



RESEARCH IN ACTION

“I Had to Advocate for Myself.”

**Insights on the Safe Harbor Initiative and Sexual
Exploitation from the Missing and Murdered African
American Women Task Force Data**

Final Report

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INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2023, the Minnesota Women's Foundation partnered with Research in Action to do additional analysis of the Missing & Murdered African American Women's Task Force interview and focus group data. In concert with RIA's Equity in Action process, RIA reached out to the Task Force and Advisory Council members to determine where the secondary analysis should focus its attention. Advisory Council and Task Force members suggested two areas: Safe Harbor and adultification of Black girls. Following this guidance, we returned to the original data sets and created a plan for secondary analysis of the MMAAW data set with a focus on illuminating: (1) Black women and girls' experiences of Safe Harbor policies and practices; and (2) their experiences with institutions that may refer people to Safe Harbor services, such as hospitals, schools, law enforcement and shelters.

Though not many of the original interviews explicitly mentioned Safe Harbor or involved people who are tasked with implementing Safe Harbor policy and services, we were confident that secondary analysis of our rich data set would elicit insights. Our goal for this secondary analysis was to generate additional insights that could be of practical use to community members, organizations, and allies. This secondary analysis fills gaps that RIA was unable to address due to the time constraints imposed by the legislature during the original MMAAW study.

Our initial analysis looked for themes across systems, but RIA knew we could gain from discerning important nuances by turning our attention to specific attributes within systems. This additional data analysis aims to: (1) articulate more detailed recommendations and pathways to design policy changes for those working within or supporting the Safe Harbor network; and (2) recommendations for training and reform for system actors who are likely to refer people to Safe Harbor services.

The 2022 MMAAW Task Force and Advisory report to the Minnesota State Legislature:

- Highlighted the ways systems still expect an ideal type of victim behavior in domestic violence or sex trafficking cases. In revisiting the data here, we: (1) bring more

understanding about where and when staff in the Safe Harbor network or supporting the Safe Harbor network of services misidentify Black women and girls who are victims of violence or in a precarious situation; and (2) identify where to direct and amplify resources for existing initiatives created by Black women and girls to heal from trauma

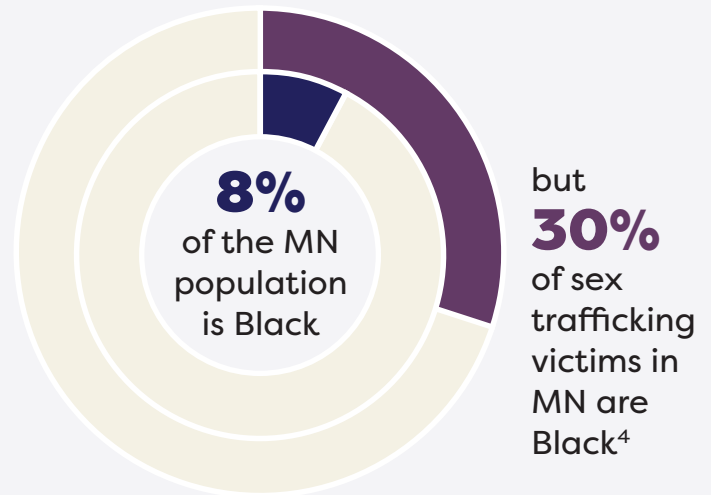
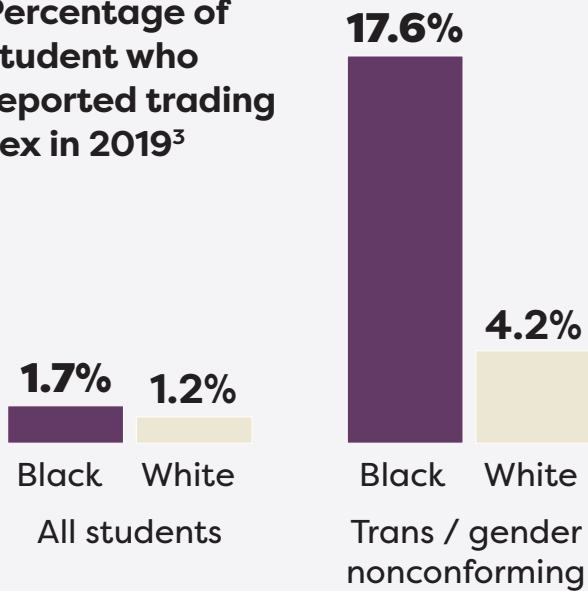
- Pointed to the problem of adultification of Black girls. This secondary analysis identifies specific systems and/or engagement points where staff adultify Black girls, thereby obscuring or denying their eligibility for Safe Harbor services
- Shared concerns about coordination, especially related to Safe Harbor practices. Secondary analysis of the MMAAW data identifies specific places where coordination lapses contribute to Black girls falling through the cracks

Because the Advisory Council directed us to examine Safe Harbor, we decided to review the most recent evaluation (Phase Four) of the program as part of our analysis process.¹ The original MMAAW Report compared its findings to the recommendations of the 2018 Safe Harbor for All Report² as well as other relevant reports, such as reports on domestic violence, to contextualize our recommendations and identify alignment with other key statewide initiatives.

One of the challenges named in the Phase Four (SH4) report was that earlier evaluations (Phases 1-3) did not involve specific attention "the cultural responsiveness of Safe Harbor" (SH4 p. 24). Notably, the Phase Four report is the first to "investigate the cultural responsiveness of Safe Harbor" in response to "minority cultural groups [who] expressed distrust [in] government systems of safety." (SH4 p. 24).

Although SH4 did include comparative and intersectional analysis of survey statistics, the evaluation team "was not able to research the specific needs of each cultural group represented in the evaluation." (SH4 p.24). Reading our secondary analysis alongside the Phase Four report provides some group-based specificity in regards to Black women and girls, highlighting key areas of alignment and serious gaps where interventions, resources, and policy changes could yield better support and services for Black women and girls seeking Safe Harbor.

