

Child Sexual Abuse and Boundary Violating Behaviors in Youth Serving Organizations: National Prevalence and Distribution by Organizational Type

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Abstract

Many youth serving organizations (YSOs) implement child sexual abuse (CSA) prevention strategies. We examined the potential impact of those strategies by retrospectively estimating the prevalence of CSA and boundary violating behaviors experienced in five broad organizational settings: organized sports, religious organizations, music or arts programs, K-12 schools, and the “Big 6 settings” (i.e., 4-H, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Boy Scouts of America, Girl Scouts of the USA, and the YMCA of the USA). We compared victimization rates between nationally representative cohorts of younger adults (age 18–22; $N = 3174$) and slightly older adults (age 32–36, $N = 3237$). Across all participants and settings, 3.75% ($n = 363$) experienced CSA in YSOs. Among survivors, younger adults reported experiencing a lower proportion of CSA within Big 6 settings than older adults (29.1% vs. 44.5%; $p < .05$), suggesting that prevention efforts may be having the desired effects in Big 6 settings.

Keywords

youth serving organizations, child sexual abuse, boundary violating behaviors, prevention

Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a prevalent public health problem in the U.S. and globally (Amene et al., 2023; Finkelhor et al., 2014; Mathews, Pacella, et al., 2023; Stoltenborgh et al., 2015). In the U.S., the prevalence of substantiated CSA has declined by 64% from 1992 through 2020 (Finkelhor et al., 2022). While it is difficult to ascertain the specific reasons for observed declines in CSA rates, varied explanations have been offered, including increased awareness among the general population, professionalization of child protective services (Finkelhor, 2008; Finkelhor & Jones, 2004), and decreases in sexual recidivism rates (Lussier et al., 2023). Another potential explanation pertains to the numerous CSA prevention, detection, and intervention efforts implemented in recent decades in many youth serving organizations (YSOs) (Assini-Meytin et al., 2021; Kaufman et al., 2020). Youth serving organizations are defined as “any public or private body, agency, association, club, institution, organisation or other entity or group of entities of any kind [...] that provides, or has at any time provided, activities, facilities, programs or services of any kind that provide the means through which adults have contact with children, including through their families; and does not include the family” (Royal Commission into

Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2014, p. “Terms of Reference” section).

Child Sexual Abuse and Boundary Violating Behaviors in Youth Serving Organizations

Improving our understanding of both CSA and boundary violating experiences from non-forensic, representative samples can contribute to developing more effective interventions and policies aiming at preventing CSA perpetration in YSOs (Kaufman & Erooga, 2016; Kaufman et al., 2019). Child sexual abuse includes non-consensual contact acts (e.g.,

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sexual touching, attempted and completed intercourse) and non-contact acts (e.g., looking at a child's private parts for sexual gratification), including internet-facilitated acts (e.g., adult sending a nude picture to a child) (Collin-Vézina & Mathews, 2018). The available research on CSA by adults in YSOs is sparse and provides a wide range of prevalence estimates. One study with pooled data from 13,052 U.S. children under age 18 estimated that 0.8% of children experience any child maltreatment in the context of a YSO; among those who did, 6.4% experienced CSA (Shattuck et al., 2016). However, this study did not specifically focus on CSA by adults in YSOs, and the sample could not provide answers about the totality of their experience up to age 18. A seminal review by Shakeshaft (2004) identified the proportion of educator sexual misconduct (which includes CSA) in K-12 schools ranged from 3.7% to 50.3% across studies. However, the rate of 9.6% was the most reliable educator sexual misconduct estimate, as it resulted from a nationally representative sample of U.S. 8th to 11th graders in the year 2000 (Shakeshaft, 2004). An updated prevalence of educator sexual misconduct with a convenience sample of 6632 college students in the U.S. found that 11.7% of students reported at least one form of educator sexual misconduct in K-12 school settings (Jeglic, Calkins, et al., 2023).

Understanding the prevalence of boundary violating behaviors and how these may create opportunities for CSA perpetration is a central feature of theoretical models of CSA prevention within YSOs (Cornish & Clarke, 2002; Kaufman et al., 2006, 2012). Boundary violating behaviors are an important separate domain of acts comprising subtle forms of behavior that may be innocuous or are possible indicators of grooming children for future abuse.¹ Boundary violating behaviors that often precede CSA perpetration may be categorized as sexual misconduct (e.g., asking children/youth to talk about sexual things), rule violations (e.g., giving children/youth drugs), ingratiating contact (e.g., giving children/youth gifts), and family ingratiating contact (e.g., befriending parents/caregivers). Boundary violating behaviors have been examined in the context of people who survived or perpetrated CSA but are seldom, if ever, considered using general population samples. For example, in one such study Jeglic, Calkins, et al. (2023) found that among those who had experienced educator sexual misconduct, 19%–42% also experienced some form of boundary violating behaviors (e.g., gift giving, special attention, phone calls, or texts). Boundary violating behaviors have also been examined in the context of small samples of individuals convicted of perpetrating CSA in YSOs (Erooga et al., 2020; Leclerc et al., 2005, 2015).

Child Sexual Abuse and Boundary Violating Behaviors in the Context of the Largest U.S.-based Youth Serving Organizations

The 4-H, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Boy Scouts of America, Girl Scouts of the

USA, and the YMCA of the USA are amongst the largest and longest operating YSOs in the U.S. These organizations may be especially attuned to the risks of CSA for many reasons, such as a core mission focus on youth well-being and the impact of lawsuits—experienced directly or by peer organizations—on organizational reputation or finances (Wurtele et al., 2019). Previous research involving four of the Big 6 settings found that they have collectively implemented more than one thousand discrete policies, procedures, and practices aimed at preventing, detecting, and addressing CSA in recent decades (Assini-Meytin et al., 2021). Such policies, procedures, and practices include overall statements expressing the organizations' commitment to child safety (e.g., protecting children from CSA is the responsibility of everyone in the organization); codes of conduct describing a set of behavioral standards to guide interactions between adults and children (e.g., staff and volunteers cannot transport children in their own vehicles); CSA prevention training and education for staff and volunteers, parents, and participating children and youth; screening and hiring procedures (e.g., the inclusion of background check/criminal history); and procedures to guide organizations' response to suspected and confirmed cases of CSA (Assini-Meytin et al., 2021).

