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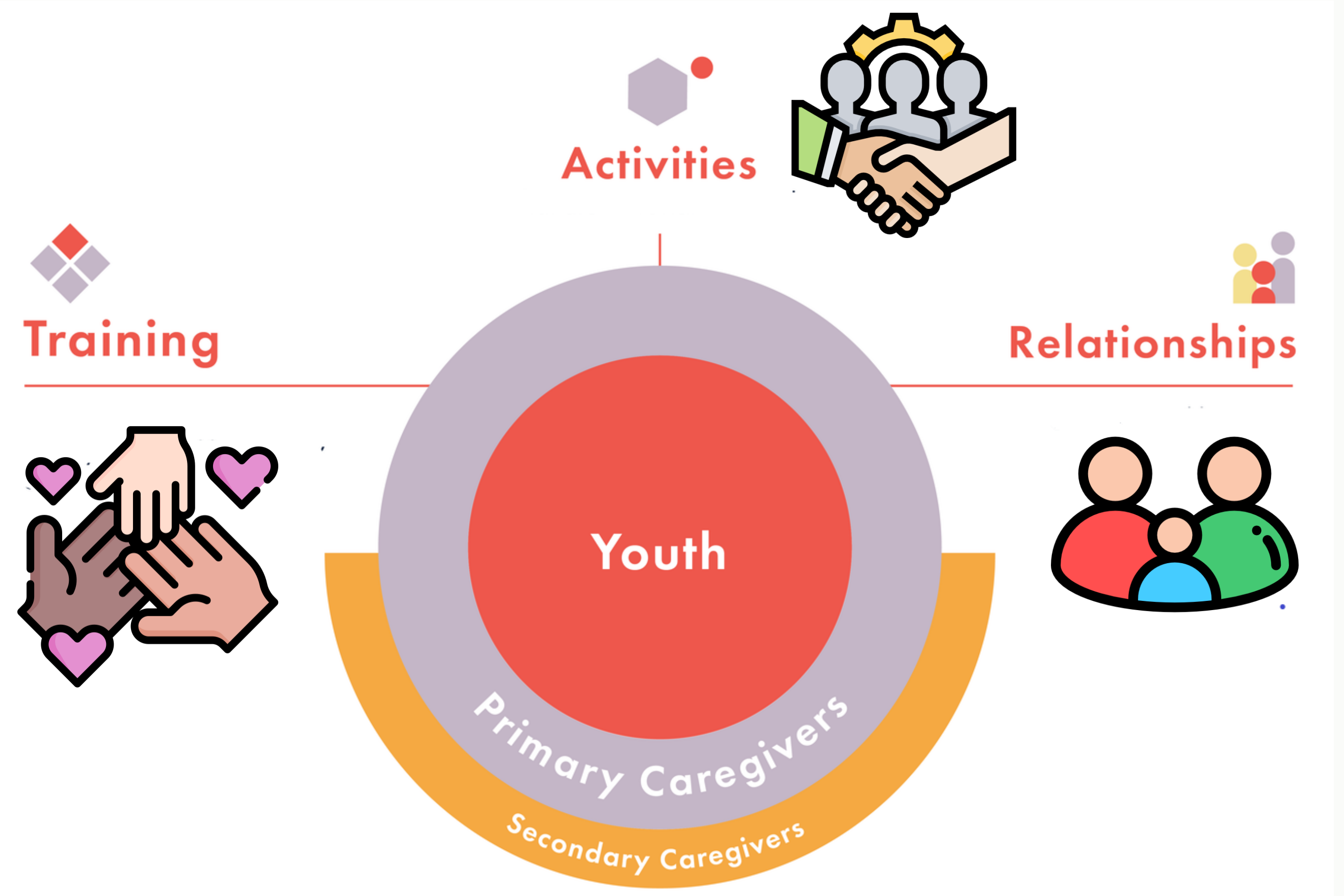
Challenges of Engaging At-Risk Youth in the Context of COVID-19: The Family and Me (FAM) Program