Percentage of student who reported trading sex in 2019³



METHODS

For the secondary analysis, we re-analyzed Lived Experience (LE) interviews and Key Informant (KI) interviews where participants discussed at least one of the following topics:

- Safe Harbor law and services
- Black women or girls going missing
- Trafficking
- Shelters for survivors of trafficking or abuse

We focused on these topics because of their clear relevance to Safe Harbor and adultification. For example, interviewees spoke of the ways law enforcement or school staff assume Black girls are runaways, not victims of crime, because of adultification.

Research in Action staff developed emergent codes in line with concerns and priorities of the Advisory Council. Staff were split into two groups of coders to read through transcripts that featured Key Informants discussing Safe Harbor or Lived Experience participants discussing interactions with an agency related to Safe Harbor. Coders made marginal notes in the transcript and then shared their feedback with the lead research team, who then used that feedback to draft a codebook for the project. The lead team then each coded

the same transcript and compared notes. The team finalized the codebook after that session and resumed coding the remaining transcripts.

After coding was complete, the lead team reviewed and analyzed the results by iteratively cycling through the codes to consolidate them into themes. Two key themes emerged:

- Push factors in child welfare, housing, law enforcement, and education that make Black girls more vulnerable to trafficking and other forms of violence
- Gaps within and across these systems that endanger Black girls and fail their caregivers when they seek help in the wake of trafficking or other forms of violence

After they completed the thematic analysis, the researchers reviewed the Phase Four Safe Harbor Evaluation Report, which consists of: a survey of youth who received Safe Harbor Services; interviews with youth in Safe Harbor services; interviews with service providers; and complementary reports that consider the impact of COVID-19, the uprisings in the wake of the police murder of George Floyd, and other relevant events. In the next three sections, we detail the thematic findings from the secondary analysis, then share areas of alignment with SH4.

PUSH FACTORS

**THAT INCREASE
VULNERABILITY TO
BEING TRAFFICKED**

**Economic insecurity
and poverty**

**Housing insecurity
and inadequate
emergency housing**

**Child welfare
and foster care
involvement**

**Criminalization, fear
of reporting, and
criminal records**

**Absence of education
about the red flags of
sexual exploitation**

THEME 1: PUSH FACTORS

Across the lived experience transcripts, participants described that they experienced some combination of “push factors.” Similarly, key informants discussed a number of factors that cause their clients to be vulnerable to trafficking or another form of violence. These factors make it substantially more difficult for survivors and victims to access Safe Harbor resources or stay out of vulnerable situations.

The concept of “push factors” that increase youth’s vulnerability to trafficking has been studied before. The University of Minnesota School of Nursing’s study, the Minnesota Youth Sex Trading (MYST) Project 2022, reports that youth in juvenile correctional facilities, foster care and unstable housing reported that they had traded sex at drastically higher levels than the whole population of Minnesota high schoolers surveyed.⁵

As the literature review of the MMAAW Task Force Report explains, factors such as homelessness, poverty, school pushout, and over-policing have led to the disproportionate sexual exploitation of Black women and girls. Because these factors are interrelated, simply removing a person from a trafficking situation is not enough to prevent future vulnerability and future harm. Rather, survivors of sexual exploitation and other forms of violence need multi-faceted support that allows them to access a broad variety of services across siloed systems. When those systems fail, it pushes people into more vulnerable situations. Five push factors emerged from the secondary analysis:

- Economic insecurity and poverty
- Housing insecurity and inadequate emergency housing
- Child welfare and foster care involvement
- Criminalization, Fear of reporting, and Criminal records
- Absence of education about the red flags of sexual exploitation

Across the push factors, lived experience participants described the combination and intersection of push factors that made them vulnerable to violence. Likewise, key informants expressed frustration at the lack of coordination and uneven levels of knowledge across systems, so that even if they made improvements in their own sector, they could not depend on the same happening elsewhere.

Economic Instability and Poverty

Economic instability and poverty are significant drivers of vulnerability to sexual exploitation. People in poverty are less likely to have stable housing and may engage in transactional sex in order to survive.⁶

Black women earn wages and own wealth at substantially lower rates than white women and white men.⁷ A 2018 report from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development reported that Black women earn 20% less than white women and 30% less than white men in hourly wages. The Minnesota Department of Health estimates that almost 30% of the state’s Black population is living in poverty. Reanalyzing the dataset, we found that both key informants and lived experience participants cited economic insecurity as one of the intersecting push factors for sexual exploitation and/or trafficking.



Things like [credit checks] have held me hostage ... You know, even right now I’m working so hard on my credit. But then I lose my job and now I can’t pay my credit card bill, and so I’m back in this loop, and I can’t get a job because I don’t have reliable transportation you know and it’s just like it’s a cycle that continues to go over and over in my life, and it’s bothersome [LE01-03].

As the quotation illustrates, the complex and cyclical nature of economic insecurity pervades nearly every aspect of their lives:

transportation, employment, food, and housing are all jeopardized when one area is destabilized. Key informants in the Safe Harbor focus group remarked that the youth they serve experience systematic and intergenerational poverty:



[W]e are serving youth who are experiencing homelessness and poverty. Right? And many of these youth we serve are experiencing long-term generational poverty, and all of the challenges that come with that" [KI-14].

Housing Instability and Inadequate Emergency Housing

Housing instability was frequently identified as a significant factor that pushes Black women and girls into sexually-exploitative situations.⁸ Black women and their families experience some of the most severe housing disparities in the state, with Black female renters reporting substantially higher rates of eviction and among the lowest rates of homeownership.⁹ In 2018, Black people made up 39 percent of adults experiencing homelessness, but only five percent of adults statewide, a figure that has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰ Housing instability—whether caused by a lack of economic resources, job loss, being abandoned, or running away from an unsafe situation—places Black women and girls into a materially vulnerable position. Many are then propositioned to exchange sexual favors for housing and/or come to rely on the trading or selling of sex to maintain housing.¹¹

Moreover, many interviewees in the lived experience groups described how they were mistreated by a variety of actors in the housing system, such as landlords, or shelter staff. This treatment deters them from seeking shelter, which in turn heightens their vulnerability to sexual exploitation.

Lived experience participants frequently named adverse experiences that they had while in emergency housing, such as feeling unsafe and suffering mistreatment and anti-Black racism at the hands of shelter staff.



Instead of shunning me, offer me help, but you tell me that I better go do this, do that, or do this, and I have two days to do that, or I gotta go, you know?

