

# HARM REDUCTION SERIES

## INTRODUCTION

2018

CHILD TRAFFICKING  
RESPONSE UNIT



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# Foreword

SB 855 (2014) and AB 1760 (2016) established as California policy that a child who has been sexually trafficked is a victim, not a perpetrator, of a crime. The response to their situation is to be protection, care and treatment – the services of the child welfare system.

However, translating that policy into practice confronts the challenge presented by many conditions: recovery and healing does not occur immediately, nor consistently, and is not fully within the control of the most capable and committed caregiver.

When “relapse” refers to a low-level illness, it is thought of as unfortunate. When it describes a child leaving a place of safety, reconnecting with an exploiter, and placing themselves in what may be grave physical as well as psychological danger, it offends every instinct of a responsible adult – whether professional, caregiver, or parent. And with that sense of offense is the real danger that since we cannot ensure the protection of the victimized child, we may decline to engage them because of the risk to our own reputations.

But our response cannot be “*If we can’t control you, we can’t help you.*”

As the State, our counties and our service providers develop and implement our programs and skills to serve trafficked children, we have to do so within the practice framework of harm reduction – the willingness to offer service and support to a trafficked child, not as enabling continued victimization, but as the environment in which the young person gains the sense of belonging, and self and agency to disconnect from their exploiters. It will take some victims longer than others. It will sometimes break our hearts. But the most important thing is to assure our caregivers that they are right, and we have their backs when they say “*As much as we wish you would not go back out there, we want you to know you can still come back here. This is your home.*”

“

***As much as we wish you would not go back out there, we want you to know you can still come back here. This is your home.”***

Will Lightbourne



Director, California Department of Social Services

# Background



Over the past five years there has been a dramatic shift in the understanding of the Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE) of children in California. The CSE of children is defined as a commercial sex act where anything of value is given to the child, including the provision of food, shelter, or payment, in exchange for the performance of a sexual act. This growing awareness resulted in changes in state law, including [Senate Bill \(SB\) 855](#) (Statutes of 2014, Chapter 29), [SB 794](#) (Statutes of 2015, Chapter 425), [SB 1322](#) (Statutes of 2016, Chapter 654) and [Assembly Bill 1227](#) (Statutes of 2017, Chapter 558).

These statutory changes recognize these children as victims rather than criminals, and identify the need for a wide array of services to address their complex needs. In order to implement these changes and effectively serve this population, agencies and providers need guidance on strategies to build on the strength and resiliency of these youth, utilize their agency and voice in decision making, and meet them where they are in their path towards safety, independence and opportunity.

Unfortunately, many of the traditional approaches to addressing child abuse in the context of the child welfare system, alone, have been ineffective in meeting the needs of commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC). Recognizing the need for innovative, trauma informed practice-based solutions, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) began researching relevant evidence-based practices for serving CSEC. Unable to identify any, the CDSS identified several promising approaches—all of which incorporate harm reduction principles and strategies.

Thus, the CDSS has partnered with a small group of subject-matter experts to further explore harm reduction strategies and their application to CSEC. Through this process, the CDSS and their stakeholder partners strongly encourage the use of a harm reduction approach when working with this population.

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## The Harm Reduction Guidance Series



To further define harm reduction and its application to CSEC and guide providers' interactions and interventions utilizing harm reduction principles, the CDSS is creating a CSEC harm reduction guidance series. This document, the first in the series, will provide background on the harm reduction approach, its benefits and limitations, how it has been applied to CSEC, and some practical strategies that can be immediately incorporated into practice. Subsequent guidance in this series will provide examples of how harm reduction strategies can be utilized within specific practitioner roles. These roles will include: social workers, probation officers, caregivers, law enforcement, mental health clinicians, health care practitioners, survivor advocates/mentors, educators, the courts, and attorneys. The series will conclude with guidance detailing the systemic adoption of a harm reduction approach.

# History of the Harm Reduction Approach

Harm reduction is a framework to approach policy and practices utilized in meeting the needs of a group of people engaged in unsafe behavior or circumstances.<sup>1</sup> The harm reduction approach was first developed in the 1980s and was most commonly used with adults who engaged in substance abuse/misuse and in risky sexual behavior.<sup>2</sup> Harm reduction was introduced as an alternative to abstinence—focusing on decreasing the negative impact of risky behaviors that can lead to harm, rather than attempting to immediately eliminate the behaviors altogether.

Harm reduction is grounded in the principle that the individuals receiving and engaging in services, children in this context, are the central practitioners of harm reduction. The programs and service providers are the facilitators, whose role is to connect those children to the appropriate individualized programs and services. The framework acknowledges the child's own authority and centers that child in decision making.

