

**Setting the Standard: Meeting the Needs of Sex Trafficked Black Girls  
in the State of California**

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## Introduction

While anyone can fall victim to trafficking, this phenomenon disproportionately affects girls and women. A study from the National Human Trafficking Resource Center found that 85% of sex trafficking women are victims.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Deliver Fund, a non-profit organization that gathers statistics on human trafficking, estimates that between 15,000 and 50,000 women and children are forced into sexual slavery in the United States every year.<sup>2</sup> Many researchers believe that thousands of trafficking victims remain undetected, thus the numbers are likely much higher. The trafficking industry upholds clear gender dynamics, whereby girls are predominately victims and buyers of sex are predominantly men (hence the term “Johns” which is used to describe a sex buyer). As a result, this thesis will focus primarily on the needs of girls, since they are most often the victims of trafficking.

As young people engage in the widespread use of social media, traffickers have initiated more covert operations for recruiting victims. Traffickers have switched from an on the street recruiting method to an online recruiting method. This has only been furthered by the COVID-19 pandemic as trafficking has become less physically identifiable. The Polaris Project found that “online forms of sex trafficking increased by more than 45% during the COVID-19 pandemic.”<sup>3</sup> Tragically, as the rates of domestic sex trafficking continue to rise, so do the number of minors who are trafficked. In the United States, the average age of entry for children into the domestic

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<sup>1</sup> AAUW. (2022, August 23). *Where we stand: Human trafficking*. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://www.aauw.org/resources/policy/position-human-trafficking/>

<sup>2</sup> Deliver Fund. (2020, April 17). *Facts about human trafficking in the US*. Facts About Human Trafficking. Retrieved December 11, 2022, from <https://deliverfund.org/facts-about-human-trafficking-in-the-us/#:~:text=It%20is%20%20estimated%20that%20beten,is%20very%20difficult%20to%20research.>

<sup>3</sup> Polaris Project. (2021). *Sexual Exploitation During the Pandemic*. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Sexual-Exploitation-During-the-Pandemic.pdf>

minor sex trafficking industry is 12-14 years old.<sup>4</sup> Despite the federal passage of several pieces of landmark legislation (such as the Federal Trafficking Victim Protection Act in 2000 that sought to protect and provide services to victims of domestic minor sex trafficking, as well as prosecute traffickers) the number of victims identified nationally continues to rise. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children found that there was an 846% increase in reported child sex trafficking cases from 2010 to 2015.<sup>5</sup> This may be partially due to more effective screening mechanisms that allow law enforcement to identify trafficking victims more successfully. However, the rising rates are also partially due to the lucrative money associated with the exploitative business and the continued demand for these girls by Johns.<sup>6</sup> The Institute for Women's Policy Research notes that "human [sex] trafficking generates large illegal profits which, combined with the perceived low risk of arrest and prosecution for traffickers, help to fuel trafficking."<sup>7</sup> On average, a trafficker can make up to \$150,000-\$200,000 per trafficking victim annually.<sup>8</sup>

In the American public perception, White suburban women are often viewed as victims of DMST. However, this is not the case. In a UCLA Law Review article on *The Racial Roots of Human Trafficking*, Cheryl Nelson Butler Esq. notes that "the mainstream media portrays the iconic prostituted youth as white and suburban, thereby rendering minority victims invisible."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Education. (n.d.). *Human trafficking 101 for school administrators and staff - ed*. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://rems.ed.gov/docs/Human%20Trafficking%20101%20for%20School%20Administrators%20and%20Staff.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> *Current DMST Statistics*. The Refuge for DMST. (n.d.). Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://therefugedmst.org/dmst-statistics>

<sup>6</sup> Judicial Council of California. (2017). *Human Trafficking Toolkit in California: Toolkit for Judicial Officers*. Retrieved November 3, 2022, from <https://www.courts.ca.gov/documents/human-trafficking-toolkit-cfcc.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Bocinski, S. (2020, September 9). *The Economic Drivers and Consequences of Sex Trafficking in the United States*. Institute for Women's Policy Research. Retrieved November 8, 2022, from <https://iwpr.org/iwpr-publications/briefing-paper/the-economic-drivers-and-consequences-of-sex-trafficking-in-the-united-states/>

<sup>8</sup> Youth Underground. (2023, March 14). *Facts & Figures*. Retrieved April 26, 2023, from <https://youth-underground.com/facts-figures/>

<sup>9</sup> Youth Underground. (2023, March 14). *Facts & Figures*. Retrieved April 26, 2023, from <https://youth-underground.com/facts-figures/>

State systemic failures make young Black women and girls disproportionately vulnerable to sexual exploitation and trafficking in the United States. As noted by Rights4Girls, an organization that works to advocate for survivors and create policy change, Black girls “are more likely to experience poverty, and consequently more likely to be disconnected from schools and other community supports.”<sup>10</sup> This makes Black girls more vulnerable to the emotional and physical manipulation of their trafficker. The Congressional Black Caucus found that 40% of sex trafficking victims were identified as Black women.<sup>11</sup> Systemic racism entrenched in the justice, education, and foster care system compounds to exert a multi-layered form of oppression in the lives of Black girls. These systems fail to treat Black girls with dignity, often punishing them harshly and disproportionately, while simultaneously failing to protect Black girls from injustice from the outside world. Such punishments can separate Black girls from receiving resources that help them thrive and push them away from systems of support and onto the streets, where traffickers can easily manipulate and exploit them. In addition, inadequate protection of Black girls through systemic failures, facilitates the space for them to be exploited by traffickers. In the Congressional Black Caucus study, traffickers admitted that they “traffick[ed] Black women [because they believe it] would land them less jail time than trafficking White women if caught.”<sup>12</sup> In my thesis, I want to make clear that race in and of itself is not a *risk factor* for someone becoming a victim of trafficking. Rather systemic harms that are caused by racism and exerted onto people of certain races, makes certain groups vulnerable to exploitation.

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<sup>10</sup> Rights4Girls. (n.d.). *Domestic Child Sex Trafficking and Black Girls*. Retrieved November 3, 2022, from <https://rights4girls.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/r4g/2019/05/Black-Girls-DCST-May-2019-1.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Davey, S. (n.d.). *Snapshot of the State of Black Women and Girls: Sex Trafficking in the U.S.* Retrieved November 3, 2022, from <https://www.cbcfinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SexTraffickingReport3.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Davey, S. (n.d.). *Snapshot of the State of Black Women and Girls: Sex Trafficking in the U.S.* Retrieved November 3, 2022, from <https://www.cbcfinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SexTraffickingReport3.pdf>

The clear gap between the public's perception of who is victimized by DMST, and the realities of actual victims can have serious implications. And while the public's perception of White suburban women as victims of DMST is a problem, it is a symptom of a larger issue. It may be *easier* for service providers to not be explicit about race in their service provision due to either ignoring race as a central contributing factor to the prevalence of DMST or creating the assumption that White suburban women are the default victim. However, when services that are meant to serve historically marginalized communities are not explicit about race, that service provision will always fail and will continue to reinforce systemic racism. This disconnect can result in improper spending and decision-making on the part of state governments when determining the best allocation of money and resources for victims of DMST. In addition, when race is not constantly discussed as it relates to policy and programming, it assumes that policies, when implemented, will affect communities in the same manner. However, because of longstanding issues of inequity in our society, that are driven by race based discrimination and harms, certain communities will oftentimes not reap the benefits of policies meant to help 'everyone'. Critically engaging in race, as it relates to policy decisions, ensures that policymakers are intentional in thinking about how policies will have differing impacts on different communities.

In this thesis, I will examine California's service provision for victims of domestic minor sex trafficking. I seek to answer the question: *How can California best meet the service provision needs of Black girls affected by DMST?* My thesis utilizes scholarly literature to inform a framework for understanding the needs of trafficked Black girls. Using insights from scholarly literature and drawing original qualitative data from interviews with experts working in the DMST space, I explore the ways in which California can best meet Black girl's service provision

needs. Both my literature review and expert interviews grounded my policy recommendation aimed at promoting stronger service provision for Black girls.

## **Social Relevance**

Black girls are disproportionately affected by domestic minor sex trafficking, yet too often their experiences are not central to the conversation surrounding the creation of service provision. While many government agencies do not gather statistics on the race of DMST victims, anecdotal evidence and a few key statistics highlight that Black children are disproportionately victimized by this phenomenon. Numerous studies, such as the 2013 National Juvenile Prostitution Study have found that a disproportionate number of child sex trafficking victims are Black.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the FBI estimates that Black children comprise the majority of all prostitution arrests for those under 18, at around 59%.<sup>14</sup> The Bureau of Justice Statistics found similar results. In a 2008 to 2010 study, nonwhite children accounted for 358 of the 460 cases of child sex trafficking investigated by the U.S. Department of Justice, with a majority of nonwhite victims identifying as Black and Latino.”<sup>15</sup> Research also illustrates that the issue is bicoastal, with Black girls consistently being exploited at high rates. A study found that 50% of child trafficking victims in New York City were Black children, with Black children representing the largest subgroup of victims.<sup>16</sup> A separate study found that up to 67% of child trafficking victims in New York were Black, despite comprising 26% of the population.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, in California, an

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<sup>13</sup> Butler, C. N. (2015). *The Racial Roots of Human Trafficking*. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from [https://www.westcoastcc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Butler\\_10.17.16.pdf](https://www.westcoastcc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Butler_10.17.16.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Rights4Girls. (2023, April 8). *HUMAN RIGHTS PROJECT FOR GIRLS*. Rights4Girls. Retrieved April 26, 2023, from <https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/r4g/2015/02/African-American-Girls-and-Trafficking.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Butler, C. N. (2015). *The Racial Roots of Human Trafficking*. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from [https://www.westcoastcc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Butler\\_10.17.16.pdf](https://www.westcoastcc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Butler_10.17.16.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> JJ., C. M. C. L. P. D. G. (n.d.). *Addressing racism in the domestic minor sex trafficking of black girls: The role of public health critical race praxis*. Public health reports (Washington, D.C. : 1974). Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35775910/>