And then I need everything done and you still won't get off my back. I'm already broken. It was traumatic. Very. I wouldn't wish anybody this experience that I had at that shelter. [LE01-03]

As the quotation illustrates, Black women and girls seek support from shelters because they are already in crisis. However, they frequently encounter a lack of empathy or even traumatic interactions, which not only deter them from seeking safe housing, but also push them into situations where they are at a higher vulnerability to violence. Key informants gave examples of how staff mistreated Black girls who then ran away from the shelter.



One day I was working, this one young lady... wanted to go back to where she was from and hang out with her boyfriend. She was like, "I'm about to leave you know and I need my stuff," and a staff [member] became kind of combative: "You're not leaving," you know and arguing with [her]...

[Then] the little girl hit the [door] button, and she had no shoes on. She didn't have no coat on. It was the dead of winter, you know, this staff [member] started chasing her... She ran downstairs, she ran outside, she said "don't follow me," and they were just running after her... She just stopped and waited, so the staff [member] caught up with her, and she started fighting, because the staff wouldn't leave her alone and let her go. And so she was like "I'm gonna have to turn 2 tricks to get some shoes!" (KI08).

Key informants who were Safe Harbor professionals emphasized that vulnerability to sexual exploitation is heavily tied to whether youth have safe housing. They pointed out that it is when youth are on the run they are particularly vulnerable to trafficking.



[T]he increase of the violence that they experience and the increase of the amount of time they stay away grows when the frequency of running increases. [KI-13]

Running away is both a cause and effect of sexual exploitation. On one hand, the housing instability caused by being on the run heightens the risk of youth being pressured to return to exploitative situations. On the other hand, sexually exploited youth may flee their housing— family, emergency or otherwise— because they feel at-risk of abuse.



[W]e know that running is a symptom and an indicator of risk for someone to experience trafficking or sexual exploitation. Right? So if you are already in the life, it is very likely that you are going to run at some point when you are triggered because you don't know how to handle the situation you're in, or because there you are being pressured to return by a trafficker, or someone else unsafe. [KI-14]

Housing instability is a push factor that intersects with nearly every aspect of life: economic security, health and wellbeing, vulnerability to domestic or intimate partner violence, and education. The Safe Harbor key informants were adamant that these factors cause youth to be on the run, increasing their vulnerability to sexual exploitation:



[Y]outh who are experiencing poverty, domestic violence, any of those things might go on the run and ... might be recruited into something dangerous [KI-14].

Child Welfare and the Foster Care System

Studies have consistently shown that the child welfare and foster care systems increase children's exposure to sexual exploitation and other forms of trauma.¹² Black women and girls are disproportionately pushed into the child protection and family court system, and Black children are more likely to be taken into foster care.^{13,14} This makes trauma, child removal, and parental termination more likely. All of these are Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)¹⁵, which makes it more likely a girl or woman would be vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

Girls who are in foster care or adopted are dealing with the trauma of not knowing who their birth family is, or being forcibly

disconnected from them. Without support, this can lead them into exploitative relationships. Secondary analysis of a focus group with two child welfare workers brought forward the following insights:



Young girls are tapped through the foster care system and then they you know get to a point where they want to find out who they are, and then there's like a disconnect between them, and their adoptive parents you know and so they're out looking for connection right any kind of connection, any kind of you know genuine love [KI-15].

Similarly, lived experience participants discussed how childhood trauma caused them or others to seek affection from people who would harm or put them in danger. For example, a participant shared that:



Young Black girls don't see themselves as having value, so they look for authenticity elsewhere. This is common in my experience with trafficked young girls. [LE-06]

In the case of transracial adoption, the participant quoted above also cautioned against white adoption of Black girls because it can push them into unsafe situations and relationships if their adoptive family isn't taking affirmative steps to involve them in Black culture¹⁶.



I work in child welfare and also support young girls in trafficking situations. There needs to be [a Safe Harbor] agency in interracial adoptions. White families don't necessarily seek out resources to connect Black girls to their culture. [LE-06]

Lived experience and key informants alike called for attention to the dynamic of girls searching for love and validation when they are questioning their identity. In this period of questioning and alienation from foster or adoptive families, they are much more vulnerable to relationship abuse or exploitation by traffickers who lure them with promises of affection and belonging. Unfortunately, as the next quotation illustrates, when social workers and foster families fail to notice or misunderstand this need for connection and culture, they will likely miss danger signs until the girl is missing and/or is attacked.



And then they're missing and you know these are the type of girls that you know like you they keep you up at night because they're so young. I mean we have might right now an 11 year old, a 14 year old, and the only times that they have surfaced is when they have been raped, assaulted, yeah, overdosed. Andit goes to so many channels before it reaches the [social] worker [KI-16].

Here, the key informant touches on how girls “fall through the cracks” of the foster care system: information has passed through “so many channels” before social workers are alerted. That means girls are only connected to supportive systems after they have experienced violence.

Falling through the cracks was echoed in the words of lived experience participants who had come through the foster care and adoption systems. They described how they had to constantly advocate for themselves, particularly for health care. These participants asserted that adopted Black girls and Black girls in the foster care system are not heard or believed.



... my stomach hurt a lot when I was a kid but was told it was attention seeking behavior. My case manager when I was briefly in foster care took me to the doctor once, but never a specialist. I tolerated and medicated the pain. I lived with this pain for decades until doctors discovered parts of my long intestine were dying. I had [to have] the whole thing removed. I had to advocate for myself [LE-06].

Further, lived experience participants called out how, as a result of being constantly ignored or dismissed, many Black women and girls expect little to no support from systems staff. The following exchange exemplifies this.



Many Black women have to advocate for themselves but it doesn't feel like a choice: it's what they have to do since they are ignored... [LE-10].

My adoptive daughter started her period at school. No one told me. I found out when I saw blood on the toilet. She didn't want to tell me, [and] the school isn't going to provide her with the pads and tampons she'll need throughout her whole life [LE-06].

In summation, involvement in the child welfare system can often push Black youth into unsafe or exploitative situations, rather than protecting them. In addition to being a “push factor” for sexual exploitation, involvement in the child welfare system can often come as a consequence when Black mothers and children experience other push factors, such as economic instability and underemployment, overcriminalization, or housing instability.