Such policies, procedures, and practices include proprietary CSA prevention training for staff and volunteers (Kaufman et al., 2020). While Big Brothers Big Sisters of America began to address CSA in their settings in the 1970s (J. Novak, personal communication, April 29, 2020), in 1989, they developed the EMPOWER training program for parents on the topic of CSA prevention. Novak et al. (2016) evaluated the parent program as part of the program's development process across four U.S. states. The evaluation supported parents' satisfaction with the training's value as an educational tool for themselves and to enhance their child's safety (Novak et al., 2016). All Big Brothers Big Sisters of America parents are now required to complete this training. Likewise, in 1988, the Boy Scouts of America implemented their Youth Protection Program to develop and maintain a culture of youth protection within Boy Scouts' programming, to which they quickly added parent-focused training (Boyle, 1994). Similarly, in 1995, the YMCA of the USA and their local federated units started prevention training and implementing child-safe policies and screening (M. Applewhite, personal communication, September 14, 2023).

In 2007, organizations including Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and Boy Scouts of America collaborated with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other experts to develop a comprehensive guide to prevent and address CSA within YSOs (Saul & Audage, 2007). The 2007 CDC guide marked a pivotal point in the systematization of child-safe policies and procedures to prevent CSA in YSOs. Despite significant efforts to prevent and address CSA and boundary violating behaviors in YSOs, few (if any) of these strategies are evidence-based and there is relatively little research on their

impact on youth safety. It remains unknown whether children and youth participating today are any less likely to experience CSA or boundary violating behaviors at the hands of YSO leaders, staff, and volunteers than those who participated in YSO programming in years past.

The Current Study

To address these knowledge gaps, we conducted what we believe is the first nationally representative survey of the prevalence of CSA victimization and boundary violating behaviors by adult leaders, staff, or volunteers of U.S.-based YSOs experienced by program participants. To do so, we recruited two nationally representative cohorts of adults, one comprised of adults ages 18–22 and one of older adults, ages 32–36. We selected these age cohorts based on three considerations. First, we focused on adults 18 years of age and older (vs. children) to ensure that it was possible to capture their experiences across the entire span of childhood up to age 18. Second, we focused on relatively younger adults engaging in a period of recall reasonably proximate to childhood and minimizing recall errors. Third, we selected two differently aged cohorts whose years of participating in Big 6 settings would not overlap substantially to better assess whether rates of CSA and boundary violating behaviors were declining over time.²

The current study will provide estimates of the prevalence of CSA and boundary violating behaviors in YSOs for these cohorts of participants, the distribution of CSA and boundary violating behaviors across the five broad types of YSOs, and will assess differences between the two cohorts. We hypothesized that, within the context of Big 6 participation, CSA and boundary violating experiences would be less prevalent among the younger cohort of participants, who are more likely to have benefited from more intensive and well-established comprehensive safety efforts than the older cohort. As described above, some of these organizations began child protection efforts in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Further, in 2007, the CDC published a comprehensive guide to prevent and address organizational CSA, establishing more publicly recognized parameters for child safety within organizations. We did not formulate specific hypotheses regarding the relative prevalence of CSA or boundary violating experiences in the remaining settings (i.e., organized sports, religious organizations, music or arts programs, and K-12 schools).

Method

Sample

Our sample was drawn from the Ipsos online KnowledgePanel (35.4%) and their partnering panel companies (64.6%). Ipsos KnowledgePanel is one of the most extensive panels in the U.S. and utilizes probability-based sampling to establish a representative sample of U.S. adults. In studies that need a

large number of respondents or that focus on specific sub-populations (i.e., young adults), Ipsos supplements their sample with participants from partnering panel companies, which are generally designed to be representative of the U.S. population, though limited in their representativeness. Therefore, Ipsos applied a calibration methodology that allows a sample composed of KnowledgePanel and non-probability partnering companies' sources to be blended together to produce a larger sample that better represents the target population. With the Ipsos weighting methodology, sample representation is improved concerning basic geodemographic distributions and attitudinal and behavioral measures.

Participants recruited for the study came from two age cohorts. The younger adult cohort participants were born between 2000 and 2004 and experienced their childhood years between 2000 and 2021. In contrast, participants in the older adult cohort were born between 1986 and 1990 and experienced their childhood years between 1986 and 2007. Participants within the target age cohorts received an email inviting them to participate in the study. Those who provided consent were then prompted to the online survey. The survey was conducted anonymously to secure the integrity of the data and increase the likelihood of honest responses. The survey response rate among qualified responses was 49.6% within the KnowledgePanel and 17.6% within the partnering panel companies' panelists. These response rates were well within the expected response rate for KnowledgePanel panelists (50%) and partnering companies (5%–20%). The participant survey median completion time was 11 minutes. Data collection occurred between July 8, 2022, and August 3, 2022. The Institutional Review Board of the Bloomberg School of Public Health at the Johns Hopkins University approved the study.

