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Review of Policies and Practices to Prevent Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-Serving Organizations in the United States

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Abstract

Technology-facilitated child sexual abuse (TF-CSA), or child sexual abuse that occurs online or through electronic communication, is a preventable public health problem that can be addressed within youth-serving organizations (YSOs). This study is a review of a purposive sample of organizational policies and practices designed to prevent TF-CSA collected from 13 national and local YSOs in the United States. Documents were coded to identify practices to prevent TF-CSA related to YSO activities or YSO staff, volunteers, or participants. Qualitative analysis indicated that YSOs included seven common practices to prevent TF-CSA in their documents. These practices included transparent electronic communication between youth and YSO staff; codes of conduct and online behavior agreements related to youth; monitoring the YSO's online presence; parental controls for youth online activity; safety behaviors for online activity for staff,

parents, and youth; parent and youth trainings for youth online engagement and prevention of TF-CSA; and practices to address staff policy violations. Most prevention practices documented by YSOs identified in this study are consistent with emerging literature on TF-CSA prevention. Key gaps include protections for youth from groups inequitably burdened by TF-CSA and evaluation of the implementation and effectiveness of practices in preventing TF-CSA across settings and populations.

Keywords

Child sexual abuse; youth-serving organizations; prevention; technology-facilitated; online behaviors; electronic communication

Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a preventable public health problem. According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2022), CSA refers to the involvement of a child under the age of 18 years in sexual activity that violates the laws or social taboos of society and that the child does not fully comprehend and does not or cannot consent to. Technology-facilitated CSA (TF-CSA) refers to the sexual abuse of a child under the age of 18 years that occurs partly or entirely through electronic forms of communication and interaction, such as SMS texting, e-mail, photographs, social media, online chat, online streaming, or internet-based video gaming platforms (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017; May-Chahal & Palmer, 2018). Common elements of CSA, which include grooming (i.e., befriending and preparing a minor for abuse), sexual solicitation (i.e., adults engaging in sexual conversation with minors), "sextortion" (i.e., blackmailing minors into engaging in sexual acts), and generation and distribution of child sexual abuse material (i.e., "child pornography"; see Chauviré-Geib & Fegert, 2023), can each be perpetrated via these electronic communication technologies (e.g., social media, texting). Therefore, TF-CSA has garnered interest in the research literature (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017; May-Chahal & Palmer, 2018).

Research indicates TF-CSA produces similar emotional, psychological, and behavioral outcomes relative to in-person CSA, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress symptoms, self-harm, and inability to trust others (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020). TF-CSA may be accelerated by major advances in technology (e.g., Drejer et al., 2023) and the COVID-19 pandemic that necessitated the use of online communication platforms (Harris et al., 2021). In a global survey of youth with internet access, 54% reported experiencing at least one online sexual harm, defined as being asked to engage in sexual acts, being sent sexual photos or media, or being asked to keep online sexual behaviors a secret (WePROTECT Global Alliance, 2021). Although girls (57%) were most at risk in the survey, nearly half of boys (48%) reported experiencing sexual harm. Certain groups of youth may be at higher risk for TF-CSA, including youth who have experienced other forms of abuse (Helweg-Larsen et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2007; Wells & Mitchell, 2008) and youth who have been exposed to family alcohol abuse (Helweg-Larsen et al., 2012), as these youth may be more isolated, feel misunderstood, and lack parental guidance. Youth with disabilities

(Normand & Sallafranque-St-Louis, 2016) and youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ+; Gámez-Guadix & Incera, 2021; Helweg-Larsen et al., 2012; May-Chahal & Palmer, 2018) are more likely to seek out relationships online and may be targeted due to their identities. LGBTQ+ youth are especially at risk for sextortion, as others may threaten to "out" them to family or friends (Gámez-Guadix & Incera, 2021). Additionally, youth experiencing homelessness may experience high rates of TF-CSA related to using social media to advertise sexual services in exchange for basic needs (May-Chahal & Palmer, 2018). Older youth (i.e., teenagers) tend to experience high rates of TF-CSA when adults take advantage of their curiosity about sex and romantic relationships (Wurtele & Kenny, 2016).

