



JOHNS HOPKINS BLOOMBERG SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH  
The Moore Center for the  
Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse

## Moore Center Projects

### Safe Harbor Law Evaluation Across Multiple States

#### Summary

As part of our mission to research and develop child sexual abuse prevention strategies and inform and advise stakeholders on research, we are launching a study to determine whether commercially sexually exploited children protected by Safe Harbor laws, which are designed to ensure that exploited youth are not charged with prostitution and/or are given access to resources, fare better than children who are charged with prostitution offenses.

#### Background

- Commercial sexual exploitation of children is a significant problem. While it's hard to determine the exact number of commercially sexually exploited youth, estimates range from 1,400 to over 2 million children and many youth continue to be charged with prostitution offenses. In 2012, 616 youth were arrested for prostitution related charges nationally.
- Sexually exploited children are considered a highly vulnerable population because they are more likely to have a history of physical and sexual abuse, family dysfunction, and neglect. Sexually exploited youth tend to come from disadvantaged households and neighborhoods. These factors may make children especially vulnerable to a host of negative outcomes, including commercial sexual exploitation.
- Safe Harbor laws are used to treat these children as victims, through decriminalization and placement in treatment services. However, not all states have Safe Harbor laws. Many commercially sexually exploited children are being arrested and not receiving the services they need.
- In 2008, New York was the first state to develop a Safe Harbor law, and since then, 17 additional states have enacted some level of Safe Harbor-style policy protection for children. Though Safe Harbor laws vary by state, the underlying values are consistent: 1) children involved in prostitution are victims; 2) sexually exploited children have needs that exceed the capabilities of the criminal and juvenile justice systems; and 3) the negative consequences of a criminal justice response to sexually exploited children are considerable.

#### Research Questions

Our Safe Harbor Law study seeks to answer the following questions:

- Has Safe Harbor legislation impacted national trends in arrests for sexually exploited children?
- Do children protected under Safe Harbor policies fare differently with regard to the justice system compared to children prosecuted for prostitution?
- How has Safe Harbor legislation shaped the way key stakeholders respond to sexually exploited children?

## Timeline

- **Phase 1: Study preparation.** The project's first 12 months will be dedicated to obtaining institutional review board (IRB) approvals, amending existing data sharing agreements and maintaining data accessibility with current partner states, obtaining study support, and finalizing data extraction protocols with all study sites.
- **Phase 2. Data Collection.** The project's second phase will be dedicated to obtaining archival criminal justice records both nationally and from individual states.
- **Phase 3: Data Analysis.** Data analysis will begin once data collection efforts are finalized and data cleaning and conditioning is complete.
- **Phase 4: Synthesis of findings and dissemination.** The project's final phase will involve the completion of the final report and the dissemination of study results and recommendations. The final report will include, at a minimum, a description of the study methodology, summaries of key findings, detailed analyses related to each of the identified project goals, and resulting policy recommendations. The dissemination plan will include submission of manuscripts to scientific journals, development of white papers and policy briefs aimed at non-research audiences including practitioners and policy makers, state-specific reports to share with participating agencies, presentation of results at professional conferences, and other dissemination vehicles.

## Collaborators and Partners

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### Principal Investigator

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### Co-Principal Collaborator

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