Alameda County community agency that serves victims of DMST, found that out of all of their victim referrals, 66% were Black children.<sup>18</sup>

Statistics also highlight the rate at which Black girls specifically are found to be victimized by DMST. Research from Dr. Jamille Harrel in *Knowledge of Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking among African American Parents* notes that “of the over 300,000 minors in the U.S. who are victims of domestic sex trafficking, it is estimated that 43% are African American girls.”<sup>19</sup> Other studies highlight similar statistics, one in particular found that Black girls composed 23% to 92% of victims in six cities that were being studied for domestic minor sex trafficking.<sup>20</sup> However, Black girls comprised 6% to 38% of the population in those respective cities. Time and time again, studies highlight that Black girls are always overrepresented. In a study entitled *Survivor Insights: The Role of Technology in Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking* conducted by Thorn and Dr. Vanessa Bouché, they found that 45% of their sample of 260 domestic minor sex trafficking survivors were Black girls.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Dr. Hannabeth Franchino-Olsen and Dr. Sandra Martin used the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health to find that of a sample of 12,605 respondents, Black girls had significantly higher odds of being a victim of domestic minor sex trafficking than their non-Black peers.<sup>22</sup> California specific data highlights that the disproportionate representation of Black girls as victims can be

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<sup>18</sup> Rights4Girls. (2023, April 8). *HUMAN RIGHTS PROJECT FOR GIRLS*. Rights4Girls. Retrieved April 26, 2023, from <https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/r4g/2015/02/African-American-Girls-and-Trafficking.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Harrell, J. (2015). *Knowledge of Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking among African American Parents*. Walden University. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2441&context=dissertations>

<sup>20</sup> JJ, C. M. C. L. P. D. G. (n.d.). *Addressing racism in the domestic minor sex trafficking of black girls: The role of public health critical race praxis*. Public health reports (Washington, D.C. : 1974). Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35775910/>

<sup>21</sup> Meshelemiah, J. C. A. (2022, October 28). *How the Jezebel stereotype has been weaponized against black girls and made them vulnerable to sex trafficking: An examination of Carceral Public Systems - Journal of African American Studies*. SpringerLink. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12111-022-09596-0>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



seen on an individual state level, in addition to a federal level. The STAR Court program in Los Angeles, CA, reported that 91% of trafficked girls were Black or Latinx.<sup>23</sup>

Considering the disproportionate impact of sex trafficking on Black girls, service provision should aim to be color-brave. Color-brave, a term developed by Melody Hobson, encourages individuals to “embrace the notion that race impacts experiences, and pushes [individuals] to investigate [their] own biases and assumptions about race” in order to better craft solutions and foster relationships.<sup>24</sup> If the state of California chooses to be color-brave when thinking about issues of domestic minor sex-trafficking, race can be a tool to *better* serve girls. Embracing race as a central factor in the disproportionate impact of DMST allows government officials to ask questions, engage with impacted people, and create services that are stronger. Given the intersection of systemic racism and sexism in the United States, it is imperative that service providers adopt a color-brave framework to ensure that Black female victims are not harmed by the failure to consider the matter. Discussions regarding service provision must take seriously that Black girls are disproportionately affected by DMST, and therefore service provision should be created with the goal of aiming to serve those most impacted. Failure to acknowledge race (and the associated racial bias and systemic racism) will result in these girls not receiving adequate care and services tailored towards their needs.

Failure to engage Black girls will result in service provision that is color-blind. Service provision is an important tool that seeks to meet the specific needs of sex trafficked victims. Color-blind service provision will treat all victims the same, thereby assuming that their experiences are the same, and not differed by race. However, trafficking and the exploitation of

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Hobson, M. (2014). *Color blind or color brave?* Melody Hobson: Color blind or color brave? | TED Talk. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from [https://www.ted.com/talks/mellody\\_hobson\\_color\\_blind\\_or\\_color\\_brave](https://www.ted.com/talks/mellody_hobson_color_blind_or_color_brave)

Black girls is so heavily tied to historic racist wrongdoings. As a result, attempting to separate the two (race and trafficking) will not help address the root of the problem and ensure adequate service provision. My study seeks to center the experiences of Black girls and be explicit about how to best serve them. I believe that by critically engaging stakeholders who are experts and work explicitly to provide services that help Black girls, this thesis can be a step towards imagining what a strong color-brave state-wide response looks like.

## **California Sex Trafficking Landscape**

I have chosen to examine California as a case study due to the state's unique relationship with the sex trafficking industry. California's geographic location, densely populated cities, and large economy, make the state a leader in domestic minor sex trafficking cases. In 2018, there were 705 human trafficking cases reported in California (most of which were sex trafficking incidents), making it the state with the highest human trafficking rate in the United States.<sup>25</sup> In addition, in 2019, Deliver Fund identified California as the state with the highest per capita trafficking rate.<sup>26</sup> Out of the top twenty-five cities with the highest cumulative reported cases of human trafficking per capita, California cities were listed in five slots.<sup>27</sup> In addition, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego were determined by the FBI as three of the highest high-intensity child prostitution metropolitans.<sup>28</sup> However, while California has high rates of sex trafficking, the state is a leader in innovative service provision for sex-trafficked minors.

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<sup>25</sup> HTCourts. (n.d.). *Human Trafficking in California: Facts, Statistics, Shelters and Prevention Organizations*. htcourts.org. Retrieved April 26, 2023, from <https://htcourts.org/california/>

<sup>26</sup> Deliver Fund. (2023, January 15). *3 states with the highest human trafficking in America*. DeliverFund.org. Retrieved April 26, 2023, from <https://deliverfund.org/blog/top-3-states-in-america-for-human-trafficking/>

<sup>27</sup> National Human Trafficking Hotline. (2018). *Hotline Statistics*. Retrieved November 3, 2022, from <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/states>

<sup>28</sup> Judicial Council of California. (2017). *Human Trafficking Toolkit in California: Toolkit for Judicial Officers*. Retrieved November 3, 2022, from <https://www.courts.ca.gov/documents/human-trafficking-toolkit-cfcc.pdf>

From 2014 to 2017 California passed three landmark policies that marked changes in the DMST service provision landscape. Prior to the passage of these policies, victims of DMST were prosecuted as child prostitutes, rather than treated as victims. The stigma and treatment of child victims lacked humanity and adequate resources necessary to support them. The criminalization of child trafficking led to victims being placed into juvenile detention facilities where they faced increased contact with the criminal justice system. This also made it harder to connect victims with services. California’s bills aimed to strengthen service provision and truly see and treat victims as victims. The first of the three landmark policies was California Senate Bill 855, which allowed victims of DMST to receive services from the child welfare system and created the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) Program, which allocates funding for counties to craft multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs) in charge of service responses.<sup>29</sup> A year later, California Senate Bill 794 codified the Federal Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act “which requires all county child welfare and probation agencies to create protocols to identify, report, document, and serve CSEC and at-risk children.”<sup>30</sup> Lastly, California Senate Bill 1322 prohibited victims from prosecution.<sup>31</sup> The implementation of these policies triggered county and state level services and resources.

## **Theoretical Foundations**

In order to understand how the state of California can better serve Black girls, it is important to clearly define what scholars deem as necessary components of service provision for sex trafficked Black girls. Cultural factors, such as the adultification (the practice of treating

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<sup>29</sup> National Center for Youth Law. (2022, April 1). *California CSEC Policy Compendium* . National Center for Youth Law. Retrieved April 26, 2023, from <https://youthlaw.org/resources/california-csec-policy-compendium-under-construction>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Black children as though they are adults) and sexualization of the bodies of Black girls, can play a role in explaining their disproportionate rate of sexual exploitation. Dr. Monique Morris notes in her book *Pushout*, “[adultification] is a profound concept that bears repeating: no matter what a Black girl does, no matter her age, and no matter how small or big she is, a man is going to always be looking at her sexually.”<sup>32</sup>

Stereotypes and racial bias pertaining to Black girls has allowed society to turn a blind eye to their victimization. As mentioned in my introduction, the adultification of Black girls has played into the notion that Black girls are naturally “overly sexual” and are thus viewed as adult prostitutes who are willfully engaging in sexual favors, rather than children who have been emotionally manipulated and trafficked. In addition, the cultural and societal views regarding Black girls has led to systemic harms. As noted by Dr. Jacquelyn Meshelemiah, this adultification encourages harsh and punitive punishment which can be seen in the education, child welfare, and criminal justice systems.<sup>33</sup>

### *Understanding the Problem on a Systemic Level*

Cultural biases and systemic failures oftentimes compound to make Black girls disproportionately vulnerable to the sex trafficking industry. Scholarly literature details the three key systems that have caused Black girls trauma and made them vulnerable. The three most influential systems were identified by the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) as the foster care system, the juvenile justice system, and the education system. While these systems all harm Black girls in different ways, they all result in pushing Black girls away from systems of support

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<sup>32</sup> Morris, Monique, *Pushout: the Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*, The New Press, 2018, p. 130

<sup>33</sup> Meshelemiah, J. C. A. (2022, October 28). *How the Jezebel stereotype has been weaponized against black girls and made them vulnerable to sex trafficking: An examination of Carceral Public Systems - Journal of African American Studies*. SpringerLink. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12111-022-09596-0>

and placing them in more vulnerable positions. These systems disconnect Black girls from society, where they remain neglected. Meshelemiah notes that “the unprecedented number of African American girls who disappear from their classrooms, communities, and churches, only to end up exploited, remains uncounted because Black children are seldom considered high-profile cases.”<sup>34</sup>

*The Foster Care System:* Oftentimes, traffickers spend several months building a relationship with the girls that they intend to traffic. Traffickers tend to seek out girls who have experienced abandonment and abuse. This trauma makes it easier for victims to become exclusively reliant on their relationship with their trafficker. Since these girls have often experienced abuse, traffickers present a warped perception of “love” and try to convince vulnerable girls that they will love and provide for them. As a result, traffickers see youth in the foster care system as easy targets for exploitation, given the abandonment that they have faced from their biological and foster families.<sup>35</sup> The Congressional Black Caucus notes that girls frequently have negative experiences with their group/foster homes. Black girls are often sexually abused and exploited.<sup>36</sup> In particular, a 2017 study from the National Women’s Law Center found that Black and Native American girls are more likely to experience sexual abuse, exposure to violence, and other forms of maltreatment in foster care.<sup>37</sup> As a result, girls run away from their foster homes and roam the streets, increasing their chance of engaging with a