Measurements

The survey instrument was designed to capture experiences of CSA and boundary violating behaviors in YSOs. Selected CSA and boundary violating behaviors questions were pre-tested in cognitive interviews with a sample of $N = 10$ young adults recruited from Ipsos KnowledgePanel. Cognitive interviews followed similar procedures as used elsewhere when validating approaches to measuring the prevalence of CSA (Mathews, Meinck, et al., 2023). Minor modifications to item wording were made to assist with comprehensibility and retrieval, as informed by findings from the cognitive interviews.

Demographic Characteristics. Demographic characteristics collected as part of this investigation included gender identity (men, women, non-binary/other); race and ethnicity (non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic two or more races, Non-Hispanic other, and Hispanic); highest level of education (less than high school, high school graduate, some college, bachelor's degree or higher); mother's highest level of education (less than high school, high school graduate, incomplete college,

complete college or some graduate school, complete graduate school, don't know); exposure to CSA training or education, including how to recognize, resist, and report abuse, or how to differentiate between "good touch" and "bad touch" at school or other organizations; and exposure to parental (or other caregivers) communication about CSA.

Child Sexual Abuse. Child sexual abuse victimization items were adapted from the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ) - R2: Adapted Version (Australian Child Maltreatment Study) (Mathews et al., 2021). Child sexual abuse was assessed with four items that inquired about whether any adult staff member or another adult at school or other youth organization ever: (a) made you look at their private parts, or looked at yours when they shouldn't have; (b) touched your private parts when they shouldn't have, or made you touch their private parts; (c) tried to force you to have sex, even if it didn't happen; and (d) forced you to have sex. Response options were: 1 = Yes, 2 = No, and 3 = Not sure. The four items were combined into a single measure coded as zero = Never, 1 = Ever, 2 = Not sure, where "ever" indicates at least one instance of sexual abuse before age 18. We also inquired about CSA victimization by someone outside the context of any YSO (e.g., family member, acquaintance, stranger).

Boundary Violating Behaviors. Questions assessing the experience of boundary violating behaviors were developed and categorized based on items in the Modus Operandi Questionnaire (MOQ; Kaufman, 1994; 2019). The MOQ is a comprehensive measure of CSA-related modus operandi (i.e., 300+ items) that has been used over the past 30 years to assess various aspects of adult and adolescent perpetrated CSA (e.g., (Kaufman, 1994; Kaufman et al., 1998; Kaufman & Patterson, 2010; Leclerc et al., 2010; Leclerc & Tremblay, 2007). We classified these behaviors into four broad categories: sexual misconduct (e.g., took nude pictures of you, showed you pornography); rule violation (e.g., gave you drugs, met with you after the organization is closed); ingratiating contact (e.g., treated you as a favorite, confided personal things to you); and family ingratiating contact (e.g., offered to babysit you or your sibling(s) to help out). Of note, several behaviors included in the sexual misconduct constitute CSA in the context of this study (e.g., taking a nude picture of you or showing you pornography). However, for this study, we included them among boundary violating behaviors, as they can clearly be placed in the category of sexual misconduct, and are often used by adults who offend against children to desensitize them to sexual acts prior to engaging in contact-based CSA.

Sexual Misconduct. Participants were asked whether any adult staff member or another adult at school or other YSO ever: (a) walked in on you in a bathroom; (b) walked in on you in a changing room or locker room; (c) took nude pictures of you; (d) invited you to go skinny dipping (swimming naked);

(e) asked you to talk about sexual things; (f) sent you sexual pictures over the internet or a cell phone; (g) showed you movies containing nudity or sexual content; or (h) showed you pornography. Multiple choices were allowed. For analysis of "any sexual misconduct," response options were combined into a single dichotomous item, where "0" indicated no sexual misconduct and "1" indicated at least one instance of sexual misconduct.

Rule Violation. Participants were asked whether any adult staff member or another adult at school or other youth organization ever: (a) gave you cigarettes; (b) gave you beer or liquor; (c) gave you drugs; (d) allowed you to do things against the rules; and (e) met with you after the organization is closed. Multiple choices were allowed. For analysis of "any rule violation," response options were combined into a single dichotomous item, where "0" indicated no rule violation and "1" indicated at least one instance of rule violation.

Ingratiating Contact. Participants were asked whether any adult staff member or another adult at school or other youth organization ever: (a) tickled you; (b) gave you piggyback rides; (c) gave you gifts; (d) gave you money; (e) treated you as a favorite; (f) confided personal things to you; (g) took you for car rides; and (h) took you to their house. Participants were allowed to endorse multiple responses. For analysis of "any ingratiating contact," response options were combined into a single dichotomous item, where "0" indicated no ingratiating contact and "1" indicated at least one instance of ingratiating contact.

Family Ingratiating Contact. Participants were asked whether any adult staff member or another adult at school or other youth organization ever: (a) drove you home; (b) offered to babysit you or your sibling(s) to help out; (c) helped fix things or do chores around your house; (d) created a close friendship with one or both of your parent(s) or other caregiver(s); (e) bought gifts for people in your family; (f) took the family out for dinners; (g) gave or loaned your parent(s) or caregiver(s) money; (h) had drinks with your parent(s) or caregiver(s); (i) did drugs with your parent(s) or caregiver(s); and (j) created a romantic relationship with both or one of your parent(s) or caregiver(s). Participants were allowed to endorse multiple responses. For analysis of "any family ingratiating contact," response options were combined into a single dichotomous item, where "0" indicated no family ingratiating contact and "1" indicated at least one instance of family ingratiating contact.

Youth Serving Organization Type. For each CSA and boundary violating behavior category specified above, participants who endorsed at least one behavior within each category were prompted to indicate the type of organization where it happened. Response options included the Big 6 settings, organized sports, religious organizations, music or arts programs, K-12 schools, other YSOs, and not sure.

