factors and warning signs and using insight obtained from experts by experience in the child welfare system, items were fine tuned for use within the child welfare context. Experts also provided insight regarding item relevance, additional risks, usability, application, and overall impressions of the screening tool. A second goal of this study was to further obtain preliminary validation of the screener by completing the screening tool using interviews with survivors of sex trafficking as minors.

Based on feedback obtained by child welfare experts, items were deleted, added, and modified. Overall, experts were supportive of the screener and indicated support for using it. They also provided support regarding the usability of the screening and suggested its applicability for use when screening youth across the pathway of sex trafficking involvement. Feedback obtained resulted in the interim version of the York Sex Trafficking (YST) Screening Tool used for this stage of this project, which includes 52 indicators of sex trafficking that are relevant to the child welfare context. Preliminary validation of the screening tool was further examined by completing the screening tool using interviews with a second group of experts, namely survivors of sex trafficking as youth. Survivors endorsed 40 of the items included in the screening tool when describing their experience of being trafficked. Overall, the YST screening

tool provides a child welfare specific screening tool that was developed in partnership with child welfare experts to accurately capture the context-specific experience of child welfare involved youth.

Integrative Synthesis

This dissertation presents new understandings on the screening of sex trafficking within child welfare, including insight into the challenges and indicators that are encountered from the perspective of child welfare workers. It also provides an in-depth look into the construction of a child welfare specific sex trafficking screening tool (The York Sex Trafficking Screening Tool; YST). Research suggests that there is a strong link between sex trafficking involvement and having a prior or current history with child welfare (Baird & Connolly, 2023; Fong & Berger Cardoso, 2010). Studies 1 and 2 of this dissertation emphasize the need for taking a highly tailored approach when screening for sex trafficking, particularly one that considers the subtle nuances of sex trafficking involvement that are specific to the experiences of child welfare involved youth.

Semi-structured interviews (Study 1) revealed that child welfare workers experience similar challenges to frontline workers in other disciplines when assessing for sex trafficking, while also experiencing context-specific challenges, including professional limitations that hinder their ability to access necessary information regarding the youth's level of risk. Child welfare workers also highlighted the need for additional training to help recognize signs of sex trafficking. They further commented on the need for a developmentally appropriate and context-specific sex trafficking tool that takes into consideration the unique experiences of child welfare involved youth. This is important given that the majority of sex trafficking screening tools are intended for screening adults (Zhang, 2022). These findings contributed directly to the

development of the YST screening tool (Study 2), a sex trafficking screening tool created for the child welfare context in partnership with child welfare experts that considers both warning signs and risk factors of sex trafficking. Feedback provided by child welfare experts through semi-structured interviews regarding previously validated risk factors and warning signs of sex trafficking for children and youth led to the modification, addition, and removal of these items to create a set of context-specific indicators of sex trafficking for the child welfare context. The items on this screening tool capture both warning signs as well as risk factors that child welfare workers have encountered, including behaviours that place youth at risk and can be observed before warning signs are present. The goal of this screening tool is to also identify the youth before they have been lured by their traffickers.

As outlined in Study 1, limited training and knowledge regarding sex trafficking makes it difficult for child welfare workers to screen for sex trafficking risk and involvement. The YST provides child welfare workers with a context-specific screening tool that brings to focus important risk factors and warning signs that would indicate concern. This in turn provides a more objective and systematized process for screening high risk youth. The inclusion of new items and modification to previously validated items underscore the need for taking a context-specific approach when examining youth at risk or involved in sex trafficking within the child welfare context.

Findings from Study 1 also revealed the multifaceted process that is assessing for sex trafficking for child welfare involved youth. A comprehensive assessment requires support from the youth, the workers and their agencies, and those who know the youth best, such as their caregivers and other community supports. This ensures that important information that might otherwise be missed is captured and considered. These findings are essential when considering

the future application of the YST (Study 2) as it emphasizes the need for taking a collaborative approach when evaluating the risk factors and warning signs. For example, if the worker is missing information that is necessary for the screening process, they should be encouraged to reach out to the youth's family or caregivers, as well the youth themselves to gather this information. Taking this approach will also help to address challenges that arise when screening for less observable and more subjective signs of sex trafficking (Study 1). As such, findings from Study 1 identify the challenges that should be addressed in order to support a more comprehensive assessment of sex trafficking amongst youth.