Millions of children in the United States participate in youth-serving organizations (YSOs), which include civic, educational, religious, sports, and other organizations that provide services to children, adolescents, and young adults (Assini-Meytin et al., 2021). YSOs can serve a critical role in preventing TF-CSA within their organizations through the implementation of best practices for prevention, detection, and response. The prevention of TF-CSA within YSOs has received little attention in the literature (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020), although prevention may be informed by efforts to prevent in-person CSA. A 2007 report from the CDC (Saul & Audage, 2007) suggested policies and procedures to prevent in-person CSA in YSOs including staff/volunteer screening, guidelines on interactions between individuals, monitoring behaviors, ensuring safe environments, responding to inappropriate behaviors, and prevention trainings for staff/volunteers, caregivers, and youth. Although the National Principles for Child Safe Organizations (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018) suggested creating inclusive environments for youth from groups at inequitable risk of CSA, there remains a dearth of research on how YSOs can protect these groups from CSA exposure. Both resources suggest prevention practices that, while they have not been evaluated, are widely in use at YSOs to address in-person CSA (e.g., Praesidium, 2023) and may provide a basis for preventing TF-CSA.

Understanding the kinds of practices currently implemented in YSOs is a necessary first step to creating, implementing, and evaluating evidence-based guidelines for the prevention of TF-CSA in YSOs. In addition, given the inequitable burden of CSA experienced by some communities and populations (e.g., youth with disabilities, LGBTQ+ youth), research is needed to understand how practices may protect disproportionately burdened populations of youth while participating in YSO activities. The purpose of this study was to conduct a review of documented policies and practices to prevent TF-CSA collected from US-based national and local YSOs. Prevention practices documented in YSO policies are described, existing prevention practices are aligned with literature on TF-CSA prevention with special attention to protecting groups at risk for TF-CSA, and gaps are identified to inform future research and practice.

Methods

Data source

Data used in this study were derived from a parent study: CDC's update of the 2007 publication *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-serving Organizations: Getting Started on Policies and Procedures* (Saul & Audage, 2007). The parent study's goal was to provide updated prevention resources based on the best available evidence to support implementation by diverse YSOs seeking to prevent CSA and ensure safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for children and youth (McKeen & Alexander, 2022). In addition to a partner panel meeting and comprehensive literature review, the parent study included an environmental scan to collect documents about current CSA prevention policies and practices from national and local YSOs. Documents currently in use that were relevant to organizational efforts to prevent and respond to CSA were received from 15 participating YSOs between November 2020 and June 2021. YSOs were purposively selected through professional networks and ranged from national organizations to single-location local organizations that exclusively serve children and youth from inequitably impacted populations. Upon receipt, documents were classified (e.g., code of conduct, employee manual, best practice, safety check, and policy), screened by two researchers to identify text related to child safety and CSA prevention, and, if retained, were coded to capture organizational processes and policies pertaining to the prevention of CSA among served youth.

Data for the present analysis were derived from the coding of the YSO CSA documents. Of the 15 YSOs that participated in the parent study, documents from 13 YSOs (nine national and four regional YSOs) contained policies and practices related to TF-CSA and were included in the present analysis. These YSOs included sports, faith-based, higher education, overnight camp, and general youth programs; and five served specific populations, such as youth with disabilities or youth experiencing homelessness. Institutional Review Board oversight for this study was not required as this was a policy and program monitoring activity.

Coding and analysis of YSO documents

For purposes of the present analysis, the identification of practices used by YSOs to prevent TF-CSA involved retrieving segments of text that were coded "online presence" and "electronic communication" in the parent study from the organizational documents relevant to CSA prevention. A sample of 229 segments were retrieved from 91 documents such as employee handbooks, training documents, and codes of conduct that were actively in use during data collection (see Table 1). The most frequent documents included in the review were training documents ($n = 25$), policies ($n = 24$), codes of conduct ($n = 13$), and human resources or administrative documents ($n = 13$; see Table 1). Dedoose software (Sociocultural Research Consultants, L.L.C., 2023; www.dedoose.com) was used in the parent study to code segments of text related to "online presence" or "electronic communication." We then abstracted text segments from Dedoose output to code content for the present study using MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2022 software (VERBI Software, 2021) to identify YSO practices related to TF-CSA.