Criminalization, Fear of Reporting, and Criminal Records

Here we summarize three major and intersecting push factors:

- Criminalization of people experiencing sexual exploitation or mental illness
- Criminal records generating significant barriers to accessing resources
- Fear and distrust of law enforcement

Criminalization

Recent research underscores what many advocates have argued for years: arresting and charging people who are experiencing sexual exploitation has multiple negative, long-lasting impacts.¹⁷ The Black women participants in our interviews reiterated the fact that because Black communities are massively over-policed,¹⁸ the risks and impacts of criminalization are very high for Black women and girls.¹⁹ Particularly in the case of sexual exploitation, being arrested for prostitution creates more burden than pathways to support.²⁰

Another vector of criminalization is lack of mental health services for youth. Families and schools who are dealing with youth in mental health crises often lack resources to help them or fear the stigmatization of mental illness and do not want to draw negative attention their way. Both scenarios trigger greater vulnerability to law enforcement intervention. Key informants spoke about the scarcity of mental health resources to raise awareness and give support to families before their children are in a mental health crisis.



We don't have enough social, mental health services for youth. And so families don't know when their child has significant mental health concerns. Families don't know how to handle the behaviors and so they're scared. So they call for law enforcement to assist, and then it becomes a bigger issue [KI-15].

The police are brought into situations where Black families need help for children who have mental illness and behaviors they cannot handle. Key informants working in child welfare services raised concerns about how families feel like they have no choice but to call law enforcement when their children are in behaviors that are threatening or dangerous. Then that ramps up the exposure to law enforcement and child protective services. They are treated like criminals instead of victims/survivors.

Fear and Distrust of Law Enforcement: More Harm than Good

Many lived experience participants and key informants who provide services to Black women and girls in crisis had experiences or had heard the sentiment that reporting instances of violence to law enforcement will cause more harm than good.

Some women and girls fear that law enforcement will not be able to protect them or their loved ones from retaliatory violence. One key informant, who works in a shelter serving primarily Black girls, had also personally experienced her daughter being exploited and going missing. She recounted how her daughter did not want to report her situation to the police because the trafficker threatened her family. She told her mother she was too afraid because:



"They know where everybody works. they know what school they know, where we go on an everyday basis. They know where dad works and I don't want anything to happen to you guys, I don't want it to happen to me, so I'm gonna have to leave," she said. "The only reason I'm telling you this is because when I leave I'm leaving [forever]" [KI08].

Beyond fear of traffickers and pimps, other interviewees explained how calling on law enforcement can trigger more harm. This fear stems from a history of negative interactions. Participants feared that authorities will open the door for child protection services to

evaluate their fitness as parents, force drug screenings, arrests, or take no protective action at all.



Yeah, So if we have, you know, marginalized people who do not want to share any of their business because of their history of trauma with government entities right away, They're labeled as being non cooperative and non-compliant and so they don't want to share this information with the you know the department... I mean it could send them off on a very negative trajectory [KI-15].



And then with ... the police, [they] mainly now take the man's side basically, if this is domestic, and he hasn't hurt you or you have not hurt him, it's like - 'Well, you guys try to figure it out.' But if my life is, if I feel like I'm being threatened, and my life is in jeopardy, you want me to stay? [LE-13]



My first instinct is going to be to protect myself for my child. Then we have to think- we're left thinking about our future. If we're gonna be taken away from our child because we had to stop this [violent] person [LE-10].

Criminal Records

Lived experience participants named that having a criminal record of any kind creates a vicious cycle of: (a) exposure to violence and situations where they may be criminalized; and (b) barriers to accessing supportive and rehabilitative services. The Safe Harbor for All (SH4) Report states that:

The criminal record blocks recovery and exit from transactional sex and sex trafficking, locking people in a cycle of involvement and exploitation. It also opens the door to discrimination, harassment and abuse from landlords and employers who can use the charge to solicit sex or commit labor exploitation. (p. 40)

We re-analyzed an interview with a Twin Cities-based detective who specializes in cases of sex trafficking. This key informant believed that sometimes the only way to either get testimony from a victim or save them from sex trafficking was to arrest them or have them under a court order:



So, I'm certainly not advocating for charging women, but I think sometimes, to get mental health help, or to get addiction help, sometimes you need someone forcing you, i. e., in courts, forcing you to get help. And sometimes it's the pimp saying "No, you are not going to treatment, I need you." verses, so if we could get someone [to say] "No, she doesn't have a choice, she's not going to get sued, the courts are ordering her to do this." [KI-06]

However, the same key informant acknowledged that arrest records create significant barriers to recovery, harming survivors' chances of leaving sexual exploitation behind.



Criminal arrest, prior arrest, or arrest due to being victimized, or in this life, is incredibly detrimental to them getting out of this life, which is super frustrating to me. I've had so many women say to me, "I did identity theft." This is actually the girl that was beaten by the guy in the hotel... She was charged federally with identity theft, and has a conviction, and she's like "I can't work at Target. So there's nothing you can say or do for me that will ever make me stop." And I get it, like, you're right. [KI-06]

The key informant implied that they understood the stigma and discrimination women might face from employers who see a gap in their resume or no jobs on their resume. They argued women need structural support to get to a place where they can get jobs that keep them out of economic vulnerability that could push them back into prostitution or other dangerous situations:



Or you know, have some company or companies that are partnered with this sort of advocacy that say "Yes, I realize that you worked in sex trafficking, but you have customer service skills, you know how to talk to people, and allow them to use those experiences for a more traditional job." But like, jobs, and college, or whatever, money to go to college, because the idea is to make their life better and to get them away from this. [KI-06]

Many participants echoed the sentiment that survivors of sexual exploitation need long-term supportive and rehabilitative services that include them in society. Continuing to think about large-scale interventions to sexual exploitation, the next section discusses how education on sexual exploitation is lacking and needed for systematic prevention.

Absence of Education about the Risks of Sexual Exploitation

In the original MMAAW interviews and focus groups, interviewers asked participants to describe where they believe more resources and support are needed to prevent violence against Black women and girls. Particularly in the context of sexual exploitation, several participants called for preventative, culturally-informed education for Black youth around sexual exploitation and relationship violence.