Theoretical Lens

This dissertation further supports the idea that vulnerability of sex trafficking involvement for youth extends beyond individual factors and needs to be considered from a social ecological perspective. Finigan-Carr and colleagues (2019) provide a theoretical adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Model by providing a multi-level approach to understanding sex trafficking involvement that examines how risk factors at four levels contribute to increased risk of youth sex trafficking: 1) societal level (i.e., macro-level processes such as health, economic, educational, and social policies), 2) community level (i.e., community contexts where social relationships occur), 3) relationship/interpersonal level (i.e., the impact of individual factors on relationships), and 4) individual/intrapersonal level (i.e., individual factors that influence how the youth behaves), with social norms existing and interacting at all levels.

In addition to using this model to understanding increased risk for youth, findings from Study 1 revealed that the Social Ecological Model can be extended and used to understand the challenges faced by child welfare workers when assessing for sex trafficking risk and involvement. At the societal level, child welfare workers described the need for more sex

trafficking awareness. At the community level, challenges at the agency level, such as limitations experienced due to the worker's professional role were noted. At the relational/interpersonal level, lacking a relationship with the youth was mentioned as a barrier that impedes the information gathering process. Lastly, at the individual level, child welfare workers spoke about challenges personally faced when trying to accurately assess the signs of sex trafficking involvement, such as the need to make assumptions about the youth. That being said, the majority of challenges reported by child welfare workers were located within the community and individual levels. Adopting this framework allows researchers to consider how these challenges are situated across complex social ecological systems and to explore the levels that are most impacted by these challenges.

The development of the YST screening tool involved careful consideration of previously validated indicators found within the literature. The interim version of the YST screening tool used for this phase of the research consists of 52 indicators that cover risk factors and warning signs that can also be located across the four levels of the Social Ecological Model. At the societal level, the YST includes items pertaining to sex trafficking awareness and education (e.g., Youth is aware that sex trafficking is a crime). At the community level, the YST includes items that capture risk occurring within the community context, such as school attendance and community exposure to risk including environments and people that may promote involvement (e.g., Youth has sporadic school attendance). At the relational/interpersonal level, the YST includes items that capture information about the youth's relationships with their caregivers, family members, and peers that can increase risk (e.g., Parent/caregiver is unable to provide adequate supervision). Lastly, at the individual level, the YST includes items that capture individual factors that can influence the youth's behaviours, including gender, cultural, and

sexuality identity (e.g., Youth positively identifies with their racial background). It is also important to note that several indicators on the YST can be located across multiple levels within the Social Ecological Model (e.g., Youth identifies with their gender identity), further reinforcing the interconnectedness of these various levels and of the risk factors that increase risk.

Clinical Implications and Next Steps

Although a strong link exists between child welfare involvement and sex trafficking amongst youth, there is limited empirical research necessary for informing anti-sex trafficking initiatives (Baird & Connolly, 2023). More specifically, there is a lack of research regarding the experience of child welfare workers when screening for sex trafficking involvement, a crucial step in addressing this public health issue. Furthermore, there is also a need for a child welfare specific sex trafficking screening tool that takes into consideration the unique experiences of child welfare involved youth. These two studies highlight the importance of the assessment process as a first step in protecting children and youth against sex trafficking involvement. Findings from this dissertation are important as they provide insight into potential areas of challenge experienced by child welfare workers. Addressing these challenges will lead to more accurate identification of youth who are at risk or involved in sex trafficking.

Agencies working to support child welfare involved youth should continue to provide training opportunities aimed at enlightening staff on the risk factors and warning signs that they are likely to encounter when working with their youth. It is also necessary for child welfare agencies to recognize the professional limitations that their workers experience during the assessment process and to address these barriers to the best of their ability. This may include ensuring full access to necessary documents and resources needed and/or access to other child

welfare personnel working with the youth. Furthermore, efforts should also be placed to encourage the development of trusting relationships with the youth and their families.