Data were coded using a conventional qualitative content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Patton, 2002). Two authors independently coded text between May and June 2023 using a codebook developed to identify common prevention strategies related to the prevention of TF-CSA. The codebook was developed after an initial review of the data, using key segments and notes of the first author, with a catch-all code for segments that may warrant creation of a new code. Agreement between coders was calculated using the percent agreement feature in MAXQDA, and coders met to discuss differences on how codes were applied and whether any new codes needed to be added. Codes were refined, with redundant codes combined and no new codes added, and data was then recoded to reach 100% agreement (MacQueen et al., 1998). The codebook included codes such as safety behaviors, online presence, codes of conduct, trainings, violations, and others (see Table 2). The text content for each code was examined, including relationships between codes using MAXQDA's code relations browser, and then common prevention strategies were abstracted from this text based on how frequently they appeared in the data (i.e., via counts), including how many YSOs espoused the strategy and how prominently the strategy featured in a YSO's documentation.

Results

The following common TF-CSA prevention strategies were abstracted from the YSO document analysis: 1) transparent electronic communication between youth and YSO staff; 2) codes of conduct and agreed upon online behavior related to youth; 3) monitoring the YSO's online presence; 4) parental controls for youth online activity; 5) safety behaviors for online activity for staff, parents, and youth; 6) parent and youth trainings for youth online engagement and prevention of TF-CSA; and 7) practices to address staff policy violations. Please note that because many of the YSOs in this study have their documents posted online, we chose not to include any quotations that lead back to the YSO's Web site when entered into a search engine so as to protect confidentiality.

Transparent electronic communication between youth and YSO staff

Most YSOs ($n = 11$) had policies requiring that electronic communications be observable and interruptible between staff/volunteers with youth or between adults and youth. YSOs operationalized this policy by extending the in-person "rule of three" or "two-deep leadership" (i.e., having at least two adults present for every interaction, eliminating one-on-one interaction with youth; Wurtele, 2012) to online contexts and requiring the presence of a third adult in all online communications, or by requiring communications on social media to be public posts (i.e., not private messages). For one YSO, allowable forms of communication between staff and youth included e-mails copying the supervisor or the parent or public communications through official organization Web sites and other forums. YSOs tended to limit the online platforms that could be used for program activities to those with the option to restrict private communications. For example, six YSOs restricted the use of social media platforms with private video communication that is deleted after a short period of time for staff and youth in their programs. For one of these social media platforms, the deleting video feature could not be disabled or circumvented if not a "friend" of the end-user, and thus it was disallowed for program use. As advised by another YSO,

"[c]ovenants should include an agreement not to use such one-on-one messages …. Adults using [*social media platform*] should consider not using the messaging function and consider turning off notifications of messages so that they will not see messages sent from youth."

Codes of conduct and agreed upon online behavior related to youth

A majority of the YSOs ($n = 11$) established codes of conduct for staff and volunteers that delineated specific acceptable and unacceptable electronic communications and online behavioral interactions with youth. The codes of conduct most often applied to staff/volunteers who were required to limit all communication with youth to professional content (i.e., messages with a programmatic purpose) and limit electronic contact with youth outside of program activities for any reason, including "friending" youth on social media, posting images of youth without consent, or giving private phone numbers or e-mail addresses to youth. Exceptions were often specified for emergency situations, preexisting dual relationships (e.g., adult is a family friend or relative of youth in addition to being a YSO employee), or closeness in age (i.e., communications between youth and adult participants who are very close in age, such as 16 years and 18 years, may be exempt from parts of the code of conduct). Consistent with transparent communication practices, nine of the YSOs prohibited use of private electronic communications between staff/volunteers and youth, including social networking Web sites, instant messaging, and texting. Inappropriate forms of communication also included but were not limited to, harsh, coercive, or threatening language; discussions of sex; private messaging between staff or volunteers and youth; posting photos of youth on social media without parental consent; posting inappropriate comments on photos; and "friending" youth on social networking sites.

