April 2022

Crime Victims' Institute
College of Criminal Justice ● Sam Houston State University
Director: Mary M. Breaux, Ph.D.

Texas Youth Camps' Response to Child Abuse Prevention and Reporting Standards

Bailey Vautrain, M.S.

Victimization of children - one of the most vulnerable populations - is considered heinous. Child victimization can take the form of physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological abuse or the lack of care leading to the neglect of the child (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention [CDC], 2021). These forms of child maltreatment can lead to developmental issues and long-term effects that may continue into adulthood (CDC, 2021). Long-term effects of child abuse include failure to thrive, anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts and behaviors, post-traumatic stress, antisocial behaviors, difficulty in social settings, aggression, poor academic performance, juvenile delinquency, adult offending, and substance use (CDC 2021; Clark, 2007; Fitzpatrick et al., 2010). With 1 in 7 children enduring abuse and/or neglect in the United States every year, child abuse is a problem that needs further examination (CDC, 2021).

Attempts to reduce child abuse can be made through awareness, support for caregivers, and organizational policies designed to prevent child abuse. Reporting and reacting appropriately to outcries are the primary responses necessary when child abuse occurs. Resources have been put into place for reports of child abuse to be made and addressed through state child protection agencies. Child Protective Services (CPS), a division of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (TXDFPS), is responsible for handling allegations of child abuse and/or neglect for the over 7 million children residing in Texas (TXDFPS, 2021a; United States Census Bureau, 2021). While CPS is primarily responsible for the official response to child abuse and neglect, they rely heavily on people in the child's life to make initial contact; these individuals can be family members or friends, educators, doctors, or other community members (TXDFPS, 2021b).

Camp professionals that come into regular contact with children and the industry serve children in a way that is unique to all other child service industries in its programming and, often, locations. While this industry has its peak during the summer months, many camps serve youth year-round. The American Camp Association (ACA), one of the largest associations in the industry, served over 10.3 million campers in 2019 in the United States (ACA, 2020), and in 2020 there were over 15,000 camps and 1.1 million staff associated with their organization (ACA, 2021a). The ACA reports 116 camps and 285 programs in Texas in 2021 (ACA, 2021c). In addition to the ACA, there are multiple other camp associations and independent organizations across Texas, the United States, and the world that serve youth with their programs or at their facilities. Youth camps can operate their own programming at their own facilities or rented facilities, at rental facilities without their own programming and catering to renters, or a mixture of both. There are also many camps in the state of Texas that have multiple locations with all locations being in the state or across the U.S. (ACA, 2021c). The main component of all these organizations is their connection to children which makes them an important factor in the prevention of and response to child abuse. Additionally, youth camps need to be aware of the likelihood of child maltreatment occurring at their facilities and how they can prevent these cases. While there is no definitive data regarding abuse at youth camps, it would be irresponsible to ignore the possibility.

Literature Review

In the execution of the normal activities of their programs, youth camps have opportunities to identify signs of abuse in their campers whether the abuse happens inside or outside of their program. Prior research on youth camps, either by associations or academic scholars, has focused on the aspects of camps that positively influence the children that attend their programs (Garst et al., 2011; Gillard et al., 2014; Schelbe et al., 2018; Sibthorp et al., 2010; Youth Development Strategies, Inc., n.d.). Camps are often focused on child development and instilling values, such as resiliency and creativity, through the unique cultural norms of the program and relationships. This, however, does not negate the need for camps to seek to keep their campers safe while under their care.

Youth Camp Child Abuse Prevention and Reporting Policies

Organizations must be prepared to prevent and respond to child abuse and many camp associations advocate for this along with offering information and ideas (ACA, 2021b; Boy Scouts of America [BSA], 2019). If a camp is operated for four or more consecutive days, they must perform criminal and sex offender background checks on all adults either employed by the camp or visiting who will have unsupervised contact with children (Texas Administrative Code, Title 25, §265.11). Though it is only required for adults who have unsupervised contact, it can be argued that conducting background checks for all adults on site is the best practice.

Some camps take abuse prevention into consideration when designing their facilities and many include it in their practices. The camp's individual policies around preventing and reporting child abuse and/or neglect, which are required by the State of Texas, are taught to their staff including their state's individual requirements (Texas Health & Safety Code Title 2, §141.0111; Texas Administrative Code Title 25, §265.15). These policies can be created by camp leadership and/or the Board of Directors. One important question is: *are those responsible for developing the camp's policies around prevention and reporting have a good understanding of the current and relevant information about child abuse?* Identifying whether the individuals responsible for creating the policies understand the specific nuances about institutional and/or religious abuse as it relates to their organization is also important.