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<sup>34</sup> Meshelemiah, J. C. A. (2022, October 28). *How the Jezebel stereotype has been weaponized against black girls and made them vulnerable to sex trafficking: An examination of Carceral Public Systems - Journal of African American Studies*. SpringerLink. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12111-022-09596-0>

<sup>35</sup> Davey, S. (n.d.). *Snapshot of the State of Black Women and Girls: Sex Trafficking in the U.S.* Retrieved November 3, 2022, from <https://www.cbefinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SexTraffickingReport3.pdf>

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Hunt, M. (2022, March 15). *Podcast speaks to black girls' experience in foster care*. The Imprint. Retrieved April 26, 2023, from <https://imprintnews.org/foster-care/podcast-speaks-to-black-girls-experience-in-foster-care/63417>

trafficker. In Los Angeles County, 62% of Black girls who were victims of human trafficking were from the child welfare system.<sup>38</sup>

*The Educational System:* The school-to-prison pipeline plays a dramatic role in exposing Black girls to sex trafficking. In schools, Black girls' bodies are often overpoliced, leading to harsh disciplinary actions. For example, within a single year in the Pittsburg California School District, 141 out of 172 seventh and eighth grade Black girls were suspended. Whereas only one out of thirty-seven White girls was suspended.<sup>39</sup> These harsh disciplinary actions, like suspension and expulsion, make victims vulnerable to more time on the street and more opportunities to get recruited by traffickers.

*The Juvenile Justice System:* The correlation between the juvenile justice system and the domestic minor sex trafficking industry is one of the most pronounced correlations. A CBC study found that, in Los Angeles County, “92% of girls in the juvenile justice system who identified as victims of sex trafficking were Black,” which is jarring, considering Black people as a whole comprise 9% of the population in Los Angeles County.<sup>40</sup> In California, under Senate Bill 1322, minors are no longer able to be prosecuted as prostitutes, rather they are to be treated as victims in need of services. Unfortunately, girls who are trafficked are oftentimes now arrested for other petty crimes rather than being arrested for prostitution. According to Grantmakers for Girls of Color, “law enforcement [is] more likely to see a Black sex trafficking victim as a prostitute and not as someone needing help.”<sup>41</sup> This makes it harder to ensure that girls get

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<sup>38</sup> Davey, S. (n.d.). *Snapshot of the State of Black Women and Girls: Sex Trafficking in the U.S.* Retrieved November 3, 2022, from <https://www.cbcfinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SexTraffickingReport3.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> Glover, J. (2021, March 11). *Pushed out: How excessive school discipline against black girls leads to drop out, incarceration.* ABC7 San Francisco. Retrieved December 11, 2022, from <https://abc7news.com/black-girls-suspended-more-than-white-pushed-out-school-to-prison-pipeline-school-pushout/10405118/>

<sup>40</sup> Davey, S. (n.d.). *Snapshot of the State of Black Women and Girls: Sex Trafficking in the U.S.* Retrieved November 3, 2022, from <https://www.cbcfinc.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/05/SexTraffickingReport3.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

connected to adequate services. In addition, Black girls in juvenile hall are often recruited by their peers to get involved in the domestic minor sex trafficking industry.

### *Understanding the Solution*

Analysis of the scholarly literature suggests that service provision should meet the following categories: adequate trauma-informed care, culturally responsive care, justice-centered care, care that is not systemically involved, and care with social workers at the center. The following sections describe different components of service provision that are instrumental in meeting the needs of sex-trafficked Black girls.

*Trauma-Informed Care:* Literature indicates that trauma-informed care is one of the most important aspects of service provision for victims of domestic minor sex trafficking. In Dr. Thema Bryant-Davis' and Dr. Robyn L. Gobin's article, *Still We Rise: Psychotherapy for African American Girls and Women Exiting Sex Trafficking*, the authors discuss at length the benefits of trauma-informed care for Black sex trafficking victims. Davis and Gobin focus on Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT) and Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) as two influential and important ways to care for these groups. CPT focuses on "encourag[ing] survivors to challenge faulty cognitions related to self-blame, the trustworthiness of others, safety, power and control, esteem, and intimacy."<sup>42</sup> Studies found links between symptom improvement and CPT for Black girls.<sup>43</sup> This therapy, in addition to others discussed in the study, helped rehabilitate Black girls who suffered from PTSD in connection with their trafficking (and other traumas).<sup>44</sup> "MBSR addresses trauma-related symptoms by cultivating mindfulness skills and enhancing

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<sup>42</sup> Bryant-Davis, T., & Gobin, R. L. (2019, October 2). *Still we rise: Psychotherapy for African American girls and women exiting sex trafficking*. University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Retrieved December 11, 2022, from <https://experts.illinois.edu/en/publications/still-we-rise-psychotherapy-for-african-american-girls-and-women>

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

awareness of internal experiences (e.g., physiology, cognitions, emotions) among trauma survivors.”<sup>45</sup> Centering service provision in trauma-informed practices helps best meet the psychological needs of these girls, which has only been further highlighted by studies referenced in Davis and Gobin’s article.<sup>46</sup> The authors also note MBSR is effective at addressing the emotional care needs of Black victims, regardless of whether it was practiced individually or in a group setting.

*Culturally Responsive Care:* Scholarship argues that womanist therapy allows victims to better understand how systemic factors have shaped the trauma that has informed the lives of sex-trafficked Black girls. In *Womanist and Mujerista Psychologies: Voices of Fire, Acts of Courage* by Dr. Thema Bryant-Davis & Dr. Lillian Comas-Diaz, the authors note that a womanist framework addresses how “the sociocultural factors and realities of intersectional oppression that increases the risk for trafficking” manifest in the everyday lives of formerly trafficked girls.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Meshelemiah notes that “anti-trafficking work in the USA when done with a “just” and equitable lens must ground its efforts in an intersectional framework that interrogates the impact of stereotypes and biases rooted in race and racism, gender, and class.”<sup>48</sup> Understanding the intersection of such identities is essential in order to ensure that service provision addresses how layered oppression creates unique harms that cannot be fully understood if viewed on a singular plane (i.e solely looking at the effects of race, or gender, or class).<sup>49</sup> In addition, a womanist framework discovers how “cultural strengths can be utilized to address

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Bryant-Davis, T., & Comas-Diaz, L. (2016). Introduction: Womanist and Mujerista psychologies. *Womanist and Mujerista Psychologies: Voices of Fire, Acts of Courage*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14937-001>

<sup>48</sup> Meshelemiah, J. C. A. (2022, October 28). *How the Jezebel stereotype has been weaponized against black girls and made them vulnerable to sex trafficking: An examination of Carceral Public Systems - Journal of African American Studies*. SpringerLink. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12111-022-09596-0>

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.



prevention and intervention strategies.”<sup>50</sup> For Black girls, womanist therapy is a successful tool, because it allows girls to exercise self-empowerment, despite the systemic obstacles that they face. Educating Black girls about the cultural context for some of their suffering allows them to understand that the oppression that they have endured is not a self-inflicted curse, rather it is a result of historical factors. This understanding allows girls to develop tools to achieve emotional and mental liberation.<sup>51</sup> Davis & Gobin note that womanist therapy centers itself in the “celebrat[ion of] the experiences and perspectives of African American women.”<sup>52</sup> This allows for an increase in self-confidence and self-empowerment in Black girls, something that should be incorporated into any service provision programming for this group.

*Justice Centered Care:* Scholarship highlights that helping Black girls achieve some version of justice is instrumental to service provision for sex-trafficked Black girls. In *I Went from Being Held Captive to Captivity Again: How the Criminal Legal System Fails Black Women and Girl Survivors of Sex Trafficking*, Dr. Cassandra Gonzalez interviews formerly sex trafficked young Black women who articulated that justice should be a part of service provision for victims of DMST. The interviewees collectively defined justice as two-pronged: First, Black girls articulated that service providers should help girls define and achieve justice outside of the criminal justice system (due to the prevalence of systemic racism).<sup>53</sup> Second, victims identified that their care needs pertaining to justice should not just relate to self, but also to the victims’

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<sup>50</sup> Bryant-Davis, T., & Comas-Díaz, L. (2016). Introduction: Womanist and Mujerista Psychologies. *Womanist and Mujerista Psychologies: Voices of Fire, Acts of Courage*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14937-001>

<sup>51</sup> Milton, B. I. (2010). ‘Reconnecting to resilience’ a historical study of slave narratives with implications for social work practice with African American youth from high risk environments. *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A*, 70, 3193

<sup>52</sup> Bryant-Davis, T., & Comas-Díaz, L. (2016). Introduction: Womanist and Mujerista psychologies. *Womanist and Mujerista Psychologies: Voices of Fire, Acts of Courage*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14937-001>

<sup>53</sup> Gonzalez, C. M. (2022). “I went from being held captive to captivity again”: How the Criminal Legal System Fails Black Women and girl survivors of sex trafficking. 2022 | *Volume 11, Issue 3*. <https://doi.org/10.21428/88de04a1.254b3460>

relationships with their community. Interviewees noted that to feel fully cared for they must re-enter a community that has been educated on “the importance of Black women [within] the Black community [so that] Black women and girls [can feel] loved [and] valued.”<sup>54</sup>

*Social Workers at the Center:* Interviewees in Dr. Cassandra Gonzalez’s study noted that service provision must be facilitated by social workers who have been educated on the connections between slavery, racial oppression, and sex trafficking. Girls identified social workers who were well-trained in these principles, as the best agents to provide justice to these girls. Interviewees also discussed that their best care would be provided outside of state systems, due to the deep distrust that the victims have for systems, which have often in the past, also been a mechanism for exploitation.