Signed agreements between youth and between staff and youth were included by four YSOs to prohibit bullying and cyberbullying, including bullying of a sexual nature. As exemplified by one YSO, all youth and adult participants had to agree to rules and behavioral expectations for online events including: "… [n]o violence including violent/bullying language, threats, displaying a weapon or violent images. No sexualized conduct or behavior on or offline including sexual advances, jokes, explicit or offensive pictures, requests for sexual favors, sexting and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. …"

Another YSO noted all program participants must be as accountable to the code of conduct in the online environment as they would in person, with failure to follow the code of conduct potentially resulting in dismissal from the program.

Monitoring the YSO's online presence

YSOs ($n = 8$) generally created shared social media accounts, video conferencing accounts, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses to be used by staff in communication, rather than staff using their personal devices or accounts. All YSO accounts were to be closely monitored for posts that did not conform with YSO values and inappropriate posts removed. YSOs described varied policies for maintaining a positive online presence through their organizational accounts. For example, three YSOs described implementation and enforcement of digital safety competencies to ensure staff "[u]nderstands, follows,

communicates and enforces policies related to internet and social media use" and "understands, educates and manages a safe online environment for children and families by promoting healthy communication and zero tolerance for cyberbullying."

Staff in four YSOs were required to keep their own personal social media accounts free of any content inconsistent with the organization's values. According to one YSO, staff and volunteers should notify their supervisor should a youth "friend" them on a personal social media account or contact them via phone call or text on a personal device, and staff/volunteers were encouraged to use privacy settings on their social media accounts. Another YSO required adult volunteers and staff to stay in an "adult role" on any personal social media platform where their posts were visible to youth, meaning posts were appropriate for youth and free of sexual, harassing, or discriminatory content.

Parental controls for youth online activity

Parental controls were incorporated throughout the policies and procedures in the sample of YSO documents. Parents were sometimes engaged by YSOs ($n = 3$) in reviewing and helping enforce electronic communications policies, and, in four YSOs, they were given the option to opt out of their child receiving any electronic or online communication and opt in to provide permission for any pictures posted. Further, four YSOs required parental permission for all apps used by youth on their personal devices. As stated by one YSO, "… agency policy considerations should include requirements that the parent/guardian be made aware of all communications or social media interactions between [adults and youth], and take responsibility for monitoring those interactions on an ongoing basis." Also, when posting on social media, "volunteers must get parent's permission to post any pictures or information on social media/internet regarding the child. The child's last name or location should NEVER be used when posting any information." Parents could also be a potential third person in the "rule of three" for communications, meaning they could be copied on all communications with youth.

Safety behaviors for online activity for staff, parents, and youth

Organizational safety policies and plans focused on protecting children's information (e.g., restricting names and photos posted online) and restricting access to children by adults, such as restricting attendance in online events to adults who had passed a reference check. In four YSOs, staff and volunteers were provided training and information about the privacy features of various online platforms (e.g., awareness of how to prevent the unauthorized access of video conferencing by outside individuals). One YSO established a "Youth Safety Guideline" and step-by-step instructions to prevent uninvited attendees from joining or "bombing" a video conference or meeting.

According to one YSO, it is essential for participating organizations to create a comprehensive internet safety plan. The safety plan might include the development of an acceptable use policy approved by the Board of Directors and signed by each staff member that defines appropriate use of computer equipment and the internet and a code of conduct (also see Codes of Conduct and Agreements).

Parent and youth trainings for youth online engagement and prevention of TF-CSA

Three YSOs provided online safety training delivered to parents, usually through a third-party vendor. Materials from trainings that were included in the study sample focused on educating parents about digital literacy and cyberbullying. Trainings also addressed behaviors of individuals who may potentially engage in TF-CSA, primarily described as strangers who gain access to children online. Through these trainings, parents were advised to communicate family values, expectations, and dangers of online behavior to their youth and to stay aware of their youth's activity online. Parents were also given advice on how to respond to instances of bullying and abuse, as well as technology tips such as keeping the family computer in a common area and using caller ID to trace suspicious calls.

