

# RESEARCH CONNECTION

## Addressing the challenges of the sexual exploitation of children and youth

By Karen Rempel, Ph.D. & Breanna Lawrence, Ph.D.



### Why this research is important

As a multifaceted legal, social, health, and psychological issue, sexual exploitation is an understudied area of research. In fact, very little is known about those involved. The influence of social media, substance use, complex trauma, and increasing numbers of children in foster care are risk factors related to sexual exploitation. This is not a new issue for a large urban centre such as Winnipeg; however, smaller and rural communities often lack awareness and resources when complicated problems such as sexual exploitation emerge in these communities. The dearth of research on sexual exploitation in rural areas exacerbates the implication related to public perception and effective interventions.

### What you need to know

The sexual exploitation of children and youth is a significant societal concern with increasing prevalence and challenging research considerations. In Brandon and the Westman area of Manitoba, the concern is rapidly growing. However, there is, in general, a poor understanding of the definition(s) of sexual exploitation and an overly narrow profile of victims, which leads to increased complexities. In addition to improving institutional collaboration, there is a need for increased public awareness, updated training for professionals, and specialized community services.

### How the research was conducted

The research was initiated following consultations between the Brandon School Division and the Brandon University's Faculty of Education. Through a joint initiative, a Research Round Table Forum was developed to promote exchanges between researchers, experts, and practitioners on the topic of sexually exploited children and youth in Brandon. Focused on gathering information and promoting awareness, the Forum was held over two days and included keynote presentations by recognized national researchers, discussion panels of local experts, and focused group discussions. The researchers gathered and analyzed data

from the focused group discussions. The themes from the focus group discussions were used as a conceptual framework for a systematic document review of reports and research to locate, appraise, and synthesise the best and most current evidence and sources of information.

### What the researchers found

Differing definitions of sexual exploitation result in a lack of awareness of sexual exploitation as a criminal offence and intensifies barriers to institutional collaboration. While boys and young men are not traditionally seen as at risk, all genders are vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Social media is often used as a recruitment tool. The lack of identification and limited prosecution of recruiters and perpetrators of the crime of sexual exploitation contributes to on-going sexual exploitation as well as under-reporting in small, rural or remote communities. Sexually exploited children and youth often experience great difficulty in trying to escape sexual exploitation. For example, trauma bonding or attachment to the perpetrator is not uncommon. Mental and physical illness issues including cognitive impairments, complex trauma, psychological stress, behavioural concerns, and substance use can be consequences of sexual exploitation.

### How this research can be used

The concerns of communities and service providers is for prevention, reduction, and early detection of children and youth who are at risk for sexual exploitation. Service providers, as well as law enforcement agencies, should actively work together across jurisdictions to support and identify at-risk children and youth. At the same time, better efforts are needed to identify and prosecute recruiters and perpetrators. In the larger community, there is a need for greater awareness of the signs and risk factors, reduced stigma of sexually exploited children and youth, and more strengths-based interventions for marginalized and vulnerable populations.

### About the researchers

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### Publications based on this research

Centre for Aboriginal and Rural Education Studies. (2018).

*Report on the Research Round Table on Sexually Exploited Children and Youth in Brandon, Manitoba.*  
Brandon, Manitoba, Canada: Author.

You can see the full report at:

<https://www.brandonu.ca/bu-cares/files/2019/02/BU-SECY-Report-November-2018-277405.pdf>

### Keywords

Sexual exploitation of children and youth; at-risk children and youth

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