Data Analysis

Data analyses are comprised of three main steps, accounting for sample weights in all analyses. First, the weighted percentage of CSA victimization and the four categories of boundary violating behaviors were estimated for all YSO settings combined. Second, of those who reported CSA and boundary violating behaviors, weighted percentages were used to estimate the distribution across YSO settings. Third, to assess for statistically significant differences between the cohorts in terms of reports of experiencing CSA and boundary violating behavior, bivariate and multivariate logistic regression models were analyzed. The multivariate logistic regression models controlled for demographic characteristics that may influence the likelihood of experiencing CSA and boundary violating behaviors (i.e., gender identity, race and ethnicity, mother's highest level of education, CSA education in school/youth serving setting, CSA education by parents/caregivers, CSA victimization non-YSO related). The results report unadjusted odds ratios (*OR*) from the bivariate logistic regression models and adjusted odds ratios (*AOR*) from the multivariate logistic regression models.

Participants were given the option to decline or skip survey items. Across all the items, missing data comprised less than 1% of the responses. Given the substantial sample size and the low level of missing data, it is unlikely to impact study findings significantly. As a result, missing data were not factored into the analyses. Analyses were conducted in Stata/SE 18.0.

Results

Participant demographic characteristics by cohort are presented in Table 1. Statistically significant differences were observed in gender identity, race and ethnicity, participant's highest level of education, mother's highest level of education, and CSA education. Specifically, compared to the older cohort, a greater proportion of adults in the younger cohort self-identified as non-binary (4% vs. 1%), Hispanic (24% vs. 19%), having a mother who completed college or some graduate school (32% vs. 28%), and having been exposed to some CSA education or messaging in school (62% vs. 46%) and at home (58% vs. 47%). No statistically significant differences between the younger and older cohorts were observed in CSA victimization by any other person unrelated to a YSO (18% vs. 17%). Finally, compared to the older cohort, a smaller proportion of younger adults endorsed participating in organized sports (46% vs. 48%) and religious organizations (29% vs. 36%), consistent with observed declines among U.S. youth in sports and religion over time (Chen et al., 2021; Twenge et al., 2015).

Overall Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse and Boundary Violating Behaviors

Table 2 shows the prevalence of CSA perpetrated by adults in any YSO by cohort. Overall, 4% ($n = 363$) of the entire sample

reported experiencing some form of CSA by adult leaders, staff, or volunteers in one or more YSOs. There was no statistically significant difference between the two adult cohorts (3.8% for those aged 18–22; 3.7% for those aged 32–36).

The prevalence of boundary violating behaviors by adults in YSOs, by type, by cohort, and corresponding associations is shown in Table 3. Overall, 7% ($n = 617$) of the entire sample reported experiencing one or more sexual misconduct behaviors by adult leaders, staff, or volunteers in one or more YSOs. The younger cohort reported significantly more such experiences (8% compared to 6% in the older cohort). However, there were no statistically significant cohort differences in sexual misconduct when controlling for sample demographic characteristics (*AOR* = 1.16, 95% confidence interval [*CI*] = 0.89, 1.51).

Overall, 12% ($n = 928$) of the entire sample reported experiencing one or more rule violations by adult staff or volunteers in one or more YSOs. The younger cohort reported significantly more such violations (15% compared to 10% in the older cohort). The association remained statistically significant in the adjusted model (*AOR* = 1.52, 95% *CI* = 1.23, 1.90).

Overall, 34% ($n = 2388$) of the entire sample reported one or more ingratiating contacts by adult staff or volunteers in one or more YSOs. The younger cohort was significantly more likely to report such contacts (42%, declining to 26% in the older cohort). The association remained statistically significant in the adjusted model (*AOR* = 1.95, 95% *CI* = 1.67, 2.28).

Overall, 30% ($n = 2076$) of the entire sample reported experiencing one or more family ingratiating contacts. The younger cohort was more likely to report such contacts (31%, declining to 28% in the younger cohort). However, the difference between cohorts did not reach statistical significance in the adjusted model (*AOR* = 1.12, 95% *CI* = 0.96, 1.31).

Distribution by Organizational Type

The distribution of CSA by organizational type, cohort, and corresponding associations is displayed in Table 4. Within the subset of CSA survivors ($n = 363$), the only setting in which there was a statistically significant difference between cohorts was the Big 6. Less than one-third (29%) of the CSA survivors within the younger cohort, compared to nearly half in the older cohort (44%), reported that abuse occurred within a Big 6 setting. The association between cohort and experiencing CSA victimization in a Big 6 setting remained statistically significant in the adjusted model (*AOR* = 0.48, 95% *CI* = 0.24, 0.96). In a post hoc analysis, the prevalence of CSA in the Big 6 among those exposed to these organizations was 4.41% in the older cohort, declining to 3.52% in the younger cohort, a percent decline of 20.18%.

The distribution of boundary violating behaviors by organizational type, cohort, and corresponding associations is provided in Table 5.

Table 1. Sample Demographic Characteristics Weighted Percentages by Cohort.