Participants noted there is barely any education or discussion of red flags that indicate sexual exploitation or intimate partner violence. One lived experience participant lamented the lack of resources in Black communities to educate youth on these topics. She called for more discussions and educational resources so adults can help Black girls avoid exploitative or abusive relationships:



We don't have enough Black groups to be able to send our young girls to teach them about the pains, as far as sex trafficking, and how men approach them. The red flags they need to see before they accept going into or getting themselves involved with a man because his intentions may just be that. But they don't know because they weren't taught that and they need that love and attention [LE-Anna Marie's].

Many participants called for educational resources in the community to prevent girls and women from being trafficked/sexually exploited. These resources would be focused on learning about healthy relationships and the warning signs/red flags of relationship violence. Lived experience participants named that truly preventative support and education must center Black women and come from people with lived experience. For example, after an interviewer asked participant what support she needs from shelter staff, she replies:



Someone who could relate to what my life is like. And not assuming right away, like, what are they in here for? We have the same rights as everybody else [LE-Zen Bin 1].

GAPS

Staffing

Training

**IN SERVING BLACK
WOMEN AND GIRLS**

**Post-Recovery
Services**

THEME 2: GAPS

The MMAAW Task Force Report recommended that agencies improve coordination to increase accessibility for and responsiveness to Black women and girls. The report found that Black women and girls were generally poorly served or falling through the cracks when they sought help. Our secondary analysis points to specific gaps in the following areas: staffing, training, and post-recovery services.

GAPS IN STAFFING

Key informants pointed to high staff turnover and understaffing as problems the systems face when trying to serve Black women and girls. These staff issues undermined their ability to build relationships with colleagues and loss of institutional knowledge.



But you have so many, so much turnover, that happens within those agencies that are a part of the Safe Harbor... So many people have left the workforce, so that historical knowledge is gone [KI-13].

Another key informant spoke about how staff turnover means the loss of relationships and trust built over time. Those relationships create space for staff to communicate better across systems, to relate to each other and trust each other when they faced hard situations:



I think that there have been times where there has been miscommunication with some other partner agencies in the past couple of years, and it's harder to go back and lean on these relationships and it can feel like we're all trying to do what's best for our youth, and it's not always clear what that is in these really messy shades of gray situations and when you can't lean back on this trust and relationship that you've built that's really hard to do over zoom [KI 14].

Key informants and Black women with lived experiences also spoke to the need to hire Black women in these systems. A law enforcement KI believed that anti-trafficking work would be more successful if there were more Black women in positions like theirs:



However, I will say one thing that I think would be super advantageous is to have African American women more in police work. Which, pipe dream, again, like I get it, but I think women are just better at some things in this job, it just is. You know, and I think if you had African American women in this job, there doing the work that I am, it would've been even more successful [KI-06].

Other key informants and people with lived experiences strongly recommended that institutions seek out Black women with lived experiences to work in both direct service and leadership roles..



So, it's important that we paint a portrait or be a mirror. To the girls that we service, when they come into our program. So it's important that they see somebody that looks like them. 'Cause I'm older you know, so you know they'll be like you remind me of my grandma, and then, I'll be like, hey, I hope she cool and sexy like me [KI-08].

The above quotation describes a radical care ethic, and creating an atmosphere of radical hospitality for the girls. She is demonstrating how to treat Black girls like precious children, not adultify them. And using the Black cultural traditions of "fictive kin," where neighbors and friends act as caring guardians to all children in the community. Women like KI08 act as what Patricia Hill Collins and other Black feminists call "other-mothers" to the girls to draw them out and help them heal.



I actually came up with the name not too, long ago and it's actually called Sisters of Struggle. We have not had the opportunity, as women here to sit down and really get it off the ground because it's limited time here. But the goal that I really am gonna push for is gonna center around African American women. And girls coming together to find the resources that young girls need as well... a lot of these ladies here have become my support group they're like my little sisters now, and I try to give them the knowledge and the wisdom that I have [LE-Anna Marie's].

A Black KI spoke of how her lived experience gives her a different vantage point and helps Black women and girls in the system.



I have, as a Black woman, I have 400 plus years of trauma in my DNA. So I know trauma inside and out, also including my personal experiences with trauma childhood and adulthood trauma, so I know that through and through. And so my walk in my passion now is to focus on healing, healing Black and brown bodies [KI-15].

And both she and a Hmong key informant gave examples of how a pilot program with a Black organization has been key to better outcomes. A Hmong Key Informant spoke to the need to increase community and Lived Experience hires and collaborations to provide culturally competent services:



I think right now in child protection in Hennepin County, we have the pilot with the Village Arms and so I think that that's been very helpful. That really has forced me... to look at things deeper, provide the assistance put in all the preventative measures like we have a physical person from the community saying, 'hey, have you tried XY and Z?' And, you know, stepped out of your box to try things before, you know, a removal, or whatever it is, you know. So I think that that has been very helpful to me.

Well, a lot of stakeholders, a lot of decision makers, planning analysts, people who wear the big hats...they don't have that cultural sensitivity, right? ...[And] when these policies are put in place you know there is no consideration of culture. And I feel like oftentimes, 'oh, let's try to create something that fits the most,' you know it's like 'one size fits most,' and it doesn't. It doesn't, you know [KI-16].

GAPS IN TRAINING

As we learned in the initial MMAAW analysis, participants testified to the harm done by untrained or poorly trained staff. Participants gave examples from schools, hospitals, shelters and policing where gaps in training have negative consequences.

First, many key informants talked about how some of their peers were either unclear on how Safe Harbor works or hadn't had any training on it. One law enforcement interviewee was frustrated by how Safe Harbor training was not mandatory, and that the time commitment may deter many people from taking part in the training:



But I think statewide, there should be training, it doesn't have to be eight hours, I feel like people get to hang up on that, it seems so daunting, it doesn't need to be like that. Even if you had, we have roll call, fifteen minutes prior to your shift, even if you had somebody that came in like me and talked about what to look for in a traffic stop, what would a sex trafficking situation in a traffic stop look like, what would it look like in an apartment, what would it look like at the Mall of America. [KI-06]

Another KI expressed concerns that people trained on Safe Harbor in the wake of COVID, when much professional development went online, are not getting the kinds of experiential learning they should that would make them more adept at working with Safe Harbor clients:



And yes, there are trainings that rain down from Safe Harbor, that those who sit under the umbrella are supposed to participate in. But the reality of the world is in the work that we're doing, and I'm just going to speak from my experience as being a part of the Safe Harbor world. But I will generalize this, because I believe we're all having the same experience coming into the space, being a safe harbor provider, receiving that information, especially through Covid in a virtual world, does not impact what I need to do in the same fashion as it would have been if it would have been you know, in a classroom setting, if it would have been face to face, if it would have been more hands on [KI-13].