Given the intersection between child welfare involvement and sex trafficking, child welfare presents as an important avenue for screening youth across all stages of involvement to identify those who are at risk and those who would most benefit from support. Currently, there is a lack of sex trafficking screening tools that are specific for the child welfare context. The YST screening tool will present child welfare workers with a systematic way of assessing for context specific risk factors and warning signs of sex trafficking. The YST screening tool will help with early identification of high-risk individuals, allowing for prevention and early intervention against possible exploitation, by guiding next steps for high risk or involved youth. For example, based on the information gleaned from this screening tool, further assessment or referrals to explore level of risk and involvement can be made. As such, the YST screening tool has the potential to be used broadly within multiple child welfare agencies across Ontario and beyond. Most importantly, findings from this dissertation will aid in reducing the number of youths involved in sex trafficking within child welfare.

An important next step in the development of the YST will be to further validate this screening tool through in-depth psychometric analyses. This will be done by obtaining YST scores from a larger sample of child welfare involved youth by including those with both suspected and confirmed involvement. Doing so will provide cut off scores that can be used to identify a youth's placement along the pathway of involvement.

Limitations

As previously noted in each of the chapters, the findings from this dissertation should be considered within the context of several limitations. With regards to the challenges experienced

by child welfare workers when assessing for sex trafficking, future research should consider including the perspective of child welfare workers when reflecting on the placement of the challenges within the various levels of the adapted Social Ecological Model by Finigan-Carr et al., (2019). The perspective of child welfare involved survivors should also be considered when understanding the assessment challenges occurring within child welfare. Doing so will provide further insight into why these challenges occur, particularly those that impede youth self-disclosure, which further impacts the assessment process for child welfare workers.

The construction of the YST screening tool presents as a first step in examining the validity of a child welfare specific screening tool. Firstly, an overall limitation of this study is the exploratory nature of this work. Further research is needed to examine the tools psychometric properties prior to being implemented for use amongst child welfare agencies. Secondly, preliminary validation of the YST was obtained using pre-collected data that did not capture information regarding all items included on the YST. As such, it is likely that several indicators on the YST were under-reported by survivors during these interviews. Thirdly, despite the younger age of the survivors in this study, due to the passing of time since their involvement and their current participation in the interviews, it is likely that some risk factors and indicators were under-reported or misrepresented by survivors. Fourthly, half of the survivors in this study did not have child welfare experience. Lastly, further examination of the YST items presenting with weaker inter-rater reliability at the item level should be conducted to determine their appropriateness as part of a context-specific screening tool.

Summary

Overall, there is a clear need to take a context specific approach to understanding and addressing the assessment of sex trafficking within the child welfare context. This present

dissertation identified the specific challenges faced by child welfare workers that impact the societal, community, relational, and individual levels of the greater social ecological system that the child welfare worker and youth are embedded within. The YST Screening Tool was developed in partnership with child welfare experts to address the need for a context-specific screening tool that takes into consideration the child welfare contexts. The York Sex Trafficking Screening tool includes 52 indicators of sex trafficking, specific to the child welfare context, that captures risk factors and warning signs along the pathway of sex trafficking involvement including background risk factors, recruitment, entrapment, and enmeshment stages. Overall, this dissertation contributes to clinical research and practice by understanding the experience of child welfare workers in order to better support youth in the child welfare system that may be at risk of or involved in sex trafficking.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A