In utilizing a harm reduction approach, practitioners (e.g. social workers, probation officers, etc.) and their agency/organization must understand that CSEC will likely continue to engage in risk-taking behaviors, such as using substances or having unprotected sex, while

accessing services. This must be viewed through the harm reduction lens and seen as a way for the individual to maintain some control when much of their autonomy has been taken away by their exploiters and even the systems that seek to serve them.<sup>3</sup>

The harm reduction approach is both a philosophy to be adopted systemically, as well as a practice to employ directly with the target population. In order to reduce the incidence of commercial sexual exploitation among children and youth in California, agencies and organizations must adopt the philosophical foundation of harm reduction and practitioners must begin collectively employing harm reduction practices.

This requires leadership support and understanding within agencies, as well as guidance to line staff on how to employ the approach directly with youth. Using a harm reduction framework allows for an analysis of the underlying reasons why individuals are engaging in the risk-taking behavior such as broader system failure, poverty and racism, among others. This allows practitioners to begin exploring why youth are leaving care, what needs remain unmet and what structural barriers exist that impede youths' progress. By identifying these reasons, both the systems as well as the line workers can begin addressing these children's needs.



**“ It is essential that practitioners create opportunities for choice and more importantly, opportunities to meet the totality of a youth's needs, not just those that are met through the exploitive situation. ”**

# Tension of Utilizing a Harm Reduction Approach

Utilizing a harm reduction approach acknowledges that change is difficult, and that it may take a period of time before a youth is willing or able to leave an exploitive situation. Employing the harm reduction approach acknowledges that unsafe behavior will continue while a youth is engaging with services, and “waiting for young people to want to change poses particular difficulties for practitioners with responsibilities for keeping young people safe.”<sup>4</sup> As such, providers using harm reduction will continue to engage and serve youth who are still being exploited and are actively interacting with purchasers and traffickers. This may seem like a departure from the traditional approach to serving high needs youth, specifically within child welfare and juvenile justice. The approach may appear contrary to the goals of safety given the intent is not to immediately eliminate risky behaviors entirely, but rather to reduce them over time.

This creates a tension with the helping professions—social workers, mental health clinicians, and probation officers, among others—whose objective is to protect and connect youth to services.

Despite these difficulties, there is a recognition that utilizing the harm reduction approach with youth abused through CSE can have long-term benefits.<sup>5</sup> Given what has been learned over the years in the context of domestic violence and abuse, a rescue mentality that seeks to immediately remove an individual from an abusive relationship has proven ineffective.<sup>6</sup> What has worked is encouraging help-seeking behaviors and developing trusting relationships. Research has shown that, with these skills and relationships, individuals will exert their agency when they are ready and reach out to a trusted individual for support when it is appropriate for them.



The harm reduction approach reflects a paradigm shift in service delivery, allowing for youth to be the curators of their own safety, including how they define safety. It involves promoting self-determination and essentially assisting youth in gaining, or re-establishing, their own sense of power. System-involved youth are accustomed and often conditioned to others, including agencies and caregivers, holding power and control over their lives. It is no surprise that this same dynamic occurs within an exploitive situation and is part of the draw that keeps them in those situations.

It is essential that practitioners create opportunities for choice and more importantly, opportunities to meet the totality of a youth’s needs, not just those that are met through the exploitive situation. Focus should remain on the youth as a whole—their interests, dreams and needs, and not solely what they have experienced as a result of their victimization. We can no longer deliver services to youth but through them; with them, in partnership.<sup>7</sup>

# Application to Commercial Sexual Exploitation

Since its development, harm reduction has been applied to a wide variety of issues, and recently has been recognized as a promising strategy for serving youth abused through CSE. Harm reduction within the context of CSE, must address associated behaviors and risk factors that are often present in exploitive situations such as limited resources, unsafe relationships, substance use, risky sexual encounters, or running away, as opposed to focusing exclusively on the exploitation itself. The approach is not intended to change the person, but reduce the reliance or desire to engage in an exploitive situation. A young person may be open to accepting help, but still not be in a place to acknowledge their victimization. Thus, a harm reduction approach is aimed at reducing the impact of those behaviors, rather than trying to force a youth to leave the exploitive situation completely. In situations where a youth is at imminent risk for serious harm, a forced removal from the situation may be necessary.



In these situations, harm reduction can still be utilized through engaging in honest conversation with the youth surrounding the reasons for the move, allowing the youth to feel part of that choice and a part of where they will go next. Similarly, ensuring systems of care are able to continue to meet the needs the exploitive situation was previously fulfilling. A vital component to harm reduction is the ongoing recognition and affirmation of even the slightest of positive behavioral shifts. Practitioners must re-define success and in particular, allow youth to define their own success. For example, the likelihood of youth leaving placement is high. However, a successful use of a harm reduction approach may be to recognize a youth leaving three times in one week versus five as a success, and communicating such progress to a youth. Harm reduction assists in

building up a young person's self-efficacy and empowers them to be the primary practitioners of their own life.