The policy documents in the study sample also included some information on internet safety trainings provided by YSOs to youth. These trainings emphasized the risks of sharing personal information while interacting or talking with strangers on the internet. One YSO, for example, required all youth and staff/volunteers who use computers while at the YSO location or engaging in YSO programming to complete an internet safety training. The internet safety training included topics such as risky online decisions, cyberbullying, signs of cyberbullying, "crossing the line" between appropriate and inappropriate communication, and internet and "real world" safety. Some trainings mentioned the legal implications of CSA material, including possession of self-generated nude images by minors. One YSO required staff, volunteers, and youth to participate in a safety training before gaining access to the organization's internet and specified consequences (e.g., loss of computer privileges) if there is a violation of YSO policy.

Few trainings addressed online problematic youth sexual behavior toward other youth. Most addressed cyberbullying by describing behaviors (e.g., spreading rumors online) that they considered bullying and how youth could respond online, including standing up for others. One YSO reiterated expectations designed to promote online safety and understanding of the online environment; for example, youth were instructed to decide how they would communicate with staff. If youth received communication from YSO staff through a different channel, they were instructed to not respond and use the contact provided for the program/activity to confirm the message was legitimate. Although most youth use a variety of platforms to engage informally with friends and family, YSOs emphasized that online interactions within the YSO program should be professional and use only YSO-approved platforms.

Practices to address staff policy violations

YSOs described several practices they employed to handle violations of policies regarding online safety. In addition to TF-CSA behaviors (e.g., sexting or otherwise transmitting sexual content to a minor), online behaviors prohibited by codes of conduct (e.g., contacting youth one-on-one, taking or posting photographs without parental permission) were also subject to consequences under the YSO's disciplinary policy. One YSO included specific tutorials pertaining to common behaviors that would be a violation of an established code of conduct even in seemingly innocuous situations (e.g., taking a picture in a locker room when no unclothed persons appeared to be present).

Although disciplinary policies were not included in the sample of documents used for this review, occasional reference was made to dismissal as a potential consequence. According to one YSO, violations of policies and procedures were addressed under "Disciplinary Rules and Procedures" and could result in sanctions such as suspension or, in cases of potential abuse, reports to authorities. One YSO considered all CSA-related behaviors reportable to law enforcement, whether or not they fell under mandatory reporting laws. Disciplinary procedures were specified and shared with staff, volunteers, parents, and youth enhance awareness of consequences for violations. Three YSOs sought feedback from parents for quality improvement.

Discussion

The current study focused on common policies and practices to prevent TF-CSA within a sample of US-based YSOs. Similar to other studies (Ettekal & Agans, 2020; Garst et al., 2021), the documents were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic when many YSOs had begun to adapt in-person programs to online spaces. YSOs created codes of conduct specific to electronic forms of communication and interaction and extended existing in-person CSA prevention practices to online spaces. For example, the practice of including an additional adult for all online communication was commonly used to supervise interactions between adults and youth in person. YSOs also required parental permission for youth participation in online activities, as they would for an overnight trip. These policies described use of safety features to control online access to youth engaged in their organization and kept a controlled online presence with official organizational online profiles and safety policies that extended to staff's personal online profiles and communications. YSOs also relied on trainings to educate staff/volunteers on the use of new and evolving online technologies, including use of safety features (e.g., turning off chat, removing uninvited participants in a conference call) of popular online platforms. Further, both parents and youth received trainings from YSOs on the risks of online communication. Finally, YSOs described the consequences of staff and volunteers' policy and procedure violations, including reporting and disciplinary actions equivalent to those for in-person violations.

It is important to note that the majority of these practices have not been evaluated for effectiveness in preventing TF-CSA, and they may have originated from either adaptation of an in-person prevention practice or expert opinion. However, the extension of in-person policies and practices to online spaces may not be apparent, feasible, or practical for all YSOs to implement. For example, it is less feasible to create a secure environment on social media platforms, the design of which YSOs do not control, or monitor behavior of youth on these platforms (e.g., when they have access to private messaging). Future research could help evaluate the feasibility and effectiveness of the TF-CSA prevention practices identified in this study.

