

# Challenging childhoods

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## Impact paragraph

### Aim and main conclusions

The consequences of Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on youth's mental and physical health and future well-being have shown to be detrimental. The overall aim of this dissertation was to advance knowledge on (intergenerational) childhood adversity, and specifically its pathways to sexual exploitation in youth.

The studies in this dissertation revealed that ACEs are common in sexually exploited youth and at-risk youth (including youth with special care and educational needs) with and without intellectual disabilities. ACEs have been widely linked to a range of mental health disorders, including anxiety disorder, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and psychotic disorder (McKay et al., 2021). This dissertation focused on psychotic disorders and found relationships between the severity of ACEs and psychotic experiences in both patients with psychotic disorders and their parents. Results provided indications of the intergenerational impact of childhood adversity. These insights substantiate the need that professionals working with at-risk youth and their families are aware of ACEs (e.g. general practitioners, pediatricians, social workers, psychologists, teachers, community care workers, policemen). The earlier ACEs are identified and addressed, the higher the chances may be to prevent long-lasting negative health consequences, and additional adversities such as sexual exploitation (Thompson et al., 2014; Webster, 2022). This also benefits societal costs, for which ACEs are a significant contributor (Hughes et al., 2021; Karatekin et al., 2022).

This dissertation specifically focused on sexual exploitation because it is a major societal and hidden problem that has received too little attention in research, policy and practice. Important insights were gained on risk and protective factors for sexual exploitation, and how ACEs may trigger a chain of other risk factors, mental health problems, risk behavior and ultimately circumstances in which at-risk youth are vulnerable to be sexually exploited. This knowledge can inform future research that aims to further elucidate these potential pathways to sexual exploitation. It also highlights key points and time frames in the lives of at-risk youth and their families at which prevention efforts can be aimed. This dissertation identified a significant gap in research and practice regarding protective factors. It underlines the critical need for a better understanding of how protective factors can mitigate the impact of risk factors, so that researchers and practitioners can incorporate more strength-based prevention programs and interventions into the existing risk reduction strategies.

### Relevance

Today, the topic sexual exploitation is of increasing relevance. Globally there is growing attention in research, policy and practice to the complex issue of sexual exploitation. Studies have revealed the

widespread nature of sexual exploitation, affecting millions of people worldwide (The International Labor Organization, 2017), in particular at-risk and marginalized youth, such as youth with intellectual disabilities and young men (Moynihan et al., 2018; Reid, 2018). This has led to the conclusion that the ‘hidden crime’ of sexual exploitation is more common than previously thought. Regularly, newspapers headline about both sexual and criminal exploitation and how it manifests itself in all domains of society (e.g. online, the streets, in hotels, neighbourhoods, around schools and health care centres). Addressing sexual exploitation by prevention and intervention strategies has become a critical issue on governmental agendas, for example the action plan of the Dutch program ‘Together against Human Trafficking’ (Samen tegen Mensenhandel; Rijksoverheid, 2024). To be able to develop and enrich prevention and intervention strategies, knowledge gaps have to be filled. This dissertation makes an important contribution by increasing knowledge on risk and protective factors for sexual exploitation and including at-risk and marginalized youth (youth with intellectual disabilities and young men), for whom timely and adequate care and support is crucial to prevent long-term consequences on their health.

This dissertation focused on risk and protective factors for sexual exploitation at the individual, family, community and societal level. Also the ACE framework emphasizes the importance of addressing the broader context that give rise to ACEs, such as family level and society level risk factors (Karatekin et al., 2022). Thereby this research aligns with current movements in healthcare that seek to explain behavior from a more holistic perspective. In the last decades, healthcare is shifting from disease-oriented care to more personalised patient and family centred care (Bokhour et al., 2018). There is also a growing emphasis for someone’s strengths and personal needs, rather than only on problems, risks and pathologies (Schlechter et al., 2019; Stancliffe et al., 2020). Mental health problems are the result of complex and dynamic biological, social and psychological interactions, it is thus important that an individual is seen within the broader context of functioning, its family and environment (Köhne & Van Os, 2016; Van der Stel, 2020). The results of this dissertation imply that taking history of the personal life of at-risk youth and their parents, including both adverse and positive experiences, can provide important information for the understanding of behavioural root causes. This knowledge can help to implement trauma-informed and strength based (early) interventions, that meet the personal needs of youth and their families. Ultimately, this can lead to more sustainable health outcomes.

### **Target audience**

ACEs and sexual exploitation are societal challenges, making the results of this dissertation relevant to a broad audience. At-risk youth interact with professionals in a wide variety of domains, so the results are of importance for people working in medical healthcare, mental healthcare, education, social