Youth Camp Child Abuse Prevention Training

Apart from the screening of employees and volunteers and preventative policies, one main preventative measure camps employ is the training of the adults who serve in their programs. Individual camps and programs are responsible for their own trainings (Gillard & Warner, 2021; Gillard et al., 2014), which, in turn, allows them to establish their own set of norms from the beginning of the individual's career with the organization (Garst et al., 2011). Most camp industry associations encourage covering child abuse recognition, prevention, and reporting as a part of core training and many require it to be a member (BSA, 2019, 2021; Gillard & Warner, 2021; YMCA of the USA, 2021). For example, if a youth camp is operated for four or more consecutive days within the state of Texas, they must ensure that any adults, staff, or visitors who have contact with children have completed an approved child abuse prevention training (Texas Administrative Code, Title 25, §265.11; Texas Health and Human Services, 2021). Though it is only required for adults who have contact with children, ensuring an adult will never have contact with a child is nearly impossible. These trainings, which are certified by the Texas Health and Human Services Commission, must meet certain standards (Texas Administrate Code, Title 25, §265.12; Texas Health and Safety Code, Title 2, §141.0095), which include a variety of topics from a general overview of sexual abuse to warning signs of sexual abuse to prevention guidelines. Therefore, a valid research question is :*are these trainings adequate in preparing camp staff and volunteers to prevent, identify, and respond to child abuse and in informing them on the subtle nuances of grooming and abuse in relation to camp culture?*

Youth Camp Culture

Youth camps stereotypically are known for their outgoing, loud, rustic ambiance that has been immortalized by movies and stories. Often characterized by outdoor activities, group games, and a focus on

cooperation, camp is seen as a place that is unique and safe (Garst et al., 2011; Garst & Whittington, 2020; Gillard et al., 2014). This cultured environment, established through rules, staff training, and positive peer pressure, assists in implementing group norms that are unique to the camp (Garst et al., 2011).

There is also an emphasis on relationships between groups of campers as well as campers and adult leaders (Sibthorp et al., 2010). These relationships are known to promote the child's engagement, their learning, and their assimilation to camp norms (Schelbe et al., 2018; Sibthorp et al., 2010). These relationships are seen as a positive aspect of the camp experience (Halsall et al., 2016) and relationships between campers and camp staff are often characterized as supportive, promoting self-reflection and introspection, and have a direct correlation to camper participation (Garst & Whittington, 2020; Schelbe et al., 2018; Youth Development Strategies, Inc., n.d.). Healthy boundaries assist in increasing the children's feelings of personal safety and connection to the program, its leaders, and its culture and norms (Garst & Whittington, 2020). Overall, the relationships built and strengthened within the youth camp setting is a significant aspect of the culture.

Institutional and Religious Abuse

In addition to already being attractive to offenders due to the higher availability of preferred victim types or potential victims in general (Blakemore et al., 2017), camps as institutions have professional makeups that could be manipulated and exploited. Institutional abuse is not a specific type of abuse, such as physical, sexual, or emotional, but instead is qualified by how the perpetrator committed the abuse. This form of abuse happens at an institution, is committed by someone representing the institution, or in a situation where the institution has some real or perceived control or responsibility (Blakemore et al., 2017).

The dynamics of encouraging interpersonal relationships between campers and camp personnel promote feelings of safety and willingness to try new things for campers. While overall positive, these relationships can be used to manipulate and groom youth (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2020; Garst & Whittington, 2020; Schelbe, 2018). The perpetrator's role within the organization may create a power imbalance between the two parties and create a situation where the child depends on and trusts them (Blakemore et al., 2017; Craven et al., 2006). Perpetrators may exploit a relationship in which they are trusted. As it is often subtle, grooming can be difficult to spot and weakens the victim's understanding of an appropriate relationship (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2020). This misunderstanding can affect the attachment levels with the perpetrator, reinforcing the relationship between the child and offender, making the abuse easier to commit, and affecting how the victim remembers the abuse (Cashwell & Swindle, 2018; Novsak et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2020). When this betrayal of trust of the individual and the organization occurs, the victims are more psychologically and psychosocially affected than abuse without connections to someone or something the victim trusted (Blakemore et al., 2017; Cashwell & Swindle, 2018).

Additionally, an organization might be more willing to overlook questionable behaviors if the individual has a good reputation with the organization's mission (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2020; Craven et al., 2006; Raine & Kent, 2019). If camps see themselves as holding high morals or standards, then it may be difficult for stakeholders to believe that they could employ someone capable of committing child abuse (Harper & Perkins, 2018; Minto et al., 2016). Individuals who have higher levels of buy-in in an organization, such as youth camp leadership or board members, are less likely to believe allegations against other members of the group, especially if the accused are also high ranking in the group, to protect the public or their image of the organization (Minto et al., 2016). Moreover, the shrewd nature of grooming and abuse may complicate this as it allows for more room for the allegations to be questioned.

Many youth camps have religious affiliations, so the power imbalance often created by religions needs to be examined (Raine & Kent, 2019). If left unmonitored, leaders may use their authority and connection to the religion's deity or belief system to control and manipulate those with less authority. Offenses committed in the name of a deity or religion can cause greater psychological and emotional trauma in addition to the assault and violate the victim's relationship with their religious beliefs (Cashwell & Swindle, 2018; McPhillips, 2018; Raine & Kent, 2019). Additionally, if this is the child's worldview, they might not have alternative tools to recognize or process their trauma (Raine & Kent, 2019). The child might also struggle with their connection to their religion and deity, which in turn could affect their relationship with their family, culture, and community (Blakemore et al., 2017; Cashwell & Swindle, 2018).