## **Data and Methodology**

In order to explore these themes as they apply to service provision for Black girls, I conducted ten qualitative interviews with experts, and used my findings to create a policy recommendation that would establish a new standard for providing services for Black female DMST victims in California. Insights from the literature were essential to ensuring that my interview questions and subsequent analysis were centered in determining the feasibility of creating a more adequate standard of care for sex trafficked Black girls.

I reached out to interviewees via LinkedIn, email, and over the phone to participate in in-depth interviews. The average interview lasted for 45 minutes, but in total ranged anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour and 30 minutes. I used my background research on California to inform which experts were most important to reach out to. I first identified all of the different

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

stakeholders who work with Black female victims of DMST. Then, I conducted in depth research on California's policies and programs and decided that it was important to reach out to experts who could provide color to state sponsored research about the recently implemented policies and programs. I was adamant about engaging a wide variety of stakeholders who could truly help discuss whether or not these policies were working. I primarily reached out to experts that were leaders in their field. For example, some of my interviewees work or have worked at one of the leading direct service provision organizations for Black sex trafficking victims in the state of California. My research informed what experts I thought were best to bring to the table. I was also adamant about interviewing experts who had worked in the field long enough to discuss trends and changes in the state's approach to service provision.

While I asked different questions to my interviewees in order to tailor my interview questions to the expertise and domain of my experts, I kept four themes constant among my interviews. In my interviews I sought to establish a) what niche my interviewees filled within the anti-trafficking space b) how Black girls have been positively or negatively affected by the experts' work c) how California's policies have affected their ability to serve Black girls and d) what is working and what isn't? I used snowball sampling to gather interviewees. I first identified key leaders in the anti-trafficking space in California, and then utilized referrals to target what additional voices I should engage. Below I have highlighted my interviewees:

1. Executive Director for a Direct Service Provider in Alameda County, California
2. Program Leader for a Direct Service Provider
3. Founder of a widely modeled Direct Service Provider in California
4. Former Executive Director for a Direct Service Provider in California and former undercover officer for the Oakland Police Department in the Sex Trafficking Division

5. Chief of Police in the San Francisco Bay Area and member of the FBI Human Trafficking Task Force
6. Associate Professor of Behavioral Sciences in the Public Health Department in the University of California System
7. California State Domestic Sex Trafficking Policy Implementation Coordinator
8. Member of the United States Advisory Council on Human Trafficking
9. Southern California County District Attorney
10. Lawyer, Leader in the California DMST Policy Space, and Director on a California Sex-Trafficking Task Force

Sample interview questions can be found in the Appendix.

I finished conducting interviews when I felt as though I had reached a point of saturation. Towards the end of my interview process, I continued to hear the same opinions expressed repeatedly, despite interviewees holding different niches in the anti-trafficking space. At that point I realized that there would not be value in conducting additional interviews.

My ten interviews were conducted on the phone and recorded on a separate device. In addition to recording the interviews, I took additional notes to remember key points and insights from experts. After I conducted my interviews, I re-listened to each interview and coded the answers. My coding system was two pronged. There were certain question that I asked to every interviewee such as:

*“California implemented three key bills that directly impacted human trafficking survivors: Senate Bill 855, California Senate Bill 794, and California Senate Bill 1322. Are you familiar with these policies? Have they impacted your ability to provide services*

*for victims? (positive or negative) In what ways do you engage with these policies (For example, are you on the MDST teams?)”*

For questions like these I would code “positive, neutral, or negative” depending on the interviewees response. That way, I was able to understand if generally interviewees had positive, negative, or neutral interactions with state policies or programming, and if there was no consensus it was important to understand if there were trends or differences across job areas. In addition to coding the questions that I asked every interviewee, I also reviewed all of the interviews and coded for general themes that occurred across interviews. I then used those themes to shape my key findings and inform my policy recommendation.

## **Findings and Analysis**

### *Setting the Stage*

My interviewees brought forth valuable insight that helped provide context to the current service provision landscape for sex trafficked Black girls in California. Three prominent themes emerged from the interview data. First, everyone was invested and committed to the idea that service provision and the anti-trafficking movement should be spearheaded by survivors. Everyone believed in the expertise associated with the lived experiences of survivors. As a result, my interviewees agreed that it was beneficial for current victims to receive services from those who had similar past experiences.

Next, all interviewees discussed how overwhelmed they were by DMST’s impact in California. While interviewees believed that California is headed in the right direction and engaging in important conversations as it relates to domestic minor sex trafficking, the problem

is so expansive, that the state has only begun to scratch the surface of all that must be done as it relates to creating and facilitating service provision.

Finally, interviewees expressed that it is difficult to think of broad state-wide solutions to domestic minor sex trafficking in California, because the solution requires engaging so many state and community actors, which oftentimes forces state and county-agencies to address their own failures and inadequacies. My interviewees also noted that it is instrumental to coordinate and foster a relationship between state actors and community actors to successfully serve trafficked Black girls. In all, my research yielded six key findings which I have outlined below.

### *1. Issues with Policy Implementation*

My interviewees all noted that California's service provision bills are a positive step towards helping victims of domestic minor sex trafficking. Experts believe that these policies have created the framework for increased funding, expanded community education programs, and have created a change in culture. However, despite good intentions, the implementation of the three policies have had negative effects on Black girls.

#### *Implementation of California Senate Bill 1322*

One of my interviewees noted that the adoption of SB 1322 resulted in pushback from police and only made it more difficult to connect Black female trafficking victims to support systems. This is an example of a policy that had lots of support from direct service providers and other groups that worked closely with impacted communities. Unfortunately, the policy implementation was not as effective as expected.

Oftentimes, law enforcement is the first point of contact for a victim who is rescued from their trafficker. Law enforcement becomes responsible for working quickly to separate the victim from her trafficker and surround her with support and stability. My law enforcement expert noted that girls can be connected with services anywhere from an hour to twenty four hours after being rescued. For Black girls who have been systemically separated from systems of support, connecting girls to service provision is one of *the* most important interruption points to help her transition out of the sex trafficking life. However, with the adoption of California Senate Bill 1322, which decriminalized child prostitution and treated girls as victims, police began to become dis-interested in rescuing girls from their traffickers. One of my experts noted that,

*“We now have de-policing. Police stopped investigating incidents of child sex trafficking, and referrals really went down. So then we had to try to readjust and make sure that our word of mouth game and Instagram game were good. Law enforcement was such a big point of contact and they helped feed girls to direct services.... So if there is no official door... It was a Catch-22. We do not want them to be criminalized, but we do not want them to be left on the street with no intervention at all.”*

Prior to the implementation of SB 1322, experts noted that when law enforcement rescued victims late at night, when it was difficult to reach direct service providers, victims were held in a separate holding space in juvenile hall. When SB 1322 was implemented (in combination with SB 855 that engaged child welfare in helping victims), law enforcement believed that this transition would encourage girls to run away after being rescued. This is because in juvenile hall victims were not permitted to leave, however when victims were placed in the hands of child welfare agents, they were not required to stay. Experts noted that law enforcement seemed to view the situation as a lost cause, and would oftentimes choose not to intervene when they saw blaring cases of domestic minor sex trafficking during nightly patrols.

Law enforcement and system actors are more likely to see Black girls as willing participants in the trafficking industry, rather than see them as victims who have been

traumatized and abused. Therefore, even though state policy mandates that victims be seen as victims, cultural bias has influenced law enforcement to still see them as “child prostitutes”, denying Black girls access to “victimhood status”. Law enforcement saw Black girls as willing participants in their trafficking, choosing to see them as adults and not as exploited children. Given the cultural factors highlighted in my literature review that are often responsible for blaming Black girls for their victimhood, the implementation of SB 1322 facilitated the space for law enforcement to uphold such cultural bias, one which strips Black girls of their childhood and innocence and disconnects them from important services. Here, through expert insight, it is evident that cultural bias can dramatically affect policy implementation.

Weaker enforcement mechanisms coupled with bias expose vulnerabilities in policy implementation. As highlighted earlier in this thesis, enforcement mechanisms that are overbearing oftentimes lead to harsh punishments that separate Black girls from systems of support. However, the opposite is also true. Enforcement mechanisms that are too weak often leave marginalized and oppressed communities disconnected from necessary services. When state systems make radical changes to policies and response measures, the aforementioned must engage in conversations and institute safeguards to ensure that policies are equipped with successful implementation plans to establish that victims are supported. If not, weaker enforcement mechanisms can hinder a victim's chance to receive services that may help redirect an individual's life. A Black girl has a better chance of receiving access and referral to services if she is criminalized as a prostitute and understood to be engaging in illegal activity rather than if she is understood to be a victim. This aligns with the literature that suggests that society, state actors, and individuals often have a hard time conceptualizing Black girls as victims. A racially



conscious lens to the creation of Senate Bill 1322 should have taken seriously how often Black girls are left neglected and unprotected in communities and within state systems.

### *Implementation of California Senate Bill 855*

While one of the strengths of California Senate Bill 855 was the creation of new funding structures aimed at strengthening service provision for DMST victims, the new funding structures did not ensure that the communities most impacted were awarded resources that were representative of the scale of the problem and its effects on certain communities. While some providers believed that the state was administering adequate funding, informed by the leadership of CAST (Coalition Against Sex Trafficking), all other service providers noted that at the end of the day, the biggest problem with anti-trafficking work is a lack of adequate funding. When speaking to one of my interviewees, she noted that when SB 855 was implemented, she saw a large influx of new resources and services.

*“I was consulting for LA County during that period, and they definitely had an influx of resources and funding to get the work started (such as training, specialized placement, specialized boards, etc.) But I did not see any special programs for Black girls ...on a county-level I saw a color-blind approach [and] that was not specific to LA.”*

Without policies that are explicit about race, it is often difficult to see state sponsored support for marginalized and impacted communities. I believe that for the state to allocate funding specifically for the most marginalized, the government must take accountability for its role in producing the conditions for marginalized communities to need such services. However, when states fail to explicitly acknowledge and address this in service provision, it can lead to race-blind policy implementation, rather than act as a form of reparations for victims in need of service provision.

