Children and Youth Experiencing Commercial Sexual Exploitation in California: Characteristics and Response Efforts by Child Welfare Agencies
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BACKGROUND
Following the passage of Safe Harbor laws, which decriminalize the involvement of minors in commercial exchanges of sexual acts, many states have tasked child welfare (CW) authorities with the responsibility of preventing, providing and services to children that have experienced commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) (Barnert et al., 2016). Administrative data may be used to evaluate CW responses to allegations of CSE over time at the population-level. Moreover, these data offer client-level historical information about known CSE risk factors, including prior CW system involvement (Franchino-Olsen, 2019). The few existing evaluations offer preliminary evidence of jurisdictional differences in policies, definitions of CSE-related maltreatment, and data collection (Reid et al., 2017). To date, this is the first empirical analyses to assess CW system responses to allegations of CSE-related exploitation at the state level.

METHODS
This analysis includes all children in California with at least one documented allegation of exploitation between 2014-2018, at least one CSE indicator in their records and known sex at birth (N=3,711). Demographic data and child welfare system involvement indicators were incorporated. These administrative records were obtained as part of an ongoing data sharing agreement and research partnership between the California Child Welfare Indicators Project and the California Department of Social Services.

RESULTS
The majority of youth reported for CSE receive an investigation (82.3%).

Female youth are more likely than males to be substantiated (29.7 vs 15.8%).

Black youth are more likely than all other ethnoracial groups to be substantiated.

Youth ages 13 and older are more likely to be substantiated than children under 10 years.

Overall, most youth had at least one referral prior to the first CSE referral (86.3%).

Less than half had a CW case prior to the first CSE referral (43.5%).

Over a third had been in a CW placement prior to the first CSE referral (38.6%).

Less than a quarter were in an open case at the time of the first CSE referral (24.5%).

Fewer still had an open placement at the time of the first CSE referral (13.9%).

DISCUSSION
Ethnoracial and sex disparities emerged within the findings on substantiated CSE referrals. It remains unclear whether these results reflect the true experiences of the CSE-involved population or speak more to the decision-making and data entry practices of child welfare workers. The large portion of youth reported for CSE without a prior CW case underscores the need for further research on the mechanisms by which CW involvement contributes to a child’s vulnerability to CSE.

REFERENCES


AFFILIATIONS
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