Variable	Total	Younger cohort (18–22)	Older cohort (32–36)	p-Value
	N = 6411 %	Total N = 3174 %	Total N = 3237 %	
<i>Variable</i>				
Gender identity				
Men	48.26	47.74	48.77	<0.001
Women	49.29	48.42	50.15	
Non-binary/Other	2.45	3.83	1.09	
Race and ethnicity				
Non-Hispanic white	55.24	52.58	57.85	<0.001
Non-Hispanic black	12.87	13.21	12.54	
Non-Hispanic two or more races	2.39	2.98	1.82	
Hispanic	21.66	24.38	19.00	
Other non-Hispanic	7.83	6.85	8.79	
Participant highest level of education				
Less than high school	12.45	17.87	7.15	<0.001
High school graduate	28.45	33.62	23.39	
Some college	34.30	43.51	25.26	
Bachelor's degree or higher	24.79	0.50	44.20	
Mother's highest level of education				
Less than high school	10.05	9.34	10.75	<0.001
High school graduate	24.61	20.34	28.81	
Some college	17.45	18.92	16.00	
College graduate/some graduate school	30.06	32.46	27.71	
Graduate school	14.21	15.15	13.28	
Don't know	3.62	3.79	3.45	
CSA education				
School/Other YSOs	53.97	62.19	45.92	<0.001
Parents/Caregivers	52.46	57.92	47.10	<0.001
CSA victimization (other non-YSO related)	17.53	17.84	17.22	0.646
Participation in YSOs				
Big 6	47.32	46.44	48.18	0.336
Organized sports	41.36	39.32	43.38	0.024
Religious organizations	32.41	28.53	36.22	<0.001
Music or arts programs	35.44	36.75	34.15	0.132

Table 2. Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse by Adults in YSOs, by Type, by Cohort, and Corresponding Associations.

Child sexual abuse	Total N = 6411 %	Younger Cohort (18–22) n = 3174 %	Older Cohort (32–36) n = 3237 %	OR (95%CI)	^a AOR (95%CI)
Any CSA	3.75	3.80	3.70	1.07 (0.77, 1.49)	0.94 (0.66, 1.34)
Look	2.74	2.87	2.61	1.14 (0.77, 1.69)	1.00 (0.67, 1.51)
Touch	2.53	2.28	2.77	0.83 (0.55, 1.25)	0.71 (0.47, 1.09)
Try to force sex	1.66	1.40	1.90	0.75 (0.48, 1.18)	0.66 (0.41, 1.05)
Forced sex	1.34	1.30	1.39	0.95 (0.59, 1.52)	0.81 (0.50, 1.31)

Results account for sample weight. For cohort associations with child sexual abuse, cohort 2 is the reference group; OR = odds ratio; AOR = adjusted odds ratio; CI = confidence interval.

^aModels control for: gender identity, race and ethnicity, mother's highest level of education, CSA education in school/youth serving setting, CSA education by parents/caregivers, CSA victimization non-youth serving setting related.

Sexual Misconduct. When examining only the 617 participants who reported any sexual misconduct violations, there were three settings in which the younger cohort reported significantly fewer such violations, including the Big 6 (21%,

compared to 34% in the older cohort), organized sports (7%, compared to 26%), and religious organizations (9%, compared to 17%). All the associations remained statistically significant in the adjusted models. It was only concerning among K-12

Table 3. Prevalence of Boundary Violating Behaviors by Adults in YSOs by Type, by Cohort, and Corresponding Associations.

Boundary violating behaviors	Total N = 6411 %	Younger Cohort (18–22) n = 3174 %	Older Cohort (32– 36) n = 3237 %	OR (95%CI)	^a AOR (95%CI)
<i>Sexual misconduct</i>					
Any sexual misconduct	7.00	7.89	6.14	1.31 (1.02, 1.69)*	1.16 (0.89, 1.51)
Walked in on you in a bathroom, changing room, or locker room	3.77	4.57	2.98	1.56 (1.11, 2.20)*	1.41 (1.00, 1.98)
Took nude pictures of you	0.92	0.86	0.98	0.88 (0.40, 1.90)	0.74 (0.35, 1.57)
Invited you to skinny dipping	0.97	1.03	0.91	1.14 (0.59, 2.20)	0.97 (0.50, 1.88)
Asked you to talk about sexual things	2.19	2.16	2.21	0.98 (0.65, 1.47)	0.83 (0.54, 1.27)
Sent you sexual pictures over the internet or a cell phone	0.85	1.03	0.67	1.54 (0.81, 2.93)	1.31 (0.70, 2.45)
Showed you movies with nudity or sexual content	1.79	2.08	1.50	1.40 (0.87, 2.26)	1.19 (0.74, 1.91)
Showed you pornography	1.08	1.25	0.91	1.38 (0.77, 2.47)	1.27 (0.69, 2.33)
<i>Rule violation</i>					
Any rule violation	12.46	15.09	9.88	1.62 (1.31, 2.00)***	1.52 (1.23, 1.90)***
Gave you cigarettes	1.38	1.20	1.56	0.77 (0.44, 1.35)	0.69 (0.40, 1.20)
Gave you beer or liqueur	1.53	0.96	2.08	0.46 (0.27, 0.78)**	0.41 (0.24, 0.69)**
Gave you drugs	1.19	1.25	1.14	1.09 (0.58, 2.05)	0.97 (0.50, 1.85)
Allowed you to do things against the rules	8.49	10.60	6.42	1.73 (1.34, 2.22)***	1.61 (1.24, 2.08)***
Met with you after the organization is closed	4.85	5.86	3.85	1.55 (1.12, 2.15)**	1.41 (1.01, 2.00)**
<i>Ingratiating contact</i>					
Any ingratiating contact	33.79	41.61	26.12	2.02 (1.73, 2.34)***	1.95 (1.67, 2.28)**
Tickled you	6.03	7.02	5.07	1.41 (1.06, 1.88)*	1.34 (1.01, 1.79)*
Gave you piggyback rides	7.46	9.48	5.48	1.80 (1.37, 2.38)***	1.72 (1.30, 2.28)***
Gave you gifts	14.47	18.31	10.72	1.87 (1.53, 2.29)***	1.75 (1.42, 2.16)***
Gave you money	6.45	7.90	5.03	1.62 (1.22, 2.15)**	1.53 (1.14, 2.04)**
Treated you as favorite	16.55	21.79	11.41	2.16 (1.79, 2.61)***	2.15 (1.76, 2.62)***
Confided personal things to you	6.72	9.05	4.44	2.14 (1.62, 2.83)***	1.96 (1.46, 2.63)***
Took you for car rides	8.63	9.49	7.79	1.24 (0.97, 1.59)	1.15 (0.89, 1.49)
Took you to their house	5.63	5.58	5.69	0.98 (0.73, 1.32)	0.93 (0.68, 1.28)
<i>Family ingratiating contact</i>					
Any family ingratiating contact	29.69	31.30	28.12	1.16 (1.01, 1.36)*	1.12 (0.96, 1.31)
Drove you home	21.55	21.35	21.73	0.98 (0.83, 1.16)	0.95 (0.80, 1.13)
Offered to babysit	4.23	5.25	3.24	1.66 (1.19, 2.31)**	1.51 (1.08, 2.11)*
Helped fix things or do chores	2.22	2.26	2.18	1.03 (0.66, 1.63)	0.94 (0.59, 1.49)
Created close relationship with parent(s)	10.95	13.18	8.78	1.58 (1.26, 1.98)***	1.50 (1.19, 1.90)**
Bought gift for family	5.11	6.33	3.92	1.66 (1.21, 2.28)**	1.57 (1.14, 2.16)**
Took the family out for dinners	2.75	3.08	2.43	1.28 (0.83, 1.96)	1.19 (0.77, 1.82)
Gave or loaned your parent(s) money	1.02	1.35	0.70	1.96 (1.08, 3.56)*	1.60 (0.87, 2.93)
Had drinks with parents(s)	3.33	3.75	2.93	1.29 (0.89, 1.88)	1.19 (0.81, 1.76)
Did drugs with parents(s)	0.42	0.42	0.43	0.96 (0.36, 2.61)	0.76 (0.27, 2.12)
Created romantic relationship with parent(s)	0.59	0.83	0.35	2.38 (1.01, 5.61)*	2.07 (0.90, 4.77)