Knowing this information about standards, camp culture, interpersonal relationships, and organizational abuse, this study aims to connect and bring attention to the need for awareness about the intersections of all these topics. The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine how Texas youth camps respond to child abuse prevention and reporting standards to better understand the current effectiveness of their response to child abuse and child abuse prevention within their own unique culture.

Method

Sample

Using purposive sampling, a sample of 131 youth camps operating in the state of Texas were identified using information from the American Camp Association, the Christian Camp and Conference Association, and internet searches. From the camps' individual public websites, email addresses were gathered for one contact at the organization. If the executive director's (or someone in a similar role) email was publicly available, then their email address was used. If there were not individual email addresses, the camp's main general information email address was used. Email recruiting was then used to contact participants and direct them to the informed consent page and then the subsequent survey. As a part of the informed consent, participants were informed that in order to qualify for the survey they must be 18 years or older and employed by a Texas youth camp.

Participants

Out of the sample of 131 camps, 12 camps participated in the survey and out of those 12, eight fully completed the survey for an overall response rate of 9.16% with a completion rate of 75%. One camp only responded to the demographic questions and was removed from the sample leaving a remainder of 11 camps used. These camps verified that their camp or organization operates a facility or program in Texas that serves individuals under 18 years of age for more than four days at a time as part of its operations. They then provided their bed count from all of their facilities, both in and out of Texas, combined in order to provide an idea of the size of their organization. Four organizations (36.36%) reported that they had between 1 and 249 beds, and three camps (27.27%) reported that they had between 250 and 499 beds making up the two largest categories. One camp (9.09%) reported having between 500 and 999 beds while two camps (18.18%) had over 1000 beds. One camp (9.09%) reported having no beds as they only operated a day camp program (see Table 1).

Participants were asked what types of programs their organizations operated – day camp, overnight, rental/host, travel, and other (see Table 1). Five-day camp programs (45.45%), nine overnight programs (81.81%), nine rental/host facilities (81.81%), and two travel camps (18.18%) were reported in the survey between the 11 participants. No other programs were reported.

Participants were also asked which professional associations their organizations were a part of. The American Camp Association was represented by six camps (54.54%), the Christian Camp and Conference Association by three camps (27.27%), the YMCA of the USA by one camp (9.09%), the Southern Baptist Camping Association by one camp (9.09%), and the Marianist Province of the U.S. by another camp (9.09%). Only two camps represented more than one organization with one representing the American Camp Association and the Christian Camp and Conference Association and the other one representing the American Camp Association and the Marianist Province of the U.S. One camp represented no professional organizations (9.09%).

Table 1

Breakdown of Programs by Participants

	Day Camp	Overnight Program	Rental/Host Facility	Travel
Participant 1 (0) *	X			
Participant 2 (250 – 499) *		X	X	
Participant 3 (1000+) *		X	X	
Participant 4 (500 – 999) *			X	
Participant 5 (250 – 499) *		X	X	
Participant 6 (1 – 249) *	X	X	X	X
Participant 7 (1 – 249) *		X	X	X
Participant 8 (1 – 249) *	X	X	X	
Participant 9 (1 – 249) *	X	X		
Participant 10 (1000+) *		X	X	
Participant 11 (250 – 499) *	X	X	X	

Instrument

After giving informed consent, participants were led to the 40-question survey beginning with an overview of the organizations comprised of the four questions whose results were discussed in the participants subsection above. The remainder of the survey was split into seven sections—state of Texas requirements, training, child abuse policies, reporting, staff, facilities, and religious/organization specific abuse. Sample questions included "Do you believe that the Texas Health and Human Services approved child abuse prevention program that your camp uses adequately prepares your staff to respond to suspected or witnessed child abuse and/or neglect?", "Was child abuse prevention included in the design (or remodel) of your camp's facilities?", and "Do you believe that your staff members (program and non-program) have an awareness about religious/organization abuse and how it relates to the camp industry?" For questions regarding either subtype of camp staff (program or non-program) definitions were given. For the purpose of this study, program staff are those with direct contact with children such as counselors and recreation staff with non-program staff consisting of those without direct contact with children such as food service, administration, and maintenance.

While religious/organizational abuse and the awareness of the issue was a main focus of this study, the survey was designed in a way to not draw disproportionate attention to the topic and create accidental participant bias by seemingly encouraging one type of answer over another. The survey ended with two open-ended questions allowing camps to provide any additional feedback that they thought was relevant. This survey was conducted through a secure survey site that was able to gather answers without gathering any personal data or identifying characteristics.

Analysis

When analyzing the data, overall statistics for each question were calculated in addition to observation of the answers for each camp. Statistics for each question were calculated using the amount of respondents to that question not the overall amount of respondents. Individual camp's answers were then related back to their organizational characteristics – organization size (i.e., bed count numbers), professional association affiliation, and program type, which allowed similar practices or beliefs between camps that also shared similar organizational characteristics to be identified. This also allowed the opportunity to see if the youth camp had practices or beliefs that could have been influenced by their organization's characteristics. Results were separated into their individual sections that they fell into and then cross-referenced against each other.

For open-ended questions with multiple responses, answers were examined using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and overarching codes that represented themes for each corresponding question were identified. Once data was separated between themes, responses were compared to their organization's characteristics to identify trends. For open-ended questions with one or two responses, they were compared to any similar data and the respondent's organizational characteristics.