References reviewed for the development of the YST

Reference	Purpose	Sample
Fedina, L., Williamson, C., & Perdue, T. (2019).	This study aims to retrospectively examine associations between multiple risk factors and domestic child sex trafficking (i.e., entry into the commercial sex industry under the age of 18).	Individuals 16 and older involved in the commercial sex industry (N = 273).
Romero, D. E., Interiano-Shiverdecker, C. G., Castellon, N. E., & Strentzsch, J. (2021).	A review of child sex trafficking instruments.	---
Choi, K. R. (2015).	Literature review examining risk factors for domestic minor sex trafficking in the United States.	---
Panlilio, C. C., Miyamoto, S., Font, S. A., & Schreier, H. M. (2019).	Assessing risk of commercial sexual exploitation among children involved in the child welfare system.	CPS and Long-term foster care cohort taken from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW).
Fong, R., & Cardoso, J. B. (2010)	Review article examining child human trafficking and child welfare.	--
Lanctôt, N., Reid, J. A., & Laurier, C. (2020).	This study aimed to assess differences in the level of post-traumatic symptoms reported by those who experienced CSEC during adolescence and those who did not.	The study used longitudinal data collected from 125 French-speaking female adolescents who were placed in residential centers between the ages 12 and 17 years.
Landers, M., McGrath, K., Johnson, M. H., Armstrong, M. I., & Dollard, N. (2017).	This article presents data on the demographic characteristics, trauma history, mental and behavioral health needs, physical health needs, and strengths of commercially sexually exploited youth.	87 commercially sexually exploited youth. These youth were served in a specialized treatment program in Miami-Dade County, Florida, for exploited youth involved with the child welfare system.

Franchino-Olsen, H. (2021).	Systematic review of risk factors of sex trafficking involvement.	---
Chohaney, M. L. (2016).	Risk factors specific to sex trafficking in Ohio.	Street-based sex workers ($N = 328$).
Reid, J. (2014)	The aims of this study were to examine variables associated with adolescent versus adult onset of commercial sexual exploitation and identify potential risk and resiliency factors differentiating adolescence-limited sexual exploitation and early-onset-adult persistent exploitation.	Interviews with 174 women, 23% of whom reported commercial sexual exploitation in adolescence and/or adulthood.
Reid, J. A., & Piquero, A. R. (2016).	Drawing from Agnew's general strain theory, this study utilized multigroup structural equation modeling to explore similarities and differences in vulnerability to CSE across gender.	1,354 youthful offenders, 8.4% of whom indicated CSE.
Reid, J. A., & Jones, S. (2011)	A review of the historical, neurological, and developmental vulnerabilities typical of child sex trafficking victims.	---
Greenbaum, V. J., Dodd, M., & McCracken, C. (2015)	Evaluation of a tool to identify child sex trafficking victims in healthcare settings.	108 study participants, 25 comprised the CSEC/CST Group, and 83 comprised the ASA group. Average (SD) age was 15.4 (1.8) years for CSEC/CST patients and 14.8 (1.6) years for ASA patients.
Greenbaum, V. J., Livings, M. S., Lai, B. S., Edinburgh, L., Baikie, P., Grant, S. R., ... & Self-Brown, S. (2018).	Evaluation of a tool to identify child sex trafficking victims in healthcare settings.	Youth ages 11-17 years, patients seeking medical support. For emergency department sites, inclusion criteria included a chief complaint of sexual violence.
Benavente, B., Bully, P., & Ballester, L. (2024).	Systematic search of instruments for the early identification of risk of sexual exploitation in children (CSE) and appraise their metric properties.	---