Results account for sample weight. For cohort associations with boundary violating behaviors, cohort 2 is the reference group; OR = odds ratio; AOR = adjusted odds ratio; CI = confidence interval. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

^aModels control for: gender identity, race and ethnicity, mother's highest level of education, CSA education in school/youth serving setting, CSA education by parents/caregivers, CSA victimization non-youth serving setting related.

Table 4. Distribution of Child Sexual Abuse by Organizational Type, by Cohort, and Corresponding Associations.

CSA/Location	Total %	Younger Cohort (18–22)		Older Cohort (32–36) %	OR (95%CI)	^a AOR (95%CI)
		%	%			
Any CSA (<i>n</i> = 363)						
Big-6	36.76	29.06	44.46	0.51 (0.26, 0.99)*	0.48 (0.24, 0.96)*	
Organized sports	11.15	11.46	10.85	1.06 (0.34, 3.35)	1.04 (0.31, 3.51)	
Religious organizations	12.37	9.76	14.97	0.61 (0.28, 1.36)	0.61 (0.27, 1.38)	
Music or arts programs	8.62	9.29	7.94	1.19 (0.49, 2.86)	1.13 (0.45, 2.84)	
K-12 schools	33.30	37.09	29.51	1.41 (0.72, 2.75)	1.41 (0.73, 2.92)	
Other	15.62	15.40	15.83	0.97 (0.37, 2.53)	0.97 (0.35, 2.64)	
Not sure	11.89	16.65	7.12	2.61 (1.04, 6.51)*	2.56 (0.97, 6.75)	

Results account for sample weight. For cohort associations with location, cohort 2 is the reference group; OR = odds ratio; AOR = adjusted odds ratio; CI = confidence interval. **p* < .05

^aModels control for: gender identity, race and ethnicity, mother's highest level of education, CSA education in school/youth serving setting, CSA education by parents/caregivers, CSA victimization non-youth serving setting related.

school settings in which the younger cohort reported significantly more sexual misconduct violations (49%, compared to 31%). The association remained statistically significant in the adjusted model (*AOR* = 2.37, 95% *CI* = 1.43, 3.92).

Rule Violations. Of the 928 participants who reported rule violating experiences, there were no statistically significant cohort differences within any of the specific settings.

Ingratiating Contacts. When examining only the 2388 participants who reported any ingratiating contacts, the only setting for which there was a statistically significant difference between cohorts was religious organizations with 16% of the younger cohort reporting such contacts, increasing to 28% in the older cohort. The association remained statistically significant in the adjusted model (*AOR* = 0.46, 95% *CI* = 0.34, 0.62).

Family Ingratiating Contacts. When examining only the 2076 participants who reported any family ingratiating contacts, there were three settings for which the younger cohort reported significantly fewer such contacts than the older cohort, including the Big 6 (24%, compared to 29%), organized sports (21%, compared to 27%), and religious organizations (24%, compared to 32%). All associations remained statistically significant in the adjusted models.

Discussion

Our findings indicate a national prevalence rate of nearly 4% for CSA victimization occurring within a broad array of organizational settings that serve youth. This prevalence is higher than reported elsewhere (Shattuck et al., 2016). This may be due to the survey asking specific questions about CSA in certain environments and gathering retrospective self-reports from adults who could recall their experiences throughout childhood without being too distant from them. We also found that the prevalence of CSA across all settings was

similar in the younger and older cohorts. This similarity in CSA victimization between cohorts across all settings is disappointing, given national and international efforts to bring more attention to the prevention of CSA in YSOs (Kaufman et al., 2019; Saul & Audage, 2007).