Most YSOs established codes of conduct for staff and volunteers specific to electronic communications, with specific behaviors prohibited such as messaging or friending youth on personal devices or social media accounts. Although not currently evaluated in the literature, these codes of conduct may reduce opportunities to engage in CSA (Wurtele & Kenny, 2016), as there is a growing trend of CSA cases in which adults contact and groom

youth primarily via private messaging, texting, and social media (Darling & Hackett, 2020; Jaffe et al., 2013). However, prior studies found that people who commit TF-CSA know such codes of conduct exist and either ignore or work around them, thereby minimizing their effectiveness (e.g., Darling et al., 2018). Research from school settings suggests that poor understanding and awareness of policies, as well as inconsistent enforcement, can be barriers to the effective implementation of sexual misconduct policies (Grant & Heinecke, 2019). To maximize impact, YSOs could work to overcome these barriers and monitor the implementation and effectiveness of policies to prevent TF-CSA (CDC, 2021). Effective implementation and enforcement are also important to address health equity and ensure that policies are effective at preventing TF-CSA across youth populations at increased risk for violence (Baumann & Cabassa, 2020; Brownson et al., 2021; Hall et al., 2016). Resources are available for improving policy implementation, including education for organizations impacted by a policy, processes to change operations and systems to support a new policy, and ways to monitor a policy to increase the likelihood of achieving intended outcomes (CDC, 2021).

Many YSOs participating in this study documented policies and practices using security features of online platforms to limit access to youth by strangers (e.g., preventing unauthorized access in online webinars) and YSO staff/volunteers (e.g., restricting communication with youth to official accounts). YSOs also extended the popular "rule of three" or "two-deep leadership" often used during in-person CSA prevention (Wurtele, 2012) to online spaces. The "rule of three" requires a third adult (often a parent) be copied on each communication between adults and youth, making these communications observable and interruptible. Although this strategy has not been evaluated for effectiveness for the prevention of in-person CSA or TF-CSA, it is widely used for in-person CSA prevention based on expert opinion (e.g., Saul & Audage, 2007). However, the "rule of three" may not be ideal in YSOs whose model is based on one-on-one interactions between adults and youth (Letourneau et al., 2020). Additionally, supportive one-on-one coaching or mentoring relationships can be vital for stigmatized groups such as LGBTQ+ youth (Johnson & Gastic, 2015). YSOs may need to develop additional strategies to ensure the safety of relationships involving online communication. Future research is needed to examine the effectiveness of "rule of three" policies and to explore strategies for ensuring safe, nurturing one-on-one mentoring experiences online, as well as supporting youth from diverse sexual and gender groups in finding and building safe and healthy relationships virtually.

The documents in this study described trainings for staff, parents, and youth about online safety and potential harms. Training is the most commonly recommended approach to prevent in-person CSA by experts (Kaufman et al., 2019), and trainings for parents containing accurate, up-to-date information have demonstrated some success preventing precursors to online violence against children (e.g., cyberbullying; World Health Organization (WHO), 2022). Among 25 training documents reviewed, there was a consistent emphasis on teaching parents the behaviors and potential risks of strangers who youth could meet online. However, most online harms toward youth are perpetrated by someone they meet in person, and education that leans into the "stranger danger" narrative can be misleading and potentially increase risk for TF-CSA (WHO, 2022; Wurtele & Kenny,

2016). Evidence-based trainings that are updated frequently to align with advancements in technology and address potential of abuse by acquaintances may be effective at preventing TF-CSA.

There is evidence supporting youth training approaches in preventing online violence against youth, including online sexual behavior and cyberbullying (WHO, 2022). However, injunctions such as "don't talk to strangers" or "don't give out personal information" may be unrealistic, as many online activities involve these actions, and youth are unlikely to follow such rules. Instead, the WHO recommends educating youth about appropriate and inappropriate online behaviors from acquaintances and strangers, and ways to respond to inappropriate behaviors such as assertiveness and boundary setting. Such trainings provide flexibility to accommodate changing technologies, as such skills can be applied across platforms or when there are changes in features. However, caution is warranted when trainings place the onus of avoiding violence on minors. This may lead to minors feeling they are to blame for their own abuse (Beckett et al., 2019).