Nichols, A. J., & Cox, A. (2023)	The present study specifically examines providers' observations of 62 sex trafficking indicators comparing minor and adult service populations.	Responses of providers working with sex trafficking survivors ($N = 86$), comparing minor and adult service populations ($n = 47$) in a Midwestern metropolitan area
Gerassi, L. B., Cruys, C., Hendry, N., & del Carmen Rosales, M. (2023).	The purpose of this study is to determine whether and how providers observe relevant indicators and assess for sex trafficking risk among minors (ages 12-17), young adults (ages 18-29), and families of minors.	Participants ($N = 267$) were asked whether they provided direct services to minors (ages 12-17, $n = 245$), adults (ages 18-29, $n = 148$), and/or families/foster families of minors (ages 12-17, $n = 163$), resulting in three respective client groups.
Interiano-Shiverdecker, C. G., Romero, D. E., Anderson, A., & Castellon, N. E. (2022).	A content analysis of sex trafficking instruments (children and adults).	---
Panlilio, C. C., Dierkhising, C. B., Richardson, J., & Runner, J. (2022).	Evaluation of the classification accuracy of a screener developed for the purpose of this study, guided by the Sexual Exploitation among Youth (SEY) risk assessment framework.	Used in practice with child welfare-involved young people.
Prakash, J., Goel, R., Mu, Y., Rosner, B., & Stoklosa, H. (2024).	Evaluation of a CW screening tool to identify female sex trafficking victims.	Female child welfare involved youth.
De Vries, I., Kafafian, M., Goggin, K., Bouchard, E., Goldfarb, S., & Farrell, A. (2020).	The current study applied predictive regularization methods to identify the most decisive risk items for CSEC.	317 youths who were referred to a specialized program in the Northeast of the United States due to suspicion of CSEC.
Raj, A., Baird, G. L., Moore, J. L., & Barron, C. E. (2019).	Aim of this study was to estimate previously identified predictors of DMST using a case-control design.	Sample of 36 confirmed DMST patients and a matched pair from a general pediatric primary care clinic at a tertiary academic institution.
Identifying and Responding to America's Prostituted Youth INTERVINE Tool; Shared Hope (2010).	Screening Tool- not published	DMST for all youth ages 12-20.

Child Guidance Clinic's Sex Trafficking Assessment Review (STAR) (2018)	Screening Tool- not published	A brief (12-item), objective, and nonintrusive CSEC screening alternative.
Dank, M. L., Yahner, J., Yu, L., Vasquez-Noriega, C., Gelatt, J., Pergamit, M. R., & Center, J. P. (2017).	Screening Tool- not published	Human trafficking screening tool for child welfare and runaway and homeless youth.
Commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC): Screening tool. Collaborative Response Team, (2015)	Screening Tool- not published	A universal screening tool to identify commercial sexual exploitation in at-risk youth ages 11 to 18.
Commercial Sexual Exploitation-identification tool (CSE-IT); Basson, (2017)	Screening Tool	Identifies youth ages 18 and younger who have current or previous history of commercial sexual exploitation.
Human Trafficking Screening Tool (HTST) (2015)- Florida Institute for Child Welfare	Screening Tool- not published	Child welfare and juvenile justice involved youth.
State of Florida- Human Trafficking of Children Indicator Tool (HTCIT), (2009)	Screening Tool- not published	Children, age not specified.

APPENDIX B

YST Interview Script

1. Introduction to study

Thank you for participating in our study! Thank you for completing the consent form- do you have any questions?

2. YST

Before we start reviewing the screening tool, we would like to ask you a few questions about your experience in the CAS field:

Name of worker:

Job title:

Length of time in the child welfare field:

Prior training in ST:

Prior experience in ST:

The following tool describes the type of activities that are considered high risk for sex trafficking based on previous tools and academic literature. However, we know that there are items that the literature might not capture. We would like you, as the expert, to draw on your real-life experiences and imagine that you are completing this risk assessment tool on youth that you have supported, based on the information you already have about them. We hope that going through this process will allow you to identify sex trafficking risk items for this tool that are important, not relevant, missing, or that could be worded differently. To start, I would like you to take a couple of minutes to review the tool. Following this, I will be asking you about the items that you foresee as being difficult and easy to provide an impression for. As you review the items, please do your best to "think out loud" and walk us through your thought process.

I will now share my screen and the screening tool with you. Please let me know when you are done reviewing it.

**SHARE YOUR SCREEN AND ALLOW THE PARTICIPANT TO REVIEW THE TOOL (2 mins).
LISTEN FOR ANY COMMENTS SHARED WHILE REVIEWING**

****AFTER PARTICIPANT HAS REVIEWED YST****

C. Review Content

After reviewing the screening tool:

- 1. Which item/s could you foresee as being difficult to provide an impression for based on your role? How about within the context of CAS more generally? Why?
Cover: Items that you might not have information about?*
- 2. Which item/s could you foresee as being easy to provide an impression for based on your role? How about within the context of CAS more generally? Why?*

Cover: Items that you would have information about? Based on your experience? Any wording/items that were helpful?