The expert went on to note that currently, service provision that exists for Black girls is minimal.

*“Services to females overall are underfunded so we can only imagine what it looks like when it is Black female focused. We need to make sure that we put resources where they need to be. Service providers should not be fighting with each other to try to deliver quality services to Black people.”*

In order to adequately meet the needs of Black girls, service providers need to be equipped with the funding and resources to successfully work with victims. Direct service provision work is deeply impactful, because it allows girls to receive support and services, outside of engaging directly with systems. At their best, they are able to deliver culturally-responsive trauma-informed care and provide wrap-around services to meet girls' psychological, financial, and physical needs. However, at their worst they are inefficient, ill-informed, and unresponsive.

Los Angeles County leads some of the most robust anti-trafficking work in California and is also home to a large population of sex trafficked Black girls. So, an inability to see substantial funding dedicated towards girls in that county is indicative of policy implementation issues surrounding funding across the state. Those with the power to make decisions about funding do not see the experiences of Black girls as worthy enough to receive funding, demonstrating that there needs to be more Black girl advocates at the table, ensuring that Black girls have their needs met.

#### *Implementation Issues with California Senate Bill 793 and 855 Ctn: Child Welfare System*

Interviewees noted that while California Senate Bill 855 and 793 created a step towards ensuring that a non-punitive state agency is responsible for taking care of girls, engaging with the child welfare system did not yield expected results. As mentioned, prior to the implementation of

these bills, when girls were rescued from the trafficking industry and law enforcement could not make contact with direct service providers, girls were held in juvenile detention facilities. My interviewees noted that oftentimes child welfare *refused* to serve girls who were not being trafficked by family members. As a result, advocates believed that the aforementioned bills would hold child welfare accountable and create structure for providing care for these girls. In addition, it would limit their interaction with the criminal justice system. What advocates did not anticipate from the passage of this bill was that child welfare agencies would expose their wild inefficiencies that proved to be harmful for victims of DMST.

Systemic racism disproportionately harms Black girls. With the case of California Senate Bill 853 and 793, it is apparent that moving Black girls from one system (the criminal justice system) to another “better system” (the child welfare system), still harms them. This is because these systems were not built to protect Black girls, but rather created layered harms in their lives. By shifting the focus from one system to another the problem of providing adequate care and service provision is not solved. This is solidified by an interviewee who highlighted,

*“We had case managers inside Alameda County Child Welfare Intake System, so I was able to see firsthand how the policy was being implemented, and it was not good. If you are just instituting policy without culture change and training, you are just moving a girl from one system to the next. And this system was not treating girls any better than the criminal justice system. Girls were coming in, and the sheriff’s officers were at the intake center, because the child welfare workers said that they didn’t feel safe inside the center without law enforcement. And, the sheriffs were getting called regularly on the girls. Even the child welfare workers themselves were very old-school and did not believe in the girls’ victimization. They were unwilling to do trauma-informed care.”*

This sentiment lifts up why it is so important to meet the adequate standard of care categories highlighted in my literature review. Black girls who are victims of trafficking have experienced serious traumas that are only further triggered by contact with systems. This is why the literature

discusses the importance of victims defining freedom, justice, and liberation for themselves, outside of systemic context. Therefore, placing girls within systems that do not seek to treat them with dignity, compassion, and understanding will not truly help address their needs, even if those systems, like the child welfare system are meant to work and engage with young people who have experienced trauma. In addition, service provision must be administered by social workers who are trained in anti-racist culturally responsive teachings, and must work to uphold them in all of their work interactions. Unfortunately, direct service providers noted times in which child welfare workers would go so far as to say that recently rescued victims had their “ho clothes and ho shoes on”, illustrating a lack of cultural awareness.

If child welfare does not engage in practices that actively seek to meet the needs of Black female victims, more harm than good occurs in service provision. And this is exactly what service providers saw. Unlike juvenile hall, girls were not forced to stay with child welfare agents. Therefore, when met with service provision that was not set to adequately meet the needs of Black girls, according to service providers, victims left and returned back to their traffickers. Thus highlighting the need for ensuring that service provision within policy implementation is trauma-informed and culturally-responsive.

One of the service providers spoke to the strength of her organization’s service provision. She noted that her organization has,

*“very well trained staff that are able to engage the work in a loving way and a very clear way that allows [staff] to navigate the trauma that young women come with. We see a lot of girls who are kicked out of programs, because folks don’t know how to deal with trauma. They don’t understand that that is what is happening.”*

This demonstrates that there are groups, particularly service providers, who are seriously thinking about ways that they can adequately meet the needs of Black girls. The ability to serve

Black girls needs is truly feasible, it just requires a dedication on the part of leadership to ensure that it happens. My interviewees seem to echo the sentiment that child welfare does not seem to have the capacity or willingness to achieve such a goal. One of my experts even went so far as to note that she “does not think that the child welfare system is set up at all to serve youth well, particularly the young people that [they] will see. There is nothing in that system that [she] could say is good.”

### *Possible Effects of California Senate Bill 357*

While California Senate Bill 357 was only enacted on January 30th of 2023, several of my experts worry about the possible policy implementation issues that may occur. SB 357 decriminalizes prostitution in the state of California, and many experts noted that they were concerned about the ways in which this new law would affect how county and state service providers think about provisions for victims of DMST. One expert noted, “I don’t think [policymakers] understand how it will impact youth who are being trafficked...It is really going to impact the way that youth are exploited.” While experts have not yet seen these effects materialize, they note that it is a worry for the future.

### *2. Institutions and Institutional Actors Remain Color-blind*

When interviewing law enforcement agents and district attorneys, it was clear that while both parties were passionate about eradicating domestic minor sex trafficking, their perspectives aligned with the color-blind politics of state systems. Both Law enforcement agents and district attorneys were responsible for helping to build up robust anti-trafficking programs and task forces in their regions. When I discussed how Black girls are disproportionately impacted by

DMST, I asked my expert if the law enforcement agents who directly respond to incidents of DMST are reflective of the racial and cultural background of victims that they encounter. His answer was the following,

*“It can happen to anybody. [Sex Trafficking] can bleed into other communities. Everyone needs to be represented. What if you come across a young White female? You have to have someone that is available that she can relate to.”*

Similarly, when I interviewed a district attorney, I spoke to her about the strengths and weaknesses of the robust county task force that she served on. The task force engaged many county agencies, given the scope of the issue in that county. I was interested in understanding if members of the task force, especially those working directly with victims, were trained in any form of cultural competency or racial bias work, given the disproportionate representation of Black girls who are victims of DMST. The response was the following:

*“The stats do show that Black youth are more heavily represented when it comes to DMST, but the concern in training is that we want to be mindful of not saying that this issue only affects kids in certain neighborhoods. Because then people will think that that only happens to “those” kids. We do not want to just focus on that statistic.”*

Both law enforcement and district attorneys were evasive with my question that specifically engaged in acknowledging *who* victims are and how their racial background should be considered when ensuring that they are adequately served.

My interviewees were clearly adamant about working to combat the issues, but conversations that were explicit about race were not seen as deeply important for these state agents, when thinking through service provision. However, this “it could happen to anyone” redirect aligns with a constant sentiment that scholarship has sought to combat. Meshelemiah notes that, “this “everyone-at-risk” assertion falsely advances the notion that structural oppression (racism, sexism, and classism) does not play a major role in sex trafficking, because it

does(Butler, 2015; Gerassi et al., 2022; Musto, 2022). Domestic minor sex trafficking disproportionately happens to children who are racially minoritized, impoverished, involved with child-serving agencies (child welfare and juvenile justice system). Nowadays, it is simply irresponsible and reckless to discuss human trafficking in the USA while ignoring contextual differences related to gender, race, and class.”<sup>55</sup> The sentiments of my interviewees were not stand-alone beliefs. Rather, these beliefs are indicative of a larger systemic response for caring for Black female victims of DMST.

The dismissiveness of race as an important factor in ensuring adequate service provision promotes a color-blind attitude which, when coupled with racial biases, has harmful impacts. When I asked both law enforcement and district attorneys about Black girls as victims, they quickly dismissed this color-brave approach to the issue. However, their sentiments were followed by identifying Black and Brown men as traffickers. The willingness to engage in conversations about punishments of Black and Brown men, but not fully seeing and understanding the victimhood of Black girls is indicative of larger cultural biases that have effects both on a systemic and individual level. The willingness to engage in conversations about race when it relates to punishments versus when it relates to services can have very tangible consequences, considering the experts who held these views were law enforcement agents and district attorneys. A viewpoint that is focused on linking race and punishment rather than race and service provision, may lead law enforcement and district attorneys to focus more on the punishment of traffickers rather than the service provision needs of victims, which can have effects on funding allocation, training, etc. This is also significant because, while Black and

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<sup>55</sup> Meshelemiah, J. C. A. (2022, October 28). *How the Jezebel stereotype has been weaponized against black girls and made them vulnerable to sex trafficking: An examination of Carceral Public Systems - Journal of African American Studies*. SpringerLink. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12111-022-09596-0>

Brown men are disproportionately found to be traffickers, White men are disproportionately caught as “Johns”, which are the men who buy sex. While law enforcement and the district attorney seemed to focus on the fact that the sex trafficking industry cannot thrive without willing traffickers, it is important to note that the industry could not thrive without the prevalence and fuel from eager and willing buyers.

Law enforcement agents are the first individuals to work with trafficking victims, therefore an officer who is not trained in cultural competency or racial sensitivity training can set a negative tone and can deter a victim’s willingness to engage with state systems and service providers upon their rescue. In addition, victims have oftentimes had prior negative interactions with systems and distrust institutions. For victims, law enforcement agents are an extension of these systems and a law enforcement agent who is not attentive to these factors, will only fall short of being able to help. Similarly, in the county where my specific district attorney works, there is an innovative alternative court system for girls who are impacted by DMST. However, if attorneys working in this court program remain color-blind even though they are “trying to help”, it may deter girls from wanting to engage with that system, which can result in these girls being referred back to the juvenile court instead of participating in an alternative court system. Color-blind beliefs completely affect the way actors engage in conversations related to service provision.