Finally, the reviewed documents had little mention of online problematic youth sexual behavior toward other youth. According to youth self-report, problematic sexual behavior from other youth accounts for approximately 70% of harmful sexual behavior experienced by girls and 77% of harmful sexual behavior experienced by boys (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finkelhor, 2020). Recent increasing trends in electronic communications – such as nonconsensual sexting (Doyle et al., 2021), sexual cyberbullying (Ehman & Gross, 2019), self-generated nude images of minors (Slane et al., 2021), nonconsensual pornography (i.e., revenge porn, or the non-consensual posting online of nude photographs that had originally been shared consensually; Kamal & Newman, 2016) – created new avenues for harm to occur. Effective trainings on boundaries, consent, and age-appropriate and inclusive sexual education can help youth understand which behaviors are inappropriate to engage in with other youth (Assini-Meytin et al., 2020; Letourneau et al., 2017). Further, some may benefit from learning the risks of common problematic youth behaviors such as nonconsensual sexting, self-generated nude photos of minors, and nonconsensual pornography.

While documents describing specific procedures for responding to allegations of misconduct and reporting to authorities fell outside the scope of this review (i.e., no discussion of electronic communication or online behavior), having clear guidelines for such procedures is considered important to preventing all forms of CSA in YSOs (e.g., Saul & Audage, 2007). Although holding those who engage in CSA behaviors *accountable* is important, punishment after the fact does not address primary prevention. Research in schools indicated that punitive or zero-tolerance policies for youth behaviors such as bullying (Day et al., 2016) or problematic youth sexual behavior (Kelley et al., 2019) were ineffective and counterproductive at prevention and could even increase mental and physical health disparities among certain groups of youth, such as Black youth (Duarte et al., 2023). Emerging research suggests harsh policies could also be counter-productive for TF-CSA prevention, including sexting behavior (e.g., Lemke & Rogers, 2020). Research suggests enacting harsh legal sanctions/sentencing, severe punishment, and poor prison conditions for criminal acts among adults may be ineffective at preventing recidivism and limited in promoting desistance future acts of CSA (Agan et al., 2021; Drago et al., 2011;

Estelle & Phillips, 2018; Rose, 2021) and may increase inequities by disproportionately affecting disadvantaged groups (Rose, 2021). Policies to hold those who engage in CSA behaviors accountable might work best if paired with policies intended to prevent CSA before it occurs. For example, the enactment of supportive policies promoting healthy behavioral interactions both in person and online (Duarte et al., 2023) may be effective in preventing TF-CSA before it happens and less likely to increase inequities especially among stigmatized groups of youth such as Black youth (Lorenc et al., 2013). Notably, no documents reviewed addressed ways to create supportive environments for youth who desire to express their sexuality while online and ask questions about sexual health. Finally, research is needed to develop policies to prevent TF-CSA before it occurs, rather than relying on punitive policies after the fact.

Many YSOs serve groups of youth who experience stigma and discrimination online and in-person or who are otherwise at higher risk of TF-CSA. While the documents included in this study mentioned the inequitable risk faced by transgender youth, sexual minority youth, and youth with disabilities while interacting with others online, specific practices to protect these youth were not mentioned in the documents. This does not necessarily imply that YSOs have not established such policies for implementation. Research suggests that practices can be designed to be culturally appropriate to specific communities (Sawrikar, 2020). Staff/volunteers and parents can be trained to understand the unique risks and protective factors for groups experiencing racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, or other systems of oppression (e.g., Bowman et al., 2010), and to understand their own biases that may affect how they respond to youth problematic online sexual behavior (Letourneau et al., 2020) that has the potential to lead to TF-CSA behavior. In order to put the primary responsibility for preventing TF-CSA in the hands of adults rather than focusing solely on children, programs can focus on educating staff/volunteers on the dangers of online sextortion. Additionally, the policies in this study focused on individual risk, rather than reducing community or society level risk. Developing policies to address risks at a community or society level can help to prevent TF-CSA for youth at disproportionate risk.