3. *Are there any risk factors/items that are not currently included on the YST that you believe should be included? Any categories?*
4. *Given your clinical experience, overall, which of the risk factors included on the YST do you think are most indicative of whether an individual is at risk of sex trafficking?*
5. *Are there any terms or wording used anywhere on the YST that you would change?*
PROMPT: Any wording/items that were unhelpful? How about the category names?
NOTE: could also include more appropriate wording

D. USEABILITY

Thank you for providing your feedback on the content. I would now like to get your feedback on the useability of the screening tool:

6. *What did you like about the YST?*
PROMPT: layout? Items? Etc.
7. *What did you dislike about the YST? What would you change?*
PROMPT: layout? Items? Etc.

E. APPLICATION

8. *How do you envision this tool being used within your agency?*
Cover: Who would use it (e.g., intake workers, protection workers, etc.)?
Can also prompt: With certain girls or certain situations?
9. *Is there anything else that you would like us to know regarding your experience reviewing this screening tool, or the risk factors associated with sex trafficking?*
Cover: any comments?

APPENDIX C

Protocol Version of the York Sex Trafficking Screening Tool

	No information	No concern	Possible concern	Clear concern
Demographic Risk Factors				
a. Youth feels disconnected from cultural community				
b. Youth struggles with their cultural identity				
c. Youth struggles with their gender identity				
d. Youth has been diagnosed with a developmental disability (e.g., ID, LD, ADHD, Autism)				
e. Youth identifies with Indigenous heritage				
Experience of Injury, Violence, and Abuse				
a. Youth has been physically abused (e.g., signs including bruises/cuts)				
b. Youth has been a victim of sexual abuse				
c. Youth has been emotionally abused/ neglected				
d. Youth has been exposed to severe violence (e.g., family, community)				
Relationships with Adults, Family and Peers				
a. Youth is distrusting of adults (e.g., will not disclose information to adults, very secretive)				
b. Youth feels abandoned by biological family				
c. Parent/caregiver is unable to provide adequate supervision				
d. Someone else is controlling the youth's contact with family or friends, leaving the youth socially isolated				
e. Youth has unhealthy peer relationships, including deviant friends, and/or experiences social exclusion				
Romantic Relationships and Sexual Health				
a. Youth has romantic partners who are significantly older (e.g., 4 or more years older)				
b. Youth has been treated or tested for having multiple STIs				
c. Youth has had multiple sexual partners in the last year (e.g., 4 or more)				
d. Youth's first sexual experience occurred at 14 years or younger				
e. Youth has an abusive or controlling intimate partner				
Environment and Exposure				
a. Youth spends time where exploitation is known to occur				

	No information	No concern	Possible concern	Clear concern
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b. Youth uses language related to sex trafficking

c. Youth is connected to people who are exploited, or who buy or sell sex

d. Youth has gang affiliation/contact that involves unsafe sexual encounters

e. Youth gives vague or misleading information about their age, whereabouts, residence or relationships

Engagement in Risky Behaviours

a. Youth presents with substance abuse difficulties (e.g., *appears to be under the influence, found with alcohol/ drugs*)

b. Youth has past or current involvement with the justice system (e.g., *contact with police, involvement with criminal activities*)

c. Youth demonstrates pattern of running away from home

d. Youth hitch-hikes or travels in cars with unknown individuals (e.g., *receives or solicits drives from random acquaintances or unknown individuals/strangers*)

e. Youth lived outside of the home with friends (e.g., *stays over night at friends for extended time or periods of homelessness*)

f. Youth has poor school attendance (e.g., *skips multiple days or is not attending*)

g. Youth engages in concerning internet behaviour (e.g., *“sexting”, looking at porn, chatting or meeting with strangers online possibly for sexual purposes*)

h. Youth is watched, filmed or photographed in a sexually explicit manner

Youth Affect and Personal Appearance

a. Youth’s affect appears fearful, withdrawn, depressed or submissive

b. Youth appears on edge, preoccupied with safety, or hypervigilant

c. Youth presents with suicidal ideation (i.e., *thoughts about dying or ending life*)

d. Youth appears sleep deprived, or sleep is inconsistent

e. Youth presents a significant change in appearance, (e.g., *dress, hygiene, weight*)

f. Youth shows signs of physical trauma (e.g., *black eyes, cigarette burns, or broken bones*)

g. Youth has signs of branding or gang insignia (e.g., *tattoos suggestive of branding/gang affiliation*)