However, while there were no differences in the overall prevalence of CSA victimization across all settings by cohort, we did find that among those who reported CSA within the context of the Big 6, significantly fewer were in the younger cohort (29% vs. 44%). While not causal, these findings are encouraging and suggest that the policies, procedures, and practices that the U.S.'s largest YSOs have implemented to prevent and address CSA may have the desired safety enhancement result. The 20% decline in CSA in the Big 6 settings represents a substantial reduction in human suffering. In addition, it is a significant finding that indicates the capacity of all YSOs to better prevent CSA. These findings may also suggest that the prevention efforts undertaken in the Big 6 settings, allied with effective, sustained implementation and monitoring, have superior preventive power than those undertaken by other settings. Consistent with both public health theory and regulatory theory about the hallmarks of successful prevention efforts (Dorbeck-Jung et al., 2010; Hutter, 2011; McMahon & Puett, 1999), this may plausibly also indicate the greater capacity of large, centralized organizations to create sound policy and administer prevention efforts compared with organizations that may be smaller, more fragmented, less unified or less committed to prevention.

Our national prevalence estimates indicate boundary violating behaviors in any YSO setting ranging from 7% (sexual misconduct) to 34% (ingratiating contact). Similar to reports of CSA victimization, among people who reported experiencing any boundary violating behaviors within the context of Big 6 settings participation, fewer were in the younger cohort, with statistically significant between-cohort differences for the sexual misconduct and family ingratiating contact violations. This may again be attributable to the greater capacity and success of large, centralized organizations to perform and

Table 5. Distribution of Boundary Violating Behaviors by Organizational Type, by Cohort, and Corresponding Associations.

Boundary violating behavior/ Location	Total %	Younger Cohort (18–22) %	Older Cohort (32–36) %	OR (95%CI)	^a AOR (95%CI) ^a
Any sexual misconduct (n = 617)					
Big-6	26.79	20.77	34.36	0.50 (0.30, 0.83)**	0.53 (0.31, 0.92)*
Organized sports	15.25	6.91	25.73	0.21 (0.11, 0.41)***	0.16 (0.07, 0.35)***
Religious organizations	12.85	9.18	17.46	0.48 (0.24, 0.95)*	0.45 (0.21, 0.96)*
Music or arts programs	9.00	7.88	10.42	0.74 (0.31, 1.76)	0.61 (0.24, 1.56)
K-12 schools	41.06	49.38	30.61	2.21 (1.35, 3.62)**	2.37 (1.43, 3.92)**
Other	7.13	6.37	8.08	0.77 (0.30, 1.99)	0.69 (0.26, 1.88)
Not sure	6.42	9.41	2.66	3.80 (1.51, 9.53)**	4.15 (1.58, 10.94)**
Any rule violation (n = 928)					
Big-6	28.01	24.95	32.58	0.69 (0.46, 1.03)	0.69 (0.45, 1.05)
Organized sports	14.77	14.73	14.82	0.99 (0.57, 1.74)	1.11 (0.60, 2.09)
Religious organizations	15.09	13.71	17.16	0.77 (0.46, 1.28)	0.73 (0.43, 1.23)
Music or arts programs	16.71	16.68	16.76	0.99 (0.58, 1.70)	0.88 (0.51, 1.51)
K-12 schools	45.64	47.08	43.48	1.16 (0.78, 1.72)	1.22 (0.81, 1.84)
Other	9.70	9.58	9.89	0.97 (0.47, 2.00)	0.91 (0.42, 1.97)
Not sure	3.49	3.79	3.04	1.26 (0.56, 2.84)	1.22 (0.50, 2.97)
Any ingratiating contact (n = 2388)					
Big-6	29.12	27.87	31.07	0.86 (0.66, 1.11)	0.84 (0.64, 1.09)
Organized sports	16.64	16.57	16.73	0.99 (0.72, 1.36)	1.04 (0.75, 1.45)
Religious organizations	20.91	16.27	28.12	0.50 (0.37, 0.67)***	0.46 (0.34, 0.62)***
Music or arts programs	13.94	14.42	13.21	1.11 (0.78, 1.58)	1.04 (0.73, 1.48)
K-12 schools	37.91	39.73	35.08	1.22 (0.95, 1.57)	1.22 (0.94, 1.58)
Other	9.13	9.55	8.48	1.14 (0.73, 1.78)	1.10 (0.71, 1.70)
Not sure	6.18	6.56	5.59	1.19 (0.72, 1.96)	1.17 (0.70, 1.97)
Any family ingratiating contact (n = 2076)					
Big-6	26.38	23.58	29.44	0.74 (0.56, 0.98)*	0.74 (0.53, 0.99)*
Organized sports	23.80	20.53	27.38	0.68 (0.51, 0.93)*	0.72 (0.55, 0.99)*
Religious organizations	28.23	24.46	32.36	0.68 (0.51, 0.90)**	0.66 (0.50, 0.88)**
Music or arts programs	10.59	12.36	8.64	1.49 (0.97, 2.29)	1.30 (0.83, 2.02)
K-12 schools	26.85	27.58	26.05	1.08 (0.81, 1.44)	1.10 (0.82, 1.48)
Other	6.82	7.62	5.95	1.31 (0.79, 2.14)	1.25 (0.76, 2.06)
Not sure	5.61	7.45	3.61	2.15 (1.26, 3.66)*	2.16 (1.25, 3.72)**

Results account for sample weight. For cohort associations with location, cohort 2 is the reference group; OR = odds ratio; AOR = adjusted odds ratio; CI = confidence interval. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

^aModels control for: gender identity, race and ethnicity, mother's highest level of education, CSA education in school/youth serving setting, CSA education by parents/caregivers, CSA victimization non-youth serving setting related.

implement preventative strategies, including developing an authentic commitment to reform in child protection; having critical organizational leaders championing and driving prevention to engage in robust policy design; screening, educating, and training staff; creating safe spaces; involving parents and youth in prevention; and monitoring and continuously improving these prevention components.