This particular informant works in a shelter setting and expressed how hard it is to get services to youth in need when staff in different systems aren't up to speed on Safe Harbor:



So when I'm working with mental health providers, or working with law enforcement, or this person or that person who are under that same fabric of Safe Harbor, and I have a piece of information that they don't have, and I'm trying to help them understand how this works-- along with what they're supposed to be doing. But they're not cognizant of it. So they're pushing back, and the service that the youth is supposed to be getting is missed. So there's a halt until everyone can get on the same playing field, and have the same bucket of knowledge. Then that service can be delivered. But by then the child is gone, or the youth is checked out. They're no longer interested and they don't trust the system [KI-13].

One key informant shared a story of lack of coordination and awareness with hospitals. These gaps in training or awareness about Safe Harbor led to dire results:



Children's Hospital had one of my girls. She's 16 and she was brutally, sexually assaulted. They picked her up and because she's 16, even though she is under our custody, but they said, 'oh, she's old enough to leave.' They let her leave. ...And by the time, like I said, we know that she was found, and when we go there she's already gone, like she's already out of their hands. And many of these very large systems that we are supposed to communicate with and work with have a, you know, a response time right and by the time the assigned worker gets on it, you know, they're already gone. They're gone and we're 10 steps behind [KI-15].

Second, participants emphasized the need for anti-racist, culturally-informed trauma informed training to mitigate the harms done by staff who continue to harbor racial stereotypes about Black women and girls, stereotypes that lead to mistreatment and misidentification of victims or a greater likelihood that law enforcement or family services will be involved rather than shelter or mental health services. For example, key informants spoke to how school staff often jump to conclusions about students without consulting caregivers:



So I see it through and through, even when I was working in crisis. Sometimes we would get calls, and we would even get calls about 'hey, should we call child protection? Cause this child's been coming up to school four days in a row with dirty clothes on?' Okay, what did you ask the parents? What's going on? Like simple questions. ...so like things that are even like—a person that has the lens—we see as minor, another system will make it really big. And that's how people get into the child welfare system [KI-15].

This key informant also talked about how people don't want to report violence because of the racial profiling and surveillance it leads to, which can bring child protection or police into the equation:



Yeah, so if we have, you know, marginalized people who do not want to share any of their business because of their history of trauma with government entities right away, they're labeled as being "non-cooperative" and "non-compliant" and so they don't want to share this information with the you know the department, and so then they I mean it could send them off on a very negative trajectory [KI-15].

Other key informants provided examples of how Black women and girls are profiled by staffers who do not see them as traumatized or survivors of violence. Rather, they are being racially profiled and subjected to suspicion in line with misogynoir stereotypes.



I've been having a couple of cases where African American women have been blood tested after childbirth, and they have THC in their system, and so they get an open child protection case that way. It has been identified that Black and brown women are drug tested far more likely than their white counterparts. And so there goes another entryway into child protection. And so once again, here is the system harming us. Before the mother can even adapt to having a child in motherhood, they're getting hit with a child protection case. I believe that's one other way.

I think that right away right off the bat, you know, historically, you know, there's already been just the ongoing difference in treatment of women of color, right. And so, especially with the African American women they're not gonna share everything, 'oh, this is my history, you know, and you know this is why, you know, this is why you shouldn't take my child, you know.' I mean they have had so many layers of trauma that you know that I feel like oftentimes you know the systems who are set up to support them [KI-15].

Finally, both key informants and Black women with lived experience were very clear that staff often “adultify” Black girls, treating them not as children or minors but as if they are adults.



Part of what we see in the way that young black girls are treated. They are treated like adults who should be able to handle themselves when oftentimes they are hurt, they're scared. They're angry and rightfully so about things that have happened to them, and we need to respond with them with gratitude for trusting that in us right for being able to show up as their whole cells.

But yeah, I think we need to also be able to respond to black girls as children... I think it's important to talk about these young people as children, because they are young folks who have had their childhoods taken from them, and they deserve to have the experiences of children, and to be given the same grace and the same patients that we would give to young people [KI-14].

One key informant was concerned about and gave examples of how staff can harm or retraumatize Black women and girls, and that Black women and girls aren't considered a priority due to staff believing racist stereotypes.



Well, I believe that it's multiple sources that have to do with that. Including going back to racism. Who cares, you know that mentality? And I believe that like I said, we're viewed in a different light.

You know, and somebody hurt them, and they go to the hospital. Are they gonna be treated fairly? The lack of care, you know, and the initiative to get out there and do something about it...

And, you know, are you gonna come into a shelter where you wanna feel safe and welcome and get the help that you need, and [then you are] greeted by staff who will do that or the other way around? [KI-08]

Recent research suggests white people often perceive Black children and teens as much older than they actually are.²¹ This is particularly problematic for Safe Harbor situations, where age makes a difference in the ways law enforcement officers, in particular, interact with trafficking victims. Safe Harbor law protects people age

24 and under from being arrested for prostitution. If system staffers are aging Black girls and women upward, they may not even think to apply Safe Harbor protections or offer Safe Harbor information and services.

A key informant who is in law enforcement and has worked trafficking cases noted that “most certainly, we need more money, advocacy, housing, for twenty four-plus. It's terrible when we're like “Oh, you're 26, sorry we don't have anything for you.”

Such a change might help Black women and girls more than other groups given the adultification problem.

GAPS IN POST-RECOVERY SERVICES

Black women with lived experience and key informants were critical of the lack of resources to support continued support and healing for Black women and girls who survive trafficking. They described frustration that housing, mental health, vocational, and education services were often inaccessible.