There are several limitations to this study, which examined excerpts from documents provided by 13 YSOs. No information was provided by YSOs on how specific in-person or TF-CSA prevention policies and practices were implemented, and there was no way to determine if these policies or practices were effective in preventing CSA. Second, although original documents were used to clarify ambiguity and provide additional context, excerpts of text from YSO documents were not coded within the context of the full original document. Third, policies with the potential to prevent or reduce TF-CSA that did not specifically mention online behavior may not have been coded and included in this study. For example, a subset of participating YSOs provided services and engaged with populations of youth experiencing inequitable risk of TF-CSA, including youth with disabilities and those experiencing homelessness. Although few excerpts in the documents explicitly described protecting youth experiencing inequitable risk of TF-CSA, the overarching policies may have been designed to protect such youth by default. Finally, although we examined a range of YSOs, including large national and small local YSOs, the findings in this sample may not generalize to all YSOs in the United States.

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a snapshot of current policies and procedures to prevent TF-CSA among diverse US-based YSOs. Many of the YSOs extended existing in-person CSA prevention strategies to online spaces and developed trainings and codes of conduct to prevent TF-CSA. However, there continues to be a dearth of evidence of the effectiveness of these strategies in preventing and reducing TF-CSA. In addition, research is needed to understand and prevent new risks unique to the online space, such as nonconsensual sexting, sextortion, self-generated nude images of minors and nonconsensual pornography. Finally, there is also a need for research that examines the effect of community level or society level risks on the prevention of TF-CSA in YSOs. CSA is preventable, and there are ongoing efforts to increase understanding of risk and protective factors for CSA perpetration and victimization, and to develop and evaluate prevention policies and practices for the primary prevention of CSA (CDC, 2022). CDC has developed resources for action to help states, communities, and YSOs use the best available evidence to prevent child abuse and neglect (Fortson et al., 2016), sexual violence (Basile et al., 2016) and adverse childhood experiences (CDC, 2019). The findings of this study can inform YSOs as they endeavor to prevent TF-CSA within their organizations.

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Disclaimer

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Table 1.

Youth-serving organization (YSO) document types included in study sample.

Document type	Number of documents
Code of Conduct	13
Consulting Document	4
Human Resources and Administrative Document	13
Policy	24
Resource	11
Signed Agreement/Consent Form	4
Staff/Volunteer Handbook	7
Training	25

Document types are not mutually exclusive.

Table 2.

Codes used to identify practices used by youth-serving organizations (YSOs) to prevent online and technology-facilitated child sexual abuse (CSA).

Code	Description	Example quote
Safety behaviors	Specific behaviors/practices parents/children/staff/volunteers can use that may emhance safety (e.g., appropriate background checks, chat disabled or monitored during video-based meetings, only using online platforms that are open and transparent, password protection for meetings)[1]	"Post only information that you are comfortable with others seeing and knowing about you. Many people will view your page, including parents, teachers, coaches, and employers."
Online presence	Online presence of the organization or how the organization interacts with youth/others via online/technology-facilitated platform	"Each [YSO] site may set up an official social media account with Facebook, Google+, Linkedin or any other social media network. The Executive Director or designee must have access to the account. The Executive Director or designee may select additional staff to have access to the account."
Code of conduct	Rules and guidelines for engagement with youth in online spaces (e.g., never accept a friend request from a youth)	"Adults who work with youth should use the organization's/club/or group e-mail and social media accounts (rather than personal) for communicating with youth involved in the program."
Training	Training processes for parents/staff/youth on online safety	"Staff training includes information on the prevention of bullying and proper Internet behavior."
Violations	Consequences for violation of online safety rules/guidelines	"Violations will be addressed under the Disciplinary Rules and Procedure and may result in the sanctions as set forth therein, including temporary or permanent suspension. Some violations may constitute physical or sexual abuse that must be reported to appropriate law enforcement authorities."
Scope	Descriptions of what organizations count as virtual, online, or technology-related spaces	"Your policy should include at least the following: Telephones/cell phones … A call is considered personal if it does not involve both an organization phone and organization-specific subject matter … Text messages … Email/instant messaging…"

[a]Rules and guidelines governing behaviors of YSO staff/volunteers and youth are included under Code of Conduct.