services, family support, education, child welfare and protection, criminal justice and community care and youth organizations. A key message of this dissertation to these professionals is to look beyond observable behavior of at-risk youth and their families and instead recognize and address underlying emotional, psychological, and (intergenerational) trauma-related vulnerabilities through trauma-informed care (TIC). It is critical that the results reach professionals working with these at-risk youth and their families (see also 'dissemination of knowledge'). We call on policymakers involved in healthcare and safety to invest in trauma-informed prevention and intervention strategies, because when professionals adopt trauma-informed practices, they can better understand and respond to the behavioral, emotional, and psychological needs of at-risk youth and their families (SAMHSA, 2014). Youth's chances of re-traumatization can be reduced, and professionals can help to create environments that promote healing, resilience, and positive outcomes, which prevent a wide range of negative health problems across generations and can finally reduce societal costs. So the knowledge dissemination of this dissertation to professionals should ultimately benefit at-risk youth and their families, making them an important target audience as well. Youth with intellectual disabilities and sexually exploited young men are a specific target audience, because the knowledge about their backgrounds characteristics and needs can help to reduce stigma and meet their specific needs. Both groups for example need services that approaches them without judgement, but also are sensitive and provide comprehensive education about sexuality, consent, boundaries and healthy relationships. In order to truly match care and support to the needs of at-risk youth and their families, it is recommended that they be involved in initiatives to implement this knowledge into prevention and intervention efforts. For an example on how this can be achieved, see the next paragraph.

The findings of this dissertation have led to implications and recommendations for researchers. Many knowledge gaps remain regarding pathways to sexual exploitation that can be addressed in future research. Researchers should shed more light on the nature of protective factors for sexual exploitation, the interconnectedness between risk and protective factors and needs of underrepresented at-risk populations. Understanding how certain youth and families maintain healthy despite a history of ACEs is critical for developing interventions that foster resilience across generations. Also more research is needed on the intergenerational effects of ACEs in mental health disorders, to uncover the mechanisms through which trauma is passed down. In addition, more profound qualitative research is needed to give at-risk and victimized youth a voice, to significantly enrich the scientific and practical field. Last, the perspective of parents should be included in research on ACEs and sexual exploitation, because of the possible intergenerational effects of their own ACE histories on ACEs and mental health in their children, but also because parents can play an important role in mitigating adversity and promoting strengths.

### Dissemination of knowledge

To reach the above described target groups, the following activities have already been conducted.

Results of this dissertation were shared internationally and nationally with many colleagues in research and practice and with policymakers. Internationally, the results of this dissertation were published in scientific journals (Mercera et al., 2024a; Mercera et al., 2024b; Mercera et al., 2024c). Results were also shared at the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development (ISSBD) conference in 2024 (Lisbon); the European Congress of Psychiatry in 2024 (Budapest); the European Scientific Association on Residential and Family Care for Children and Adolescents (EuSARF) in 2023 (Brighton); the WPA World Congress of Psychiatry in 2023 (Vienna) the European Society for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (ESCAP) conference in 2022 (Maastricht); the International Association for the Scientific Study of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IASSIDD) conference in 2021 (Virtual).

Nationally, results were disseminated at the NvVP 'Voorjaarscongres' in 2024 (Maastricht); Jeugd in Onderzoek congress in 2024 ('s Hertogenbosch); MHeNs research day in 2023 (Maastricht); Jeugd in Onderzoek congress in 2022 ('s Hertogenbosch). A guest lecture on sexual exploitation was held for students at 'Fontys Hogeschool voor de Pedagogiek' in 2023 (Sittard). In addition, study results were presented via webinars for (prospective) healthcare and education professionals for the association 'European Association for Forensic Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, Psychology & other involved professions – The Netherlands' (Efcap-nl) in 2022 and 'Avans Hogeschool' in 2021. Policymakers of the Ministry of Justice and Safety and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports were informed in 2022 and 2023 on the study on sexual exploitation in young men so that the results could inform their action plan 'Together against human trafficking' (Rijksoverheid, 2024). Practical factsheets resulting from the studies on sexual exploitation were shared with a wide range of professionals in different domains through knowledge institutes such as 'Landelijk Kenniscentrum LVB', 'Centrum Seksueel Geweld', 'Coördinatiecentrum tegen Mensenhandel' and 'Nederlands Jeugdinstituut'. The results also contributed to the realization of a book chapter about exploitation and intellectual disabilities in a study book for social workers (Basisboek LVB voor sociaal werkers; Kaal et al., 2022). A broader public was reached through an interview in the newspaper 'Algemeen Dagblad' on the sexual exploitation of young men (<https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/mannen-worstelen-vaak-in-eenzaamheid-na-misbruikervaring-mijn-hulpverlener-heeft-me-gered~abef5e65/>). One of the victimized young men participated in the interview as well, to help raise public awareness for this major societal issue.

Currently, the knowledge of this dissertation is being used to further develop prevention and intervention initiatives. One prevention initiative is the project of a consortium of healthcare organizations in The Netherlands (Koraal, Fier, Sterk Huis, Lumens, Pretty Woman/Best Man). In this project an e-learning for professionals is being developed on the sexual exploitation of young men,

aiming to increase professional's knowledge and skills to adequately support them. Also a platform for young men is going to be developed to inform them about sexual exploitation and accessible ways to ask and seek help. In this we collaborate actively with sexually exploited young men to assure that the information is appealing and the platform matches their needs. In another project of Koraal on exploitation and intellectual disabilities, the voice of youth and their parents are included as well, by asking them about their needs. Insights will be translated to practical handouts for professionals, including for example ways to engage in conversation with youth and parents about suspected exploitation. Regarding interventions, the residential and outpatient treatment program for youth with intellectual disabilities of Koraal (YIP!) will be further developed using the results of this dissertation.

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