One of the things I think about is the black girls that I've worked with who are attempting to re-engage in high school, [and school] is a place where we have consistently found difficulty in the way that young people are communicated with. It does not foster belonging; that [communication] fosters a sense of 'other' or of 'not good enough'.. And so I just see this pattern of our young people not being truly welcomed in school. And I just think about what are the things that we need to do to move forward to build a healthy and fulfilling adulthood. Right? How do you get on the path? And i'm not saying mainstream school is the only way, but it is it is the primary path we have built for young people to move towards that, and if you don't feel welcomed and respected in that space, and if you don't feel safe like, Where does that lead you and then where are you gonna go? [KI-14].

If we could have some, like there are people here and there, but a team that is dedicated to helping women in the court system with expunging stuff that was going on in their lives. Because, and it's similar in drugs too, like, if you were

addicted to opioids, and you were stealing, well, that's bad, right, we don't steal. If [they're] not sober, and you want that person to continue to be sober, and have a job, we have to give them a job... They're gonna go back to using [drugs] if they can't get a job... I think there needs to be more life skills, and or, if I had a billion dollars, I would create all these college funds for women that got out of trafficking. Because really again, it's like 'ok, we got you out of this life, but you have no job skills, you haven't worked a real job for three years, you know, what do we do with you?' [KI-06].

Some key informants also raised the issue of providing families with support to heal from the trauma of losing a loved one to trafficking and integrating them back into the family after their return. Another key informant talked in great detail about her family's experience after her daughter disappeared, and the anguish they experienced:



It was just like she vanished, that was so devastating. That was very devastating to us, and you know just to not know where she is. So Robin never came back home after that....

Because it's not guaranteed that they're gonna be alive, you know. So every day I had to live with that horror, you know. And not only that it affected her siblings, my other kids, cause she was the oldest, and they would always ask me [KI-08].

She also shared that the family was offered counseling services, which some of them used, some didn't.



We were offered therapy. We went to family therapy, and we were offered individual therapy. I went, my husband didn't. And the kids were like 'we don't want to talk about it.' You know who, who wants to be a kid and had a trauma happen to their sister and sit in front of people you know and ask you questions, or you know just want you to talk, you know. So, but throughout the years we got through it.

This testimony shows the larger impact beyond the youth who seek Safe Harbor—especially when we consider family reunification processes. What supports are needed for that process? Only supporting the Black women and girls who reunite with their families would be inadequate, because the whole family has been traumatized by the experience. The key informant's remarks about her kids not wanting to talk about it also suggests that the timeline to healing may be different for each family. It is also likely that different families will require different healing modalities in the immediate aftermath of violence. Culturally appropriate and age-appropriate therapies, spiritual traditions, or rituals may be a better fit for folks who are wary of dominant psychology's forms of talk therapy.

COMPARING SAFE HARBOR PHASE 4 AND MMAAW SECONDARY ANALYSIS

One of the key findings of the Phase 4 Safe Harbor Evaluation Report (SH4) is that “preliminary evidence suggests that Safe Harbor may not be effectively reaching the Black youth population.” (SH 4 p.7). SH4 compared the number of sex trafficking survivors identified and served by law enforcement and social services providers to the number of survivors who were SH clients. They found a much larger discrepancy for Black survivors than white survivors, suggesting a disconnect between the systems that first encounter survivors and Safe Harbor providers.

What could be causing this disconnect? One factor could be stereotyping of Black women and girls as “uncooperative.” As mentioned in the above section on training, without adequate training, many staff may misidentify trauma in Black girls as anger or stubbornness. This could, perhaps, lead them to label girls uncooperative or “strong enough” to not need further help.

The Safe Harbor Phase Four evaluation includes analysis from interviews with 56 people involved in different facets of Safe Harbor services and protections, such as law enforcement, advocates, staffers at sites, and regional navigators. Many of the interviewees mentioned issues around training that resonated with our secondary analysis.

In over 20 of the interviews, the following themes emerged:

- Law enforcement do not have adequate training in how to spot trafficking victims. “It’s not something that’s instituted in law enforcement skills training” (p.21)
- Culturally competent and culturally responsive training is lacking. “I know that there are people out there doing the work with culturally diverse populations that aren’t culturally competent, that don’t understand how different things come into play when they’re interacting with youth from different backgrounds. More training needs to be done” (21)

In six of the interviews, respondents mentioned the need for more long-term mental health support, particularly as part of housing support options. “There is a great need for... a housing program that does have access to psychiatry... and some of those longer term mental health supports that are going to be helpful to follow someone over time” (p.22).

These interview themes resonate with our analysis of MMAAW data as well: cultural competence, particularly having Black women staffers with lived experience in leadership roles, was a key point participants made in the interviews. Both key informants and lived experience participants also spoke to the need for culturally relevant trauma support not only for victims of trafficking but also their families.

Another factor causing gaps could be related to staffing, turnover and training gaps around SH law and procedures. While there are many possible on-ramps to safe harbor services, if people aren’t trained or aware of how to get survivors into those services, then those pathways to safe harbor will go unused. And, if there aren’t enough staff to handle the needs of clients, then it is more likely youth will fall through the cracks or be underserved. According to studies by the Minnesota Department of Human Services and the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, Minnesota is struggling to fill social services positions.

For those youth who did make their way to SH services, many experienced other gaps in service that made recovery difficult. Gaps in service were measured by two questions in the SH 4 survey:

- “What else do you still want help with?” The top 3 answers were: Mental health support (44%); transportation (38%); and housing and keeping a job tied for third (35% each)
- “What services did you hope to receive that you didn’t?” The top 3 answers were: Employment assistance and Housing (tied for first at 42%); Mental health (26%) and Independent living skills (21%)²²

These SH 4 survey responses resonate with the secondary analysis of the MMAAW data. Both lived experience interviewees and key informants noted that more resources were needed to support Black women and girls after they sought shelter or protection from traffickers. Likewise, in the original MMAAW report and recommendations, housing and shelter was a key sector for resource and access improvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Trafficking is a complex problem that touches on multiple factors in people's lives. Providing better Safe Harbor services to Black women and girls likewise requires an approach that includes multiple systems, including health, education, child welfare, housing, employment, and criminal justice. All of these systems require targeted, coordinated improvements to support Black women and girls, a group that receives the poorest quality of service. However, these improvements to service must be made with deliberate consideration of the intersecting and cyclical nature of sexual exploitation, and the complex human needs of those they are serving.