Findings

State of Texas Requirements

Respondents were asked questions to gauge whether the organizations they represented were in compliance with the state of Texas' requirements for running a youth program under the Texas Administrative Codes Title 25, §265.11, §265.12 and §265.15 and the Texas Health and Safety Codes, Title 2, §141.0111 and §141.0095. All respondents (100%) reported that they run background checks on all adult employees and volunteers before their start date while only five camps (45.45%) of the nine organizations with a rental component reported that they require these checks for visiting groups and their adults. Two of the organizations who did not require it were able to house one to 249 individuals while the other two were able to house 250 to 499 individuals.

All respondents (100%) responded that they required all program staff to complete a Texas Health and Human Services Commission approved child abuse prevention program at least once every two years. One respondent (9.09%) representing a mid-sized camp (250 to 499) and one respondendt (9.09%) representing a day camp responded that they do not require non-program staff to complete an approved child abuse prevention program training. All other respondents (81.82%) reported that they required their non-program staff to complete an approved program at least every two years. For adults with visiting groups, six organizations (54.55%) responded that they require it and three organizations (27.27%) responded that they do not require it. This requirement did not apply to two organizations (18.18%) that did not have a rental component of their program. The three organizations that did not require it all had rental components of their program and were relatively small with one camp being able to house between one to 249 individuals and the other two being able to house between 250 to 499 each. Overall, the larger organizations reported to be in compliance with Texas code for youth camps more than the smaller organizations. This discrepancy in compliance could be due to many factors including funding, administrative oversite, training, or other factors.

Training

Participants were asked about their child abuse prevention training that they conducted with their staff by being asked if they believed if the Texas Health and Human Services Commission approved training adequately trained their staff to respond to suspected or witnessed child abuse and/or neglect. All participants responded in agreement with four camps (36.36%) strongly agreeing and seven camps (63.64%) agreeing.

When asked if their organization supplemented the approved training, eight camps (72.73%) responded that they did. Those organizations expounded on how they supplemented the trainings with four camps (50%) having a staff member add to the training and one camp (12.5%) bringing in a professional on the topic. Interestingly, the camp that used a professional was in the smallest capacity bracket with only up to 249 beds. One could speculate that an organization of that size might not have the resources to bring in an expert on the subject. Three camps specifically mentioned integrating their organization's policies into the training such as the "rule of three whereby a camper cannot be alone with a staff member out of sight of others." This demonstrates that some camps follow their professional association's policies, specifically the "Rule of Three" as recommended by the ACA (2018), in which that respondent is a part of. Two camps (25%) also specifically mentioned that they focus on reinforcing the training through the camp season or year in a "proactive way to heighten awareness of good boundaries and practices."

Child Abuse Policies

The next section covered the organization's child abuse prevention policies, primarily the creation of them. All respondents (100%) answered that they did have child abuse prevention and reporting policies. Two camps (18.18%) confirmed their Board of Directors were responsible for the creation or oversight of these polices, while three camps (27.27%) confirmed that their Board of Directors were partially responsible for the creation or oversight of the policies. An interesting finding was that out of these five camps, three camps (60%) stated that only some of the members of their board had completed an approved child abuse prevention training and two camps (40%) stated that they were unsure if their board members had completed an approved training. One camp (9.09%) – a camp of 250 to 499 beds offering day camp and overnight programs and rental facilities with no professional association affiliation – stated that their employees were not required to report any suspected child abuse to Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (Child Protective Services). In the state of Texas, all adults are required to report abuse and/or neglect—suspected or confirmed—to the Department of Family and Protective Services (CPS) and/or other appropriate agencies according to the Texas Family Code, Title 5, §261.101. Since youth camps are licensed by the state, their employees are considered professionals which means they have up to 48 hours to report the abuse. If a person, professional or not, fails to report, they could be charged with a Class A Misdemeanor or enhanced to a State Jail Felony if it can be proven that they intentionally concealed the abuse per Texas Family Code, Title 5, §261.109.

Reporting

Respondents were asked to their knowledge if their camp and/or a staff member of their camp had ever made a report of suspected or witnessed child abuse and/or neglect to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (CPS). Out of 10 respondents, six (60%) responded yes while four camps (40%) responded no. For those who answered yes, they were asked how many reports were made in the past five years (2016 – 2021) and the previous 12 months. The average answer for four of these camps over the past five years was 3.25 reports with an additional camp answering "several." These five camps had an average of 0.8 reports over the previous 12 months. One camp not included in the previous four, was a camp with a bed count of 1000+ that offered overnight programs and rental facilities. They reported being associated with the American Camp Association and the Christian Camp and Conference Association and reporting an average of 4-5 reports per year. The reports show a relation to camp size and programming as the first five camps represented two camps that were able to house one to 249 people, two that were able to house between 250 to 499 people, and one camp with a bed count of 500 to 999, but only offered rental facilities and no organizational programming.

Staff

Respondents were asked to analyze if they believed that their staff (program and non-program) could appropriately identify or respond to child abuse and/or neglect. As shown in Figure 1, respondents overall had positive thoughts about their average program staff reporting mainly that they agreed or strongly agreed that an average program staff member could recognize signs of abuse and/or neglect, respond appropriately to either suspected abuse and/or neglect or witnessed abuse and/or neglect, and differentiate between signs of abuse/neglect and a camper not adjusting well, and homesickness.