Service providers were adamant that race *had* to be central in conversations about care for DMST victims. While regular data is not collected in regards to the racial demographics of victims, several of the statistics I highlighted earlier show that Black children and girls are disproportionately victimized by DMST. Similarly, comments from my interviewees furthered this sentiment. One service provider noted, “from every location that I have been involved in this



work over the last 20 years, it has been disproportionately Black women and girls that are being trafficked” adding that “85-90% of the girls that were being referred to [her] organization or walking in the door were Black girls.” The overwhelming representation of Black girls as victims alone should highlight why it is important to engage in conversations about race as it relates to DMST prevention and services. However, my interviewee highlighted exactly why it is important for service provision to explicitly name race as an important factor to consider when creating a care plan.

*“This is not to say that White girls are not trafficked, but it is important to understand that most times, if a White girl is trafficked, the system is going to respond really differently. Anything that the system has available will be made available to her. That is not a Black girl’s experience, because the system has a really hard time recognizing Black girls as victims. Then the invisibility of the system comes into play... She is going to be invisibilized or punished by any system she comes into contact with.”*

Another expert highlighted this same sentiment by noting that “you cannot decouple racism and trafficking.” If service providers take a color-blind approach and rely on state systems to help Black girls, the result will re-traumatize and harm victims by ignoring the systemic racism entrenched in these agencies. Service providers should not lean on systems that made victims vulnerable to trafficking, as a source of support to rehabilitate them from the traumas they have endured in their life. Thinking critically about race will help ensure that service providers engage in several of the key components of service provision that were discussed in the literature review (such as trauma informed care, culturally responsive care, and justice centered care that is defined outside the confines of the justice system). It is important to address the color-blind versus color-brave disconnect that exists between state agents and direct service providers, because as mentioned in point one, they rely on each other in certain capacities to best meet the needs of Black girls.

### 3. State Willingness to Engage

After hearing my interviewees discuss how state policy has affected service provision for victims of DMST, I asked relevant experts if they believed that the state was willing to engage in conversations about the experiences of Black female victims of DMST. Every expert said yes! However, they all noted that they were not aware of any state-sanctioned spaces where there were explicit conversations about Black female victims of DMST. California is already doing good work to critically engage victims of DMST, particularly because the state shares the opinions of my experts: conversations surrounding DMST must engage victims of DMST. For victims, their lived experience likens them to experts in the field and they are able to think critically about how policy and programming would impact victims. However, the experience of a White girl who is trafficked and her engagement with services and systems likely dramatically differs from a Black girl's experience. While putting survivors at the forefront is a great step, not having explicit spaces to discuss the Black female experience can be deeply problematic.

Usually there is direct push back on a state and federal level to engage in conversations that look at intersectional identities and systems. However, the insight of my experts shows promise that through conversation, the state may be better able to understand the unique harms that sex trafficked Black girls face. There is however, a difference between the state's *willingness* to listen to the experience of Black female victims and the state *actually* engaging and listening to the voices of Black female victims. Currently, direct service providers and certain regional leaders are engaging in important conversations about the experiences of Black victims of DMST, but this is not the standard (right now) for *all* service providers or county officials. While groups are not necessarily working in silos, there is no current body to bring together leaders

seeking to spearhead Black girl specific service provision work and coordinate their efforts. In addition, there is not a current body in charge of holding the state accountable for its failure to explicitly engage in conversations focused on victims of DMST.

#### *4. Black Female Survivor-Led Service Provision Is Key*

All of the direct service providers emphasized that it is paramount that service provision for Black girls must be led by Black female led survivors. One of my experts noted that,

*“The best way to serve Black girls is to focus on Black leadership and Black direct service providers. It is the number one thing that girls are always asking for. They said that leadership was lacking from all areas of their life...These girls [did] not feel seen, heard, or welcomed. Girls were looking for mentors who were trauma informed and understood what was going on. They wanted Black female leadership.”*

This directly aligns with sentiments highlighted by scholars within my literature review and other interviews. As mentioned, culturally responsive and trauma informed care are essential in ensuring that Black girls' needs are met. It therefore makes sense that Black women, who share the same cultural and demographic backgrounds of those they are serving would be best equipped to provide services that make these girls feel seen and heard. For Black girls to be seen and understood, is to feel valued and cared for. It is not only a feeling of security, but it is also aspirational. Black girls feel as though they can escape the sex trafficking life when they see Black women who are able to live outside of the confines of the trafficking industry.

#### *5. More Prevention Work*

Experts in different areas noted the need for the state to engage in more prevention work. As of late, the state has been heavily focused on strengthening and expanding service provision for victims of DMST. However, they have failed to engage in substantive action items that are

focused on prevention work. Direct service providers in different parts of the state have led the charge to engage in educational training for community based organizations, schools, hospitals, etc. However, more work must be done to think about where the state can intervene and prevent girls from being trafficked.

This inaction on the prevention side is consistent with other findings and the literature review. As mentioned earlier so many state systems (such as the criminal justice, foster care and education system) intersect and compound to make Black girls particularly vulnerable to DMST. For example, if a Black girl is in a foster home where she is being abused, and consequently acts out at school due to unresolved traumas at home, her behavior in school may then lead to a school suspension. She is now vulnerable to traffickers as she spends more time on the street and away from school. Where in this scenario does the state intervene? In this case, prevention work should establish intervention methods at every point at which a system has failed Black girls. However, this is difficult, because many of these systems allow Black girls to “fall through the cracks” and suffer. In the hypothetical case, the state would be required to exercise a certain degree of caution and care to the individual Black girl victim, which we often do not see on the state side. Rather the state thinks about prevention work as a way to educate communities on the harms of trafficking and possible risk factors. Black girls who are vulnerable to trafficking have often been pushed away from systems of support. Without proximate adults, it often falls on the state to be the eye that is the interruption point for the girls' vulnerabilities. Prevention work on the state side is difficult because it requires the state to seek out and support girls who the state has failed. However, oftentimes state intervention yields negative outcomes for Black girls, rather than positive ones.

Surprisingly, interviewees also pointed out the state's failure to engage in prevention work as it relates to traffickers. One of my experts noted,

*“We need research on the risk factors that make people a future trafficker. What is it that leads them to feel as though it is not a big deal? Or is it because of risk factors such as poverty and lack of opportunities?”*

A topic that is often shied away from is that which humanizes traffickers. However, oftentimes trauma has led to traffickers becoming traffickers. My interviewees have noted that oftentimes traffickers' own sexual trauma and abuse has made them vulnerable and willing to repurpose the harm that they experienced onto others. In order to engage in such inhumane activity, there is often a moment (or series of experiences) that has shifted one's ability to lack humanity and empathy towards others. In addition, other conditions such as poverty have pushed traffickers into seeing this path as a way to make easy cash. Because of the atrocious crimes that traffickers commit, many do not want to invest in programs to think about aiding traffickers. But several of my interviewees pushed back on that perspective and thought about how prevention services can be implemented to deter them from exploiting girls.

#### *6. County Collaboration is Key*

While many counties in California are engaged in good work as it relates to service provision, the issue of domestic minor sex trafficking requires county collaboration. One of my interviewees who worked at the district attorney office painted a clear picture that sheds light on the dire need for counties to collaborate. In her county,

*“Gangs that normally would have been fighting for territory were now working together to further domestic minor sex-trafficking...Girls are not just sold in one city. Perpetrators do not want visibility, especially where law enforcement officers are recovering the same girl over and over again. So they will work with gangs in other territories and send girls to different counties, and sell her there, until it is safe for her to come back. They work*

*together to keep the girls as commodities and away from law enforcement and child welfare.”*

This sentiment illustrates the urgent need to have a state-wide service provision response. The trafficking circuit in particular calls for a collaborative county response to the issue of trafficking. The trafficking circuit refers to the geographic path that girls are trafficked on. This comprises different counties within California and also major cities in neighboring states. Because of this, there needs to be a standard to ensure that no matter where a girl is rescued, she has access to quality services. If a girl is from a county in Southern California but is moved to a county in Northern California and is able to escape her trafficker, she should be able to have access to services that meet her needs. The shifting of one girl from one location to another necessitates equity in service response amongst counties. Even if a county may have a low population of Black individuals, Black girls are still constantly moved through and trafficked in those counties, therefore there must be services available to meet her needs. The discussion of the circuit also requires us to think about ways in which California policy makers must engage with neighboring states to think through trafficking solutions.

### **Policy Recommendation: A Black Girl Survivor (BGS) Task Force**

Grounded in my literature review and expert interviews, I propose that California create a strategic task force dedicated to solving the problems that Black female survivors of DMST face. It is evident that the needs of Black girls are unique and necessary for the state to address, therefore I believe that it is instrumental to have a body dedicated to meeting Black girls' needs. After conducting a review of current state forces aimed at combating sex trafficking, I was able to better gauge the capabilities of California task forces. With this information, I identified the goals, organization, and function of the BGS Task Force. The goal of this body is to ensure that

the voices and experiences of Black female victims are considered and uplifted when engaging in policy and programming solutions pertaining to DMST. Without it, the state will continue to engage in color-blind discourse that will result in so many of the negative policy and programming implementation issues discussed by experts.

Currently, California has two major influential task forces related to domestic minor sex trafficking: the Survivor Advisory Task Force and the California CSEC Action Team. The California CSEC Action Team is comprised of experts and survivors who identify “promising prevention and intervention practices, provide guidance to county agencies and community partners, and conduct evaluation to ensure [that] policies improve outcomes for children.”<sup>56</sup> The CSEC Action Team works in collaboration with the California Department of Social Services to create the Survivor Advisory Task Force which works to ensure that the voices of victims are included in conversations about victims of DMST. Together, both bodies work to develop policy guidelines and recommendations for counties, state agencies, and the general public. Survivor experts also serve as consultants that help advise community and state partners and policy leaders that are engaging in work related to victims of DMST.<sup>57</sup>

In addition to engaging in issues pertaining to DMST, California has also commissioned the creation of task forces that focus on the lives of Black Californians, illustrating the state’s willingness to have conversations that are explicit about race. This willingness was not only highlighted in the state’s creation of the Reparations Task Force, but also expressed in my expert interviews. This Task Force has worked to develop a proposal for reparations owed to individuals who are descendants of slaves.