Personal Belongings, Money and Goods

a. Youth has large amounts of cash, or expensive items (e.g., *new purses, shoes, technical devices*)

b. Youth has hotel room fobs or cards in their possession

c. Youth has several cell phones or changes their cell phone number frequently

d. Youth struggles financially

Suspicion of sex trafficking as part of referral?

Please indicate your level of concern for this girl

APPENDIX D

Interim Version of the York Sex Trafficking Screening Tool (YST)

For each item listed below, using your clinical judgement, please check one of the following options: **“No Info”** (i.e., information not available to make a judgement), **“No”** (i.e., information available and definitively not present), **“Maybe”** (i.e., information available and might be present), or **“Yes”** (i.e., information available and definitively present).

CATEGORY A: Background Characteristics and Protective Factors

1. Demographic Protective Factors	No Info	No	Maybe	Yes
a. Youth positively identifies with their racial background.				
b. Youth positively identifies with their ethnic and/or ancestral background.				
c. Youth positively identifies with or is well connected to their cultural community.				
d. Youth feels supported in their gender identity.				
e. Youth feels supported in their sexual identity.				
f. Youth is financially stable (e.g., has stable housing, caregiver is able to provide, children, pets, family obligations are met, is not being forced to give their money to someone).				
NOTES		/6	/6	/6

Physical/ Mental Health	No Info	No	Maybe	Yes
a. Youth has been diagnosed with a developmental (e.g., Autism Spectrum Disorder, Intellectual Disability) or learning disability/ADHD.				
b. Youth has been diagnosed with a physical disability.				
c. Youth struggles with their mental health.				
d. Youth feels disconnected, isolated or lacks supports related to their disability or mental health.				
NOTES			/4	/4

Experience of Familial/Caregiver Injury, Violence, Abuse and Trauma	No Info	No	Maybe	Yes
a. Youth has experienced sexual abuse.				

b. Youth has experienced other forms of abuse (physical, emotional, financial) or neglect. Includes exposure to intimate partner violence.				
c. Youth has experienced loss/death of a family member/caregiver.				
NOTES	SUBSCORE TOTAL:		/3	/3
	CATEGORY A TOTAL SCORE:		/13	/13

CATEGORY B Risk Factors for Recruitment

Relationships with Adults, Family and Peers	No Info	No	Maybe	Yes
a. Parent/caregiver is unable to provide adequate supervision.				
b. Youth has had unstable caregivers (i.e., high turnaround).				
c. Youth is trusting of at least one adult/caregiver (e.g., biological/adoptive/foster family or adult within community).				
d. Youth feels abandoned/ emotionally estranged by someone they felt connected to (e.g., biological/adoptive/foster family).				
e. Youth has peer relationships that appear unsafe (e.g., peers who are a negative influence, significantly older peers, unstable peer group) and/or experiences social exclusion.				
NOTES	SUBSCORE TOTAL:		/5	/5

Romantic Relationships and Sexual Health	No Info	No	Maybe	Yes
a. Youth's first sexual experience occurred at 14 years or younger.				
b. Youth has had multiple sexual partners in the last year (4 or more).				
c. Youth is non-disclosing when it comes to sharing about their romantic partner.				
d. Youth has been treated or tested for having multiple STIs/UTIs (e.g., kidney infections).				
e. Youth has romantic partners who are significantly older (e.g., significant age gap between youth and romantic partner- 4 or more years).				
f. Youth has been exposed to an abusive or controlling intimate partner.				
g. Youth has had limited education/ knowledge of safe sex practices (e.g., sex education, contraceptives).				
NOTES	SUBSCORE TOTAL:		/7	/7