Figure 1

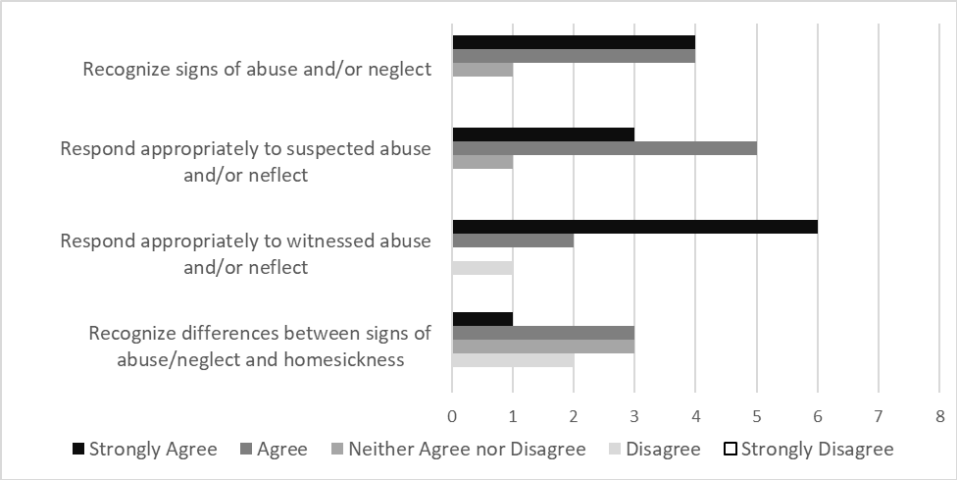
Believed Program Staff Abilities in Relation to Child Abuse and/or Neglect

Only one camp (11.11%) answered that they neither agreed nor disagreed that one of their average program staff members would be able to recognize signs of abuse and/or neglect in an underage camper. Additionally, only one other camp (11.11%) answered that they neither agreed nor disagreed that one of their average program staff members would be able to recognize the differences between signs of abuse/neglect and a camper not adjusting well to camp or homesickness.

Respondents were only slightly less confident about their non-program staff members. As presented in Figure 2, responses about an average non-program staff member in relation to those same questions were a more neutral mixture of strongly agree, agree, and neither agree nor disagree with a few disagrees. One camp (11.11%) disagreed with the question about being able to differentiate between abuse and not adjusting well to camp and disagreed that one of their average non-program staff members would not know how to appropriately respond to witnessed child abuse of a camper at their facility. This camp was a smaller facility with a bed count of one to 249 offering day camp and overnight programs in addition to rental facilities and was affiliated with the American Camp Association and the Marianist Province of the U.S.

Figure 2

Believed Non-Program Staff Abilities in Relation to Child Abuse and/or Neglect



When asked why they thought someone in their organization would not be able to appropriately respond to suspected or witnessed child abuse, respondents had similar answers between program and non-program staff. For program staff, one camp believed that it would be due to lack of training, one camp due to poor training materials, and one other camp believed that it would be due to the staff member's personal failings. For non-program staff, one camp believed that it would be due to lack of training, one camp due to poor training materials, and two camps due to the staff member's personal failings.

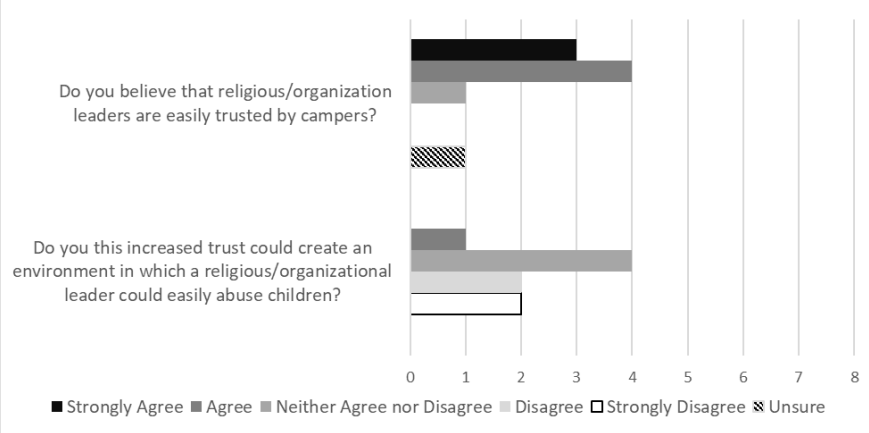
Facilities

Regarding their facilities, four camps (44.44%) responded that child abuse prevention did play a role in the design and/or remodel of their facilities. Three camps (33.33%) responded that it somewhat did while one camp (11.11%) reported that they were unsure. Facility features designed to prevent child abuse focused around sleeping quarters and bathrooms. One camp stated that they included two counselor beds in each cabin while another camp reported that they housed staff near the camper sleeping areas but not in the same room. The camp that reported separate sleeping areas also mentioned that their sleeping facilities were separated by gender and age ranges and that their counselors had separate bathrooms from the campers. It was also reported by two camps that their bathrooms were made more private while another camp mentioned that they designed their bathrooms to have multiple stalls so that campers would not be alone. In addition to sleeping quarters and bathrooms, one camp did mention that they designed their activity areas to be more visible as a deterrent. This shows that camps do not have a generic approach to preventing child abuse through their facility layout, but instead use individualized approaches.