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<sup>56</sup> CSEC Action Team. (2023, March 27). *CSEC Action Team*. National Center for Youth Law. Retrieved April 26, 2023, from <https://youthlaw.org/csec-action-team-0>

<sup>57</sup> National Human Trafficking Hotline. (n.d.). *California: All Time Statistics*. Retrieved April 26, 2023, from <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/en/statistics/california>

My interviews highlighted that not only is the state willing to engage in conversations focused on the needs of Black female victims of DMST, but there are also already great leaders within the state leading good work, which can serve as a blueprint. The BGS Task Force will be instrumental in the anti-trafficking landscape because it coordinates and streamlines work that focuses on meeting the needs of Black girls. In order to achieve this goal, the Task Force seeks to a) create an accountability arm to ensure that counties and state agencies are meeting the needs of trafficked girls b) create a statewide standard for ensuring that the needs of Black female victims of DMST are met and c) serve as a body dedicated to ensuring that the experiences of Black girls are included in all conversations related to DMST. The Task Force will comprise of survivor leaders, direct service providers, state agency leaders, researchers, and rural coordinators.

*Black Female Survivor Leaders:* It is most important to engage survivor leaders in the Task Force. Their lived experience makes them experts in understanding the needs of sex trafficked Black girls. As mentioned in the literature review, and echoed in my expert interviews, lived experience fosters cultural competency, empathy, and understanding. Even well intended policies can have unintended consequences when a color-blind approach is taken. Without thinking about systemic harms and its intersection with race and class, the Task Force will be ineffective. Black female survivors will help ensure that the conversations of the Task Force are always centered in the voices and experiences of impacted individuals.

*Direct Service Providers:* Despite law enforcement often being the first point of contact for victims of DMST, direct service providers spend prolonged periods of time with victims and become intimately aware of their traumas, trials, and tribulations. Some of the direct service providers who I interviewed noted that they work with victims as long as ten years! These



individuals are aware of what works and what is broken within county and state service provision, oftentimes filling in the gaps within the anti-trafficking space in order to ensure that victims have access to strong wrap-around services. State agencies may not be able to see areas where they fall short, but direct service providers can identify the shortcomings of these agencies by both highlighting girl experience and also reflecting on their own interactions with agencies. Direct service providers can contribute insight into the needs of girls, an awareness of state failures, as well as an understanding of the service provider landscape in counties and across the state.

*State Agency Leaders (Child Welfare, Probation, Law Enforcement):* With the implementation of several of California's Senate bills, state agencies have been granted an expanded role in caring for victims of DMST. State agencies often work in coordination with direct service providers to deliver services. In order to ensure that these systems better serve Black female victims, it is important to have leaders from these agencies represented so that they can help think through the feasibility of implementing more racially conscious training and policies in their agencies.

*Researchers:* Research is a powerful tool to shed light on the prevalence of issues affecting minority communities. However, the way in which research is conducted matters. It is important to engage researchers to think about how research can be expanded to better understand the effects of DMST on Black girls in California.

*Rural Coordinators:* Several major metropolians in California are engaging in innovative strategies aimed at addressing DMST. However, these counties often have well-funded programs that allow them to roll out large scale innovative programs. Rural counties do not necessarily have the same funding poured into their counties. However, geographically,

rural counties make up the largest portion of California. Lots of girls are trafficked through rural counties, where traffickers are able to better fly under the radar. Girls are trafficked through bus stops, train stops, and rest stops. Thus, successfully thinking about solutions surrounding DMST must think about ways to engage with rural counties to ensure they are also able to adequately serve the needs of sex trafficked Black girls.

### *Responsibilities of the Task Force*

I have outlined 6 core responsibilities for the Task Force.

#### *1. Review of Policy Implementation*

Through expert insights, it is evident that policies oftentimes have unintended consequences that can disproportionately affect Black girls. While direct service providers' excellent insights help paint a picture of the successes and failures of these policies on the ground, many official state reports do not do the same. Since the implementation of these policies, California has not published regular data on the impact of these policies and programs (however, it is important to note that COVID-19 likely affected the monitoring of these policies). When studies are published, they lack depth. For example, a study on the implementation of California SB 855 discusses different CSEC Programs that were created in counties across the state. However, the study failed to discuss what communities were being engaged through this CSEC programming. The study did not discuss the details on the demographics that were using the services, the effectiveness of those services, or the failures of those services. With the information provided, it is difficult to understand the ways that policies and programs have affected Black girls, or really any victims of DMST.

With this role, the Task Force can take seriously the ways in which California state policies and programs interact with systems that run the risk of perpetuating systemic racism and promoting cultural bias. Conducting reviews of state policies and programs can work to identify key problems in policy implementation that directly harm Black girls and can propose creative solutions for adjusting policy implementation to better serve their needs.

Annually, the Task Force should work with the state to produce county by county studies that measure the specific county level implementation of various policies and its effects on Black female victims of DMST. This county by county approach is important because even though California has implemented state law, counties are primarily responsible for the effective implementation of these policies. These studies can be modeled off of the work of organizations like Polaris. Polaris gathers data on sex and labor trafficking across the United States. Annually, the organization creates a scorecard for states, which seek to identify how well states are doing at combating trafficking. The Task Force can utilize a similar process, creating scorecards for the successful implementation of California policies across counties for the ways that it helps and protects Black girls.

## *2. Cultural Competency*

State agencies are not prioritizing cultural competency training among those who work with victims. While agencies are often trained in some capacity, it is evident that they lack trauma informed and culturally responsive training. These training sessions are instrumental in ensuring that all state and county agents that work with victims are equipped with the tools to successfully serve girls in a way that does not retraumatize them. In addition to those who work directly with victims, it will be instrumental to also train leaders on other state task forces who

make decisions that can affect victims of DMST. Educating these leaders on the unique harms that Black girls face, and highlighting how cultural and social factors play into creating solutions, will help ensure that state actors are making more informed decisions.

Rather than reinvent the wheel, the Task Force should simply be responsible for annually approving training curriculum. Interviewees suggested that organizations like the National Black Women's Justice Institute have created critical training and presentations that are applicable to train state and county agencies on how to meet the unique needs of Black girls. Some groups, like the California CSEC Action Committee already do regular trainings (and some of those training include conversations about the adultification of Black girls). However, it will be important for the Task Force to standardize training and ensure that all agencies are becoming informed on how to create stronger care that considers the experiences of Black girls.

## *2. Policy Roundtables*

One of the most important functions of the BGS Task Force is that they work to ensure that the experiences of Black girls are considered in relevant policy conversations. As a result, the state should decree that at least one member of the Task Force must be present in working groups and policy roundtables aimed at creating or amending policy that relates to victims of DMST. In addition, in order to receive endorsement from the Task Force on a policy, legislators and working groups should present their policy proposals to the Task Force and indicate the ways in which they have met the culturally responsive-trauma informed care standard (which will be created by the Task Force). The Task Force can internally create metrics and vote collectively on whether they want to support a new policy.

### 3. *Research and Funding Advocates*

Research is a powerful way to drive funding and reflect the urgency of a problem. As mentioned, not enough research is devoted to gauging the true numbers and demographics of victims of DMST. I believe that the researchers on the Task Force should work to spearhead research that more adequately gauges the rates at which Black girls are being trafficked in California. Increasing awareness on the prevalence of trafficking in California can help shift the conversation and provide justification for expanding funding and services that are dedicated exclusively towards providing services for Black girls. As mentioned by my interviewees, when an influx of money was provided to counties as a result of the different California Senate bills, programming aimed at meeting the needs of trafficked Black girls was not a funding priority. The Task Force should act as a funding advocate, ensuring that counties dedicate a portion of their funding measures to programming that is explicitly supporting the needs of Black girls.

### 4. *Prevention Arm*

As mentioned earlier, the state must engage in more prevention work as it relates to both traffickers and victims. The Black Girl Survival Task Force can take the lead in thinking of prevention interventions. It is crucial that this prevention work is spearheaded by the BGS Task Force, because this work will require engaging in culturally responsive training and practices. Black and Brown men are disproportionately represented in the racial demographics of traffickers. Experts noted that sometimes, traffickers have undergone sexual trauma and abuse themselves and have in turn exerted the same abuses onto others. Therefore, prevention work for traffickers will have to center trauma informed care. In addition, prevention work must seriously consider the racial, socio-economic, and cultural factors that may make Black and Brown boys

vulnerable to becoming traffickers. However, prevention work must not be based in cultural biases pertaining to the criminality of Black and Brown boys and men. One of the reasons that the county district attorney did not like to explicitly engage in conversations about race as it relates to DMST, is due to the fear of assuming an individual's criminality based on race. While, literature supports that it is important to discuss race as it relates to victimhood, the expert's fears highlight why it is instrumental for this Task Force, which is rooted in combating cultural and racial bias, to spearhead prevention work.

In addition, this group is best equipped to address prevention work as it relates to victims due to the combined expertise of lived experience experts and direct service providers who are best able to understand the particular vulnerabilities that Black girls face. Prevention work should engage how to identify and advocate for girls who have been separated from systems of support. This Task Force can work in coordination with state systems to ensure prevention work occurs *before* Black girls have become forced to engage with state systems.

##### 5. *Drive State Initiatives*

Other state task forces drive initiatives that are relevant to their work. I believe that the Black Girl Survivor Task Force should be no different. The Task Force should select different initiatives to implement on the state and county level that can be rolled out alone or in partnership with other task forces, like the Survivor Advisory Board. There are many urgent initiatives that could be spearheaded by the Task Force that could positively impact the anti-trafficking space.