It is important to recognize the limitations of a harm reduction approach in serving victims of CSE. Traditionally, harm reduction approaches have focused on the risky or unsafe behaviors of an individual. While applying harm reduction to CSEC, it is important to acknowledge that the unsafe behaviors they often exhibit are a result of their trauma and our system failures. Change for this population requires both an internal and external process. Internally, the child needs services and support to begin rebuilding their self-efficacy. Externally, the systems of care must meet the needs of the youth that the exploitive situation was, or is currently, meeting, such as food, shelter, a

sense of belonging, and affection. Thus, harm reduction strategies must be employed to holistically address the youth's needs while not blaming when a youth returns to unsafe situations or finds themselves "re-exploited". Providers within the multidisciplinary team must be aware of the totality of a youth's needs and make efforts to meet them, focusing on short-term incremental gains which will lead to long term stability and safety, building a path for a youth to turn to when they are ready to leave.



# Initial Recommendations

In order to effectively employ harm reduction strategies, the multiple stakeholders (e.g. social workers, probation officers, mental health clinicians, etc.) involved in a youth's life must collectively adopt the approach and consistently apply it. Similarly important, systemic adoption is essential to the successful application of a harm reduction framework across disciplines. A true practice shift cannot occur without the adoption of policies and procedures from leadership and middle management that support the use of this framework with direct service or line staff. For example, leadership should create opportunities among staff for training, learning and discussion on harm reduction.



Training

Direct service practitioners cannot employ this strategy without the direct support, coaching and guidance from their superiors, and as such, management must have the support from leadership in order to effectively support their staff. Harm reduction is essentially a language that programs and providers must learn to speak in order for every aspect of youth engagement to be rooted in its principles.

Given California's support of a multidisciplinary approach in serving this population, members of these multidisciplinary teams, and their leadership, are encouraged



Learning

to adopt harm reduction principles to reinforce the messaging and approach with the youth. A consistent approach across disciplines will ensure better engagement with youth and work against factors that may cause the youth to further retreat into their exploitive situations and disengage from services.

To accomplish this consistency, county steering committees and/or local human trafficking taskforces should adopt the harm reduction approach as a guiding principle to all work with youth abused through CSE.



Discussion

The steering committees can disseminate materials regarding harm reduction to key stakeholders and encourage the development of harm reduction policies and procedures within interagency protocols. It is important to note that the agencies making up a steering committee may all hold a different definition of harm reduction and thus a collective definition must be made in order to effectively integrate a harm reduction approach widely.

# Practical Examples

This introductory document is intended to provide the framework and background on how to begin incorporating aspects of a harm reduction approach into practice. Below is a sample of practical strategies from subject matter experts on how their agency has adopted and employed a strategy. This table is intended to be a snapshot of the guidance to come, which will expand on how role-specific practitioners can implement harm reduction into their practice, both at a ground level and systemically.



## SOCIAL WORKER

Jointly develop a safety plan with the youth to utilize when absent from care and introduce services they can access when not in placement



## PROBATION

Consider the entirety of the youth's circumstance when determining the level of response to probation violations



## CAREGIVER

Utilize appropriate consequences for when youth return from being missing from care, while also recognizing and affirming their decision to return



## EDUCATORS

Consider adjusting class schedule to meet youth's needs and allow effective participation



## PUBLIC HEALTH

Provide education and access to long-acting contraceptives if desired



## DEPENDENCY/DELINQUENCY COURTS

Implement specialized court rooms for victims of CSE



## BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

Stay present and have consistent contact while missing from placement; reminding client that they can contact therapist or attend therapy without coming back into placement



## YOUTH MENTOR/SURVIVOR ADVOCATE

Establish protocols to safely respond to youth while they are absent from care



## LAW ENFORCEMENT

Determine a point of contact for each local law enforcement agency to reduce delays in multi-jurisdictional cases



***And with that sense of offense is the real danger that since we cannot ensure the protection of the victimized child, we may decline to engage them because of the risk to our own reputations. But our response cannot be “If we can’t control you, we can’t help you.”***



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# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Hickle, Kristine, and Sophie Hallett. "Mitigating Harm: Considering Harm Reduction Principles in Work with Sexually Exploited Young People." *Children & Society*, Wiley/Blackwell (10.1111), 20 Dec. 2015, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/chso.12145>
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- <sup>3</sup> Hickle, Kristine, and Sophie Hallett. "Mitigating Harm: Considering Harm Reduction Principles in Work with Sexually Exploited Young People." *Children & Society*, Wiley/Blackwell (10.1111), 20 Dec. 2015, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/chso.12145>
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Kate Walker, California Child Welfare Council, *Ending The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: A Call for Multi-System Collaboration In California* (2013)
- <sup>6</sup> Roberts, Albert R. *Handbook of Domestic Violence Intervention Strategies: Policies, Programs, and Legal Remedies*. Oxford University Press, 2002.
- <sup>7</sup> Hickle, Kristine, and Sophie Hallett. "Mitigating Harm: Considering Harm Reduction Principles in Work with Sexually Exploited Young People." *Children & Society*, Wiley/Blackwell (10.1111), 20 Dec. 2015, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/chso.12145>





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<http://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/Child-Welfare-Protection/Child-Trafficking-Response>