Religious/Organization Specific Abuse

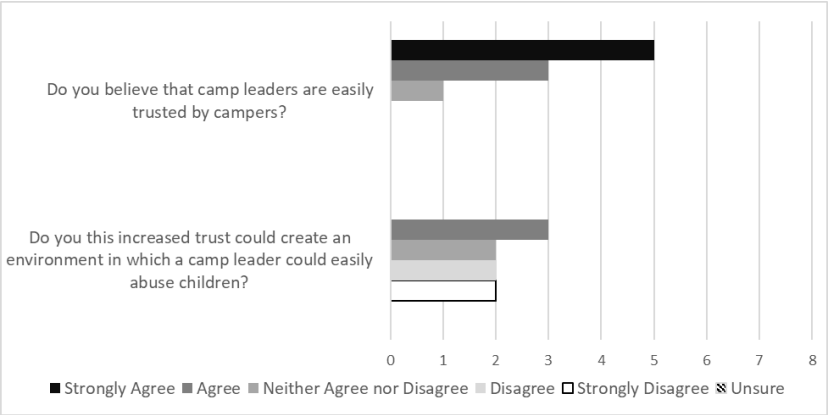
When asked about religious and organization specific abuse, respondents had similar answers for questions regarding religious/organization leaders and camp leaders. Three respondents (33.33%) strongly agreed, and four respondents (44.44%) agreed that religious/organization leaders were easily trusted by campers. One camp (11.11%) neither agreed nor disagreed while another camp (11.11%) was unsure. However, answers swung more towards disbelief when camps were asked if that increased trust could create an environment in which a religious/organization leader could easily abuse children (see Figure 3). Only one camp (11.11%) agreed that this could happen while four camps (44.44%) neither agreed nor disagreed. Two camps (22.22%) disagreed that this increased trust could lead to an environment where abuse could easily happen, and two camps (22.22%) strongly disagreed.

Figure 3
Beliefs Regarding Religious/Organization Leaders and Abuse



In regard to trust of camp leaders and child abuse, respondents answered similarly as shown in Figure 4. Five respondents (55.56%) strongly agreed, three respondents (33.33%) agreed that religious/organization leaders were easily trusted by campers, and one camp (11.11%) neither agreed nor disagreed. There was only slightly more belief that increased trust could create an environment in which a camp leader could easily abuse children than religious/organization leaders. Three camps (33.33%) agreed while two camps (22.22%) neither agreed nor disagreed, two camps (22.22%) disagreed, and two more camps (22.22%) strongly disagreed (see Figure 4). When asked if they believed that their staff members (program and non-program) had an awareness of religious/organization abuse in relation to the youth camp industry, seven camps (77.78%) believed that they did while two camps (22.22%) answered that they did not believe than their camp was affected by the issue.

Figure 4
Beliefs Regarding Camp Leaders and Abuse



Additional Comments

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked how they believed that their program could improve their prevention of child abuse and if they had any additional comments. Two camps responded to the question about improvement with both of them mentioning that they did not know. In response to the chance to offer additional comments, one camp finished out their survey by noting their understanding of the seriousness of the topic and their hopes that perpetrators would self-opt out of working at their organization because of the camp's diligence to preventing and responding to child abuse.

Discussion

While existing literature is able to clearly establish that youth camps have many positive attributes that can empower and assist children in their development, there is significantly less research concerning how camps are preventing and can protect themselves and their campers from child abuse. By examining the current policies, procedures, and beliefs of youth camps, a baseline can be established from which analysis can happen and growth can begin. This study aimed to explore the world of youth camp in relation to their response to child abuse and their beliefs about the topic and about religious and organizational abuse in relation to youth camps.

The findings revealed that the camps were moderately satisfied with their individual responses to and prevention of child abuse. They were overall satisfied with the child abuse prevention programs that were approved by the state of Texas and many supplemented by supplying applications to their own programs. An encouraging finding was that one camp even worked with a professional in the subject to further train their staff. While this training is required by state code and as a requirement to be involved in many professional organizations (Boy Scouts of America, 2019; Boy Scouts of America, 2021; Gillard & Warner, 2021; YMCA of the USA, 2021) it appeared that camps took the topic seriously in order to protect their underage campers.