In particular, I believe a strong flagship program that could be implemented would be a state-wide program focused on the expansion of Black female survivor leaders. The Task Force

could commission a program to increase the number of Black female survivor leaders represented in either direct service work or in county agency capacities. The Task Force should craft training programs to help survivors understand how to harness their lived experience and translate it into direct service provider leadership. These training programs can help bolster the number of Black female survivors engaging in anti-trafficking work and ensure that more service provision is informed by survivor leaders who understand the unique harms that Black girls face. In addition, these leaders can be trained to be involved in task forces, county/state agencies, and other relevant spaces where survivor leadership is needed. This initiative will ultimately help bolster the number of Black female survivor leaders in every county across the state of California.

## **Conclusion**

My thesis seeks to think critically about the needs of sex trafficked Black girls in the state of California. The justice system, foster care system, and education system make Black girls disproportionately vulnerable to trafficking. In addition, historical oppression, systemic racism, and cultural bias prevent Black sex trafficking victims from getting access to necessary services. While California has spearheaded innovative programs to support victims of DMST, the color-blind approach of the state has led to the creation of policies and programs that are not targeted at helping those who are most disproportionately victimized by DMST. My thesis pushes for a color-brave approach to service provision, one that seriously thinks about the actual needs of Black girls, because it is clear that they fall victim to the trafficking industry at disproportionate rates.

My literature review clearly highlighted that in order to adequately serve the needs of Black girls, service provision should be centered in trauma informed and culturally responsive care. This type of care allows Black girls to help heal from their traumas, while also finding strength and joy in their identities. In addition, service provision should help girls think about freedom and justice outside of the conventional criminal justice system. Such service provision should be administered by social workers who have been trained in anti-racist, culturally relevant training.

So much of what was discussed in my literature review was uplifted through sentiments expressed in my expert interviews. The lack of the aforementioned key factors in the creation of service provision can be tied directly to the things that experts noted is not working in the current state service provision landscape. Out of all of my findings, the most informative insight from experts pertained to poor policy implementation. While there is good state policy, the problems with California's policy implementation results in the re-traumatization of Black female victims. In addition, experts noted the need for Black female survivor led leadership, more prevention work, more county level collaboration, more color-brave thinking from state agents, and more culturally responsive training for state agents. However, while there is still an overwhelming amount of work that must happen, my experts highlighted that the state is willing to engage in conversations that focus on the specific needs of Black female DMST victims and survivors.

These findings informed my recommendation for the state to create a Black Girl Survivor Task Force that would serve as a body that constantly holds the state accountable for the failure to incorporate Black female voices into policy and programming related to DMST. The Task Force would serve as a space to strengthen policy and programming creation, implementation,



and monitoring. All while informed by the perspectives of lived experience experts, direct service providers, researchers, and state agency leaders.

While this research was grounded in a robust literature review and informed by experts in the field, there are limitations that, if applied, could greatly strengthen the policy recommendation put forth. First, I believe that incorporating a diverse array of survivor voices would have provided an even more informed understanding of where service provision is falling short for Black girls in California. I only had the ability to interview former survivors, who now utilize their experiences to lead direct service provision for those who are currently trafficked. While the insights provided by these lived experience experts were invaluable, they highlight a very specific type of experience. It would have been deeply beneficial to interview victims who never escaped “the life”, or escaped but chose to return (which is a common phenomena). Research and direct service providers note that this often occurs, due to the need for financial stability. However, it would be deeply insightful to hear from the stories and experience of those who remain on that path. It would help to provide insight to better understand where systems and service provision failed them, in their own opinion (and not in the opinions of others).

Further, while my thesis focuses on Black female-identifying victims, Black trans youth are also often disproportionately vulnerable to being trafficked. Though their experiences are different from Black female victims, there are commonalities in their experiences and service provision needs that deserve to be explored more intimately. While this would have been informative for my research, victims of DMST are concerned about a “protected group” by different research bodies, making it difficult to conduct academic research that directly engages these groups.

In addition I would have liked to engage more stakeholders in rural California. While I was able to engage with some direct service providers in rural California, I would have loved to have also heard from law enforcement and county attorneys represented in those counties as well. Domestic minor sex trafficking knows no geographical bounds. And since girls are constantly being trafficked throughout the circuit, which includes rural California, it would have been excellent to gather more insight into the unique challenges that rural counties face, aside from a lack of funding. For example, labor trafficking is also very prevalent in California, especially in rural California where there are large agricultural communities. As a result, I would be interested to hear how, if at all, issues related to labor trafficking intersect with issues related to sex trafficking. Information like this could further strengthen my policy recommendation.

Geography once again plays a role in identifying my research's limitations. As mentioned earlier, the trafficking circuit not only exists throughout the state of California, but also includes neighboring states like Arizona, as well as popular nearby cities, like Las Vegas. While developing strong service provision may help strengthen the state-wide response, it leaves girls who are trafficked in the non-California parts of the circuit vulnerable. Adequately addressing this issue may require researchers to engage with state and county leaders outside of California. Regardless, the BGS Task Force moves the service provision work of Black girls in a positive direction.

While these limitations give insight into the ways in which this research can be strengthened in the future, it in no way negates the impact of my literature review, findings, and policy recommendation. This research seeks to amplify the importance of being color-brave and investing in the stories of Black girls.

## Appendix

### Service Provider Questions

1. Will you tell me a little bit about your organization and the services that they provide.
  1. What gap does your organization fill in the service provider landscape? Are there any gaps that the organization is still trying to fill?
2. In your opinion, what are some of the strengths of your service provision?
3. Statistics clearly show that Black girls are disproportionately impacted by domestic minor sex trafficking. Have you observed this in your work? In your opinion, are there certain things that service providers should do to best serve Black girls?
  1. In your experience, what role does service provider identity play in shaping their work? (Follow Up: Do you believe that it is important to have service providers that are survivor and Black women-led?) What impact would you say that the identity of service providers and their organizations' leadership play in shaping the programs they offer survivors?
4. What role has the state government played in shaping your work? In your opinion, what would it take for state governments to facilitate Black-women-led/survivor-led service provision on a large scale?
5. California implemented three key bills that directly impact human trafficking survivors: Senate Bill 855, California Senate Bill 794, and California Senate Bill 1322. Are you familiar with these policies? Have they impacted your ability to provide services for victims? (positive or negative) In what ways do you engage with these policies (For example, are you on the MDST teams?)

6. Are there other state policies that have impacted your work and ability to provide services for victims? (positive or negative)
7. On a state level, how is the current state service provision serving Black female-identifying survivors well? Are there any areas in which it is failing them?
8. As you think of the challenges that exist when it comes to supporting Black female-identifying survivors, what would you say are the biggest ones? How could policy makers best address them?

### **Anti-Trafficking Leadership Questions**

1. Can you tell me about the process of founding your organization? What was your motivation for founding the organization?
2. What gap has your organization filled in the service provider landscape in California? Are there any gaps that your organization is still trying to fill?
3. On a state level, how is the current state service provision effectively supporting Black female-identifying survivors? In what ways is it failing them?
4. How about other relevant systems—e.g., the justice system, foster care system, etc.? In what ways are they effectively supporting Black female-identifying survivors? How are they falling short in supporting them?
5. How can state governments facilitate Black-women-led/survivor-led service provision on a large scale? In your opinion, what would it take for this to happen?
6. California implemented three key bills that directly impact human trafficking survivors: Senate Bill 855, California Senate Bill 794, and California Senate Bill 1322. Are you

familiar with these policies? Have they impacted your ability to provide services for victims? (positive or negative) In what ways do you engage with these policies (For example, are you on the MDST teams?)

7. Are there other state policies that have impacted your work and ability to provide services for victims? (positive or negative)

### **Public Health/Community Researcher Questions**

1. Can you tell me about your work and the pathway that brought you to it?
2. What would you say are the best practices that experts have identified when it comes to supporting survivors of human trafficking?
3. When state agencies are creating service provision and programming for communities who have been victims of violence and trauma, what should agencies ensure to consider? What, in your opinion, shapes how agencies decide where to focus their attention in this area?
  1. From a public health perspective, what partners should be brought to the table?
4. What is the importance of culturally relevant/trauma-informed programming?
5. In what ways do state agencies effectively support Black youth, in particular Black girls? In what ways would you say that they fail them?
6. In your opinion, what resources and/or policy changes would help state agencies best support Black youth, and Black girls in particular?

### **County District Attorney Questions**

1. County DA offices are coming up with innovative services for victims of DMST. Can you share a little bit about the programs available for victims in your county? How long have they been in operation, and how did they come about?
  1. What are those programs doing well? How are those programs failing?
2. In the state of California, Black and Brown girls are overrepresented in the number of victims of DMST. In your experience has service provision in your county been created with a mindfulness of the communities most likely to need the services?
3. California implemented three key bills that directly impact human trafficking survivors: Senate Bill 855, California Senate Bill 794, and California Senate Bill 1322. Are you familiar with these policies? Have they impacted your ability to provide services for victims? (positive or negative) In what ways do you engage with these policies (For example, are you on the MDST teams?)
4. Are there other state policies that have impacted your work and ability to provide services for victims? (positive or negative)
5. On a state level, how is the current state service provision failing Black female-identifying survivors? What is it doing well?
6. In your opinion, is it feasible for state governments to facilitate Black and Brown-women-led/survivor-led service provision on a large scale?

### **Law Enforcement Questions**

1. Can you tell me a bit about your role in law enforcement and the pathway that brought you here?
2. Can you speak a little bit about your role in the FBI Human Trafficking Task Force?
3. From your experience, what were the most immediate services that victims needed?
4. How long did you work with victims? If you worked with victims long term, how did the needs of victims change over the duration of the time that you worked with them?
5. In what capacity did you work with partners/service providers?
  1. What would you say were the strengths and weaknesses of those partnerships?
6. What do you believe is working in the current service provision for sex-trafficked youth?  
What is failing?
7. In the state of California, Black and Brown girls are overrepresented in the number of victims of DMST. In your experience has service provision in your county been created with a mindfulness of the communities most likely to need the services?
8. Are the law enforcement victim points of contact reflective of the racial background of victims?