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BACKGROUND

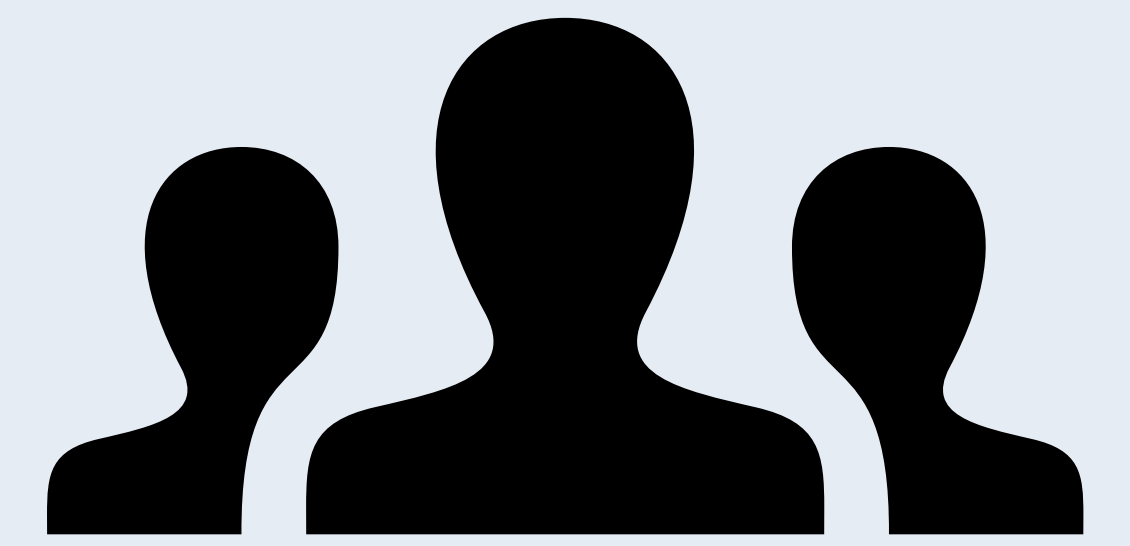
- Data were collected as part of an evaluation of the Family and Me (FAM) program, a family-based foster care pilot program for youth impacted by commercial sexual exploitation (CSE).
- The initial study was designed to assess changes in youth outcomes over time, but there has been minimal youth enrollment in the context of COVID-19.
- The research team developed a secondary research objective to better understand the challenges of engaging at-risk youth in the context of COVID-19.



METHODS

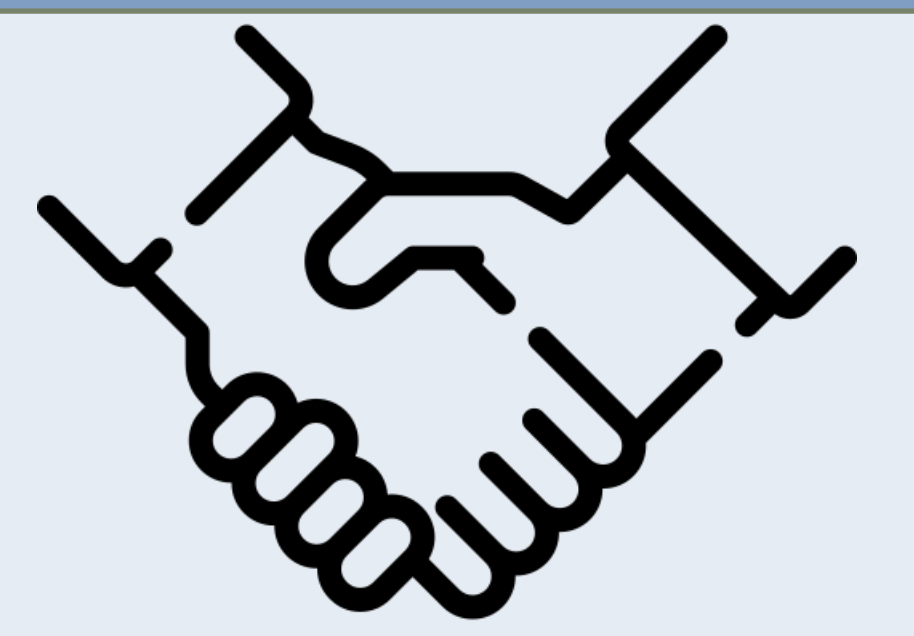
- 29 in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with direct and indirect service providers participating in the FAM program. All interviews were conducted virtually.
- Interview transcripts were coded and data were analyzed to identify key themes.

FINDINGS



In-Person Interaction

- COVID-19 restrictions limited in-person activities. Plans to open a youth drop-in center were postponed. New virtual recruitment strategies were largely unsuccessful.
- Many youth do not have reliable access to cell phones or computers and do not want to participate in Zoom calls with service providers. Many service providers try to communicate with youth through other people such as a social worker, a lawyer, or a parent, which presents additional challenges.
- It is difficult to develop rapport and maintain a connection with at-risk youth in a virtual setting.



Building Trust

- Many youth affected by CSE are living on the street, currently being exploited, and/or in other high-risk situations. It takes time to build trust with this particularly vulnerable population because they may often be absent or out-of-touch for extensive periods.
- Many youth have a history of negative experiences in the foster care system and with other supportive services, making them reluctant to engage.
- Youth often need individualized support with other resources to meet their immediate needs before they are ready to engage in discussions about foster care.