A finding worth noting was that though camps believed that leaders were more easily trusted and that their organization had a good understanding of religious/organization abuse, there was not a similarly moderate to high rate of belief that it could create environments in which abuse could more easily happen. This could indicate a misunderstanding of religious/organization abuse, lack of awareness of how it relates to their own programs, and a lack of awareness of their misunderstanding. While attributes of camps are often seen as positives – sense of community, acceptance, and strong interpersonal relationships (Garst et al., 2011; Garst & Whittington, 2020; Schelbe et al., 2018; Youth Development Strategies, n.d.) – camps must be aware of how some of these attributes and others associated with the camping industry can contribute to environments where child abuse can more easily occur. For example, strong relationships with adults is documented as having positive effects such as increased confidence in children (Garst & Whittington, 2020; Halsall et al., 2016; Schelbe et al., 2018), but these relationships can be manipulated quite easily due to the power imbalances between the two individuals (Blakemore et al., 2017). This is even more exacerbated if the manipulation or abuse happens within an institutional setting such as an organization or religion in which the adult is seen as having additional authority because of their role in the institution (Blakemore et al., 2017; Cashwell & Swindle, 2018; McPhillips, 2018; Raine & Kent, 2019). Overall, a better understanding of the areas within child abuse prevention that needs increased attention has been established. Assisting camps in protecting their campers through prevention and early, appropriate response could lead to better outcomes for the children involved.

Implications for Practice

While further research is being completed, individual organizations and professional associations can begin to look at their own programs and policies and aim to improve them in the ways they see best. Members of Board of Directors can undergo child abuse prevention courses and camps can assist their employees and volunteers in understanding the topic through application to their policies and procedures. Camp and association leadership could also seek out information about child abuse prevention and response in relation to religious and organizational abuse. While individual approaches will still have an effect, an overarching approach that is able to cover a wider variety of camps, programs, religions, etc. would be most beneficial.

Implications for Future Research

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, several implications and opportunities for future research were identified. The larger camps in this study seemed more in compliance with Texas codes regarding youth camps which could be further explored with a larger sample. If this stays true across a larger sample, then responsible factors and responding solutions could be identified and made known to camps.

The alarming response from one camp that they did not believe that their employees were not required to report suspected child abuse to appropriate authorities – the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (CPS) – needs to be further examined. While the hope is that this is an outlying response not only for this survey but in the youth camp industry as whole, awareness of state laws needs to be further investigated.

Research regarding organization's Board of Directors and their involvement in creating and maintaining child abuse prevention policies could also be further explored. If they are responsible for these policies and ensuring that the organization is in line with the law (Phillips, 2020), then knowing their understanding of the relevant topics is key. In addition to an overview of abuse and neglect, understanding of religious and organizational abuse in relation to the youth camp industry and their own organization could also be explored.

Because of the Texas requirement for abuse prevention training only needing to cover sexual abuse, research could be done on how much is known about other forms of abuse and neglect. More specifically, due to the organizational and often religious nature of youth camps their understanding of religious and organizational abuse needs to be further explored. If there is a dire need for trainings to be expanded in relation to this subject, data needs to be gathered to support this. Current views are that training is adequate even though some camps did not believe that risk factors associated with religious and organizational abuse applied to their program. Overall, training for camps need to be further examined. Through research, trainings could clarify topics such as non-sexual abuse and neglect and become more specialized based on the characteristics of the camp that is participating in the training (size, program types, funding levels, etc.) Research with larger samples and covering various states would also be beneficial overall to the industry.

Limitations

The study comes with certain limitations. There is limited research on the topic of child abuse in relation to youth camps. Further, the Texas Department of Family Services does not disclose where reports of child abuse from youth camps are classified under in their report intake findings, so a larger picture of how many reports are coming in from youth camps annually is currently unavailable.

Disclosure Statement

Bailey Vautrain was employed by Forest Glen, Inc. from 2011 – 2014 and 2018 – May 2021 and served on the Texas Section Cabinet for the Christian Camp and Conference Association from 2019 – May 2021. No youth camps or organizations that Bailey Vautrain had associations with or would reasonably recognize her name at the time of the research were included in the sample pool.

References

American Camp Association. (2018). *The power of one, the rule of three: What do these numbers mean to me?* https://www.acacamps.org/resource-library/camping-magazine/power-one-rule-three-what-do-these-numbers-mean-me

American Camp Association. (2020). *2019 impact report.* https://www.acacamps.org/sites/default/files/page_documents/about/2019-ACA-Annual-Impact-Report.pdf

American Camp Association. (2021a). *2020 impact report.* https://www.acacamps.org/sites/default/files/page_documents/about/2020-ACA-Impact-Report.pdf

American Camp Association. (2021b). *Child abuse prevention resources.* https://www.acacamps.org/resource-library/child-abuse-prevention-resources

American Camp Association. (2021c). *Find a camp.* http://find.acacamps.org/

Bennett, N. & O'Donohue, W. (2020). Identifying grooming of children for sexual abuse: Gender effects and increased false positives from internet information. *International Journal of Psychology & Psychological Therapy, 20*(2), 133-145.

Blakemore, T., Herbert, J. L., Arney, F., & Parkinson, S. (2017). The impacts of institutional child sexual abuse: A rapid review of the evidence. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 74*, 35-48.https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.08.006

Boy Scouts of America. (2019). *Camp leadership: Youth protection begins with you.* http://www.scouting.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/623-12719-CampLeadershipBrochure_WEB.pdf

Boy Scouts of America. (2021). *Youth protection.* https://www.scouting.org/training/youth-protection/

Cashwell, C. S. & Swindle, P. J. (2018). When religion hurts: Supervising cases of religious abuse. *Clinical Supervisor, 37*(1), 182-203. https://doi.org/10.1080/07325223.2018.1443305

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021, March 15). *Preventing child abuse & neglect.* https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/fastfact.html

Clark, R. E., Clark, J. F., & Adamc, C. (2007). *The encyclopedia of child abuse* (3rd ed.). Facts on File, Inc.