Reviewing the secondary analysis results and their resonance with the SH4 report, we recommend:



Increase the age range of people eligible for Safe Harbor



Hire more Black women with lived experience into positions of service and leadership



Create specific shelter sites or space within existing shelters for Black women and girls



Allocate funds and other resources to initiatives created by and for Black women and girls



Target health, education, law enforcement, and child welfare systems for comprehensive training and skill-building to serve Black women and girls

“Most certainly, we need more money, advocacy, housing, for [people older than 24 years]. It’s terrible when we’re like “Oh, you’re 26? Sorry, we don’t have anything for you.” (Key informant)

<p>Increase the age range of people eligible for Safe Harbor.</p>	<p>The age limit of twenty-four may be more arbitrary than necessary, and it may disproportionately impact Black girls and women who are adultified by system staffers.</p>
<p>Hire more Black women with lived experience into positions of service and leadership</p>	<p>All of the data reviewed here point to the need for Black women and girls to be met in the system by people they can trust to understand their experience and respond to them with a presumption of innocence and care. Black women and girls are often more vulnerable to sexual exploitation because the systems, particularly supportive housing, child welfare, and law enforcement, do not adequately serve them when they are in crisis. While a separate recommendation addresses the need to improve training for all people working within Safe Harbor-involved sectors so they can do better by Black women and girls, we center here the lived experience of survivors and their families who deeply appreciate and value the work already being done by Black women on behalf of Black girls.</p>
<p>Create specific shelter sites or space within existing shelters for Black women and girls.</p>	<p>This recommendation follows from the analysis indicating that Black survivors will experience more trust and feelings of welcome in spaces designed for them and staffed by people who share their lived and cultural experiences.</p> <p>Allow survivors with children to bring them into the shelter with them without restrictions. This would serve to maintain family unity and reduce the push factors into the child welfare or law enforcement system for youth who are currently ineligible by age to be housed in domestic violence shelters.</p>

“Even if you had, [during] roll call, fifteen minutes prior to your shift, somebody that came in like me and talked about what would a sex trafficking situation in a traffic stop look like, what would it look like in an apartment, what would it look like at the Mall of America. ” (Key informant)

Allocate funds and other resources to initiatives created by and for Black women and girls.

We highlight the lived experiences of survivors and family members who found solace and safety amongst Black women and in Black-women led spaces. In the “Push Factors” and “Gaps” sections we identified that Black women and girls are constantly without support that meets their experiences and needs. This makes them more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and stuck in exploitative situations. Institutions should direct and/or share more resources with these organizations providing safe, nurturing spaces for survivors. We also note here that the Safe Harbor 4 report recommends that the Minnesota Department of Health “strategically direct resources to specific cultural groups” to remedy gaps and deficiencies in service to Black, indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) clients of Safe Harbor sites.

Target health, education, law enforcement, and child welfare systems for comprehensive training and skill-building to serve Black women and girls.

We recommend these sectors given how often they are mentioned as places failing to identify Black girls, in particular, as in need of help. As in the MMAAW report, we recommend comprehensive training in: (1) anti-racist, culturally competent trauma-informed practices; and (2) comprehensive training in Safe Harbor protocols and processes . Such training would potentially increase staffers’ ability to both recognize a Black woman or girl as a victim of trafficking or abuse and to direct them to the right kind of support rather than the carceral system.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

We are interested in pursuing further data collection from professionals in law enforcement, particularly those who identify as Black or Black women. Our interest in recruiting more law enforcement participants was sparked by several quotations highlighted in the secondary analysis. This data collection would inquire further into the observations of participants with lived experiences that officers rarely recognize signs of violence against Black women and girls – whether it is trafficking or domestic violence-or employ questionable frameworks for thinking about how women and girls behave in relation to abusers.

We would also pursue questions about criminalization and perspectives on decriminalizing prostitution in Minnesota. This data collection would focus on law enforcement, Safe Harbor navigators, shelter staff, and people with lived experience of being arrested for prostitution. The original MMAAW pool of interviewees only included one police officer [KI-06]. That officer expressed their belief that criminalization of sex work is a useful tool to get testimony against pimps. However, that coercive tactic exposes women and girls to incarceration and the risk of having a criminal record. These outcomes make it more likely child protective services will take their children away, they will not be hired, not qualify for housing, and more. Bringing charges against Black women and girls pushes them further into the cycle of vulnerability. Below are a series of quotations from the data set that point to perspectives we'd like to explore more deeply.

POLICE OFFICER: *Oftentimes with a Romeo pimp, it's "this is my boyfriend" and then they have a tattoo of their name and "we're getting married," and for them, that is very very real. So when they're explaining to a police officer responding to a domestic or an assault or a robbery, it's very real to them also. Because that woman or girl is so convinced that that is reality [KI-06].*

SURVIVOR: *The police mainly now take the man's side basically if this is domestic, and he hasn't hurt you or you have not hurt him, it's like - 'Well, you guys try to figure it out.' But if my life is, if I feel like I'm being threatened, and my life is in jeopardy, you want me to stay. But then, on the other hand, the other side of that is okay, so I'm gonna stay. And then, when they come back either one of us could be hurt or even deceased, you know [LE-13].*

SAFE HARBOR STAFF: *I have had to call our youth who run with you know who go on run from [the shelter], the law enforcement receiving that phone call isn't always sensitive to what we need to have happen. And because they know of our location and the demographic of use that we work with. I don't think there's an urgency to go out and recover the youth [KI-13].*

We are also interested in conducting follow-up interviews or focus groups with the following groups:

- Survivors of youth trafficking and/or families to provide additional insights on post-survival services and needs
- Safe Harbor administration/leadership (e.g., in the Minnesota Department of Health) on coordination, training and staffing concerns
- Black women direct service providers who are within or outside official Safe Harbor service institutions for insights on how they work with youth and navigate systems that control resources

Because of the original timeframe of the MMAAW task force, RIA was unable to hold additional focus groups and interviews in certain parts of the state, and had to limit the overall number of research sites. However, with more time and resources, we would build on existing relationships with Safe Harbor administrators, shelters, and community organizations to recruit participants who would be able to speak to these issues.

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