Our findings also showed statistically significant between-cohort differences within the contexts of sports (sexual misconduct and family ingratiating contacts) and religious organizations (sexual misconduct, ingratiating, and family ingratiating contacts), with significantly fewer of these violations reported by the younger versus the older cohort. These reductions may reflect more recent (relative to the Big 6) progress in recognizing, preventing, and addressing CSA in

sports and religious settings. These settings experienced intense media coverage and criminal and civil litigation focused on organizational culpability in recent years (Hauser & Astor, 2018; Rezendes, 2002; Tracy, 2016). As a result, we have witnessed the establishment of new oversight bodies (e.g., the 2017 establishment of the U.S. Center for Safe Sport) and the implementation of child safe requirements (e.g., as stipulated in the 2002 U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops' Dallas Charter). We hope these reductions in boundary violating behaviors may result in reduced CSA victimization within these settings over time.

Among people who reported abuse and boundary violating behaviors, there was only one setting in which all five outcomes—CSA and the four boundary violating categories—were *higher* among the younger cohort: K-12

school settings. It is especially worrisome that this increase was statistically significant for sexual exploitation. In the past decades, scholars have urged the implementation of child-safe guidelines to prevent educator sexual misconduct in schools (Grant, Shakeshaft, & Mueller, 2019; Grant, Wilkerson, & Henschel, 2019; Henschel & Grant, 2019; Shakeshaft, 2004). Around 2009, there was an increase in the number of states adopting or recommending policies to address educator sexual misconduct. These policies include CSA prevention education in schools, criminalizing educator sexual misconduct, creating state-level task forces, and mandating the inclusion of safety posters in schools (Enough Abuse Campaign and Prevent Child Abuse America, 2021). However, policy adoption, resources, and implementation of measures vary widely within and between states (Enough Abuse Campaign and Prevent Child Abuse America, 2021). Further, school administrators often have wide latitude regarding how or even whether to implement measures to prevent and address CSA. Thus, any positive findings from schools implementing prevention measures could be washed out in a survey like the current one, which did not attempt to examine prevention practices in specific, more localized settings. These findings underscore the need for prevention measures in schools.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is not without limitations. First, our study design precludes causal conclusions. Longitudinal prospective designs would be most suited to determine whether the observed correlations reflected causal relationships. Second, while we selected the two cohorts of adults who most recently experienced childhood without significant overlap, we recognize that recall bias may still have influenced study findings. However, while it may be reasonable to expect recall bias to influence the memory of boundary violating behaviors of lower severity (e.g., ingratiating contact), it is unlikely to significantly affect the memory of CSA and other more distinct or severe forms of boundary violations (Hardt & Rutter, 2004; Widom & Morris, 1997). Third, our study design precludes conclusions about specific components of child-safe policies and practices (e.g., background checks, safety education, safety policies) that may be associated with reductions in CSA and boundary violation behaviors. Future studies are needed to build the evidence base for the policies and practices implemented in YSOs to prevent and address CSA. Relatedly, to enhance ongoing monitoring of CSA prevention efficacy, YSOs could incorporate reliable systems for detailed reporting of performance corresponding to specific policies, principles, and practices. This should enable performance oversight and periodic auditing to identify areas of concern. Fourth, our study is focused on CSA only. Our narrower focus on CSA was intended to provide more depth regarding this type of child maltreatment while seeking to limit the length of the survey to encourage a better response rate.

The current study is not designed to inform direct comparisons of CSA victimization and boundary violating behaviors between YSOs. We recognize significant differences in the amount of time spent by youth in different types of YSOs, as well as in the activities involved that preclude direct comparisons and warrant additional research. For example, future research is needed to account for the difference between spending five days a week for 7 hours at school as opposed to three afternoons every week for 3–4 hours at a Big 6 setting. Similarly, the types of safety risks that youth are exposed to when we compare the breadth of activities and outings associated with the more broad-based afterschool programs (e.g., BGCA, YMCA) to the very specific activities associated with a group drawing class (which may occur without adult monitoring and supervision) also needed to be addressed in future studies. In addition, some of our measures of boundary violating behaviors were limited by the need for further contextualization. For example, our items preclude an assessment of whether gift giving was part of an activity reward or a form of special treatment or whether driving the child home (within family ingratiating contact) was in the context of a YSO adult already known to the family in a pre-arranged carpooling along with other children.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, this study is the first to examine the potential impacts of efforts by Big 6 organizations to prevent and address CSA. These organizations have collectively implemented a broad array of policies, practices, and procedures across their affiliated sites for years if not decades (Assini-Meytin et al., 2021). Our findings of significantly lower proportions of CSA, sexual misconduct, and family ingratiating contact violations in the Big 6 settings among the younger cohort (relative to the older cohort) suggest that these efforts are paying off. Results are also encouraging for religious and sports organizations, in which the proportions of some boundary violating behaviors were lower among the younger cohort. Future studies should identify specific prevention efforts, the situations in which those efforts are most effective, and the barriers that may be preventing other organizations from experiencing similar improvements.

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Notes

1. Researchers have long identified “grooming” behaviors designed to gain the trust of children and their families by people known to have sexually abused children (Kaufman et al., 1993, 1995, 1996). However, many such behaviors (e.g., piggyback rides, giving gifts) are also normative and innocuous methods by which adults engage with children they care about and are not intended to lead to abuse (Jeglic, Winters, & Johnson, 2023). Consequently, throughout this paper, we utilize the term boundary-violating behaviors.
2. We balanced the desire to minimize recall bias with our need to have two cohorts with relatively distinct years of YSO participation. We could have selected cohorts whose years of participating in YSO settings did not overlap, but one group would have been substantially older than the other.

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