Youth Affect and Personal Appearance	No Info	No	Maybe	Yes
a. Youth presents with low self-esteem.				

b. Youth presents as withdrawn, depressed, submissive, unemotional, or flat.				
c. Youth presents on edge, preoccupied with safety, fearful, or hypervigilant.				
d. Youth presents with self-harming behaviour and/or expresses suicidal ideation (i.e., thoughts about dying or ending life).				
e. Youth appears sleep deprived, or sleep is inconsistent compared to same-aged peers.				
f. Youth presents a significant and sudden change in appearance, (e.g., dress, hygiene, weight, tattoos).				
g. Youth shows signs of physical trauma (e.g., black eyes, cigarette burns, or broken bones).				
NOTES	SUBSCORE TOTAL:		<i>/7</i>	<i>/7</i>
	CATEGORY B TOTAL SCORE:		<i>/19</i>	<i>/19</i>

CATEGORY C: Warning Signs of Entrapment and Enmeshment

Systemic Exposure	No Info	No	Maybe	Yes
a. Youth is connected to people who are exploited (i.e., trafficked), who buy or sell sex or who are known/suspected to be sex traffickers.				
b. Youth has gang affiliation/contact (e.g., tattoos suggestive of branding or gang insignia).				
c. Youth is exposed to drugs/alcohol, and/or the buying and selling of drugs.				
d. Youth spends time in locations that are known as venues for sex trafficking (e.g., physical or online spaces where youth congregate without caregiver supervision).				
e. Youth's answers to questions about their age, whereabouts, residence, or relationships are vague or misleading.				
f. Youth describes their basic needs as being unmet (e.g., financially and/or emotionally).				
g. Youth has past or current involvement with the justice system (e.g., contact with police, involvement with criminal activities)				
NOTES	SUBSCORE TOTAL:		<i>/7</i>	<i>/7</i>

Concerning Behaviours	No Info	No	Maybe	Yes
a. Youth presents with substance use difficulties (e.g., appears to be under the influence, found with alcohol/ drugs).				
b. Youth hitch-hikes or travels in cars with unknown individuals (e.g., receives or solicits drives from unknown individuals/strangers, has Ubers sent to them, has a driver).				

c. Youth has sporadic school attendance (e.g., skips multiple days or is not attending, attends to solicit other youth).				
d. Youth engages in concerning internet behaviour (e.g., posting, “sexting”, chatting or meeting with strangers online possibly for sexual purposes, has been watched, filmed, or photographed in a sexually explicit manner)				
e. Youth uses language related to sex trafficking (e.g., “the game”).				
f. Youth runs away/is gone and their whereabouts are unknown ((e.g., for long periods of time, frequently for short durations, unexplained absence).				
g. Youth lives outside of family/caregiver home (e.g., stays overnight at friends for extended time, periods of homelessness, unstable housing, with a boy/girlfriend), lives independently, and/or is being housed by someone who is paying for their living expenses.				
h. Someone else is controlling the youth’s ID documents and/or contact with family or friends, leaving the youth socially isolated (i.e., controlling cell phone and social media use)				
I. Youth reports exchanging sex for money or material goods.				
J. Youth is aware that sex trafficking is a crime.				
NOTES	SUBSCORE TOTAL:		/10	/10

Personal Belongings, Money and Goods	No Info	No	Maybe	Yes
a. Youth has large amounts of unexplained cash, or expensive items (e.g., new purses, shoes, technical devices, gift cards, groceries being assisted by strangers).				
b. Youth frequents hotel rooms and/or has hotel key cards in their possession.				
c. Youth has several cell phones.				
NOTES	SUBSCORE TOTAL:		/3	/3
CATEGORY C TOTAL SCORE:			/20	/20

NEXT STEPS

Which of the systems within the youth’s life are acting as risk factors? Check all that apply:
Youth Interpersonal Community Societal

Which of the systems within the youth’s life are acting as protective factors? Check all that apply:
Youth Interpersonal Community Societal