Craven, S., Brown, S., & Gilchrist, E. (2006). Sexual grooming of children: Review of literature and theoretical considerations. *Journal of Sexual Aggression, 12*(3), 287-299. https://doi.org/10.1080/13552600601069414

Fitzpatrick, M., Carr, A., Dooley, B., Flanagan-Howard, R., Flanagan, E., Tierney, K., White, M. ,Daly, M., Shevlin, M, & Egan, J. (2010). Profiles of adult survivors of severe sexual, physical and emotional institutional abuse in Ireland. *Child Abuse Review, 19*(6), 387 - 404. https://doi.org/10.1002/car.1083

Garst, B. A., Browne, L. P., & Bialeschki, M. D. (2011). Youth development and the camp experience. *New Directions for Youth Development, 130*, 73-87. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.398

Garst, B. A. & Whittington, A. (2020). Defining moments of summer camp experiences: An exploratory study with youth in early adolescence. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership, 12*(3), 306-321. https://doi.org/10.18666/JOREL-2020-V12-I3-10109

Gillard, A., Buzuvis, E. E., Bialeschki, M. D. (2014). Supporting transgender and gender nonconforming youth at summer camp. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration, 32*(3). 92-105. https://ttff.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Summer-Camps-and-TG-Youth.pdf

Gillard, A. & Warner, R. P. (2021). *Evidence-informed guidance for summer camp staff training.* American Camp Association. https://www.acacamps.org/news-publications/blogs/research-360/evidence-informed-guidance-summer-camp-staff-training-part-3-structure-transferability

Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* Sociology Press.

Halsall, T., Kendellen, K., Bean, C. N., & Forneris, T. (2016). Facilitating positive youth development through residential camp: Exploring perceived characteristics of effective camp counsellors and strategies for youth engagement. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration, 34*(4), 20-35. http://dx.doi.org/10.18666/JPRA-2016-V34-I4-7273

Harper, C. A. & Perkins, C. (2018). Reporting Child Sexual Abuse within Religious Settings: Challenges and Future Directions. *Child Abuse Review, 27*(1), 30-41. https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2484

McPhillips, K. (2018). "Soul murder": Investigating spiritual trauma at the Royal Commission. *Journal of Australian Studies, 42*(2), 231-242. https://doi.org/10.1080/14443058.2018.1458329

Minto, K., Hornsey, M. J., Gillespie, N., Healy, K., & Jetten, J. (2016). A social identity approach to understanding responses to child sexual abuse allegations. *PLoS ONE, 11*(4),1-15. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0153205

Novšak, R., Mandelj, T. R., & Simonič, B. (2012). Therapeutic implications of religious-related emotional abuse. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma, 21*, 165-184. https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2014.891551

Phillips, D. (2020). *Weak board vs. strong board: Why care?* American Camp Association. https://www.acacamps.org/resource-library/camping-magazine/weak-board-vs-strong-board-why-care

Raine, S. & Kent, S. A. (2019). The grooming of children for sexual abuse in religious settings: Unique characteristics and select case studies. *Aggression & Violent Behavior, 48*, 180-189. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2019.08.017

Schelbe, L., Deichen Hansen, M. E., France, V. L., Rony, M., & Twichell, K. E. (2016). Does camp make a difference?: Camp counselors' perceptions of how camp impacted youth. *Children and Youth Services Review, 93,* 441-450. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.08.022

Sibthorp, J., Browne, L., & Bialeschki, M. D. (2010). Measuring positive youth development at summer camp: Problem solving and camp connectedness. *Research in Outdoor Education, 10,* 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1353/roe.2010.0002

Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. (2021a, August 10). *Child protective Services (CPS).* https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/child_protection/

Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. (2021b, September 26). *Report abuse, neglect, or exploitation.* https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Contact_Us/report_abuse.asp

Texas Health and Human Services. (2021). *Youth camp & campus programs for minors: Sexual abuse and child molestation awareness training and examination program approved programs.* https://www.dshs.texas.gov/youthcamp/pdf/Approved-Youth-Protection-Traini ng-05-13-2021.pdf

United States Census Bureau. (2021, August 10). *Quickfacts: Texas.* https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/TX

Wilson, C., Lonsway, K. A., & Archambault, J. (2020). Understanding the neurobiology of trauma and implications for interviewing victims. *End Violence Against Women International.* http://evaw.threegate.com/Library/DocumentLibraryHandler.ashx?id=842

YMCA of the USA. (2021). *Child protection at the Y.* https://www.ymca.org/what-we-do/youth-development/child-care/child-protection

Youth Development Strategies, Inc. (n.d.) *Inspirations: Developmental supports and opportunities of youth's experiences at camp.* American Camp Association.

Bailey Vautrain, M.S. is an analyst for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children with their Exploited Children Division - Survivor Services team where she works with law enforcement and survivors of exploitation. She also has experience working with survivors of domestic violence and with youth camps. Her research interests are institutional abuse, religious abuse, domestic violence, and the neurobiology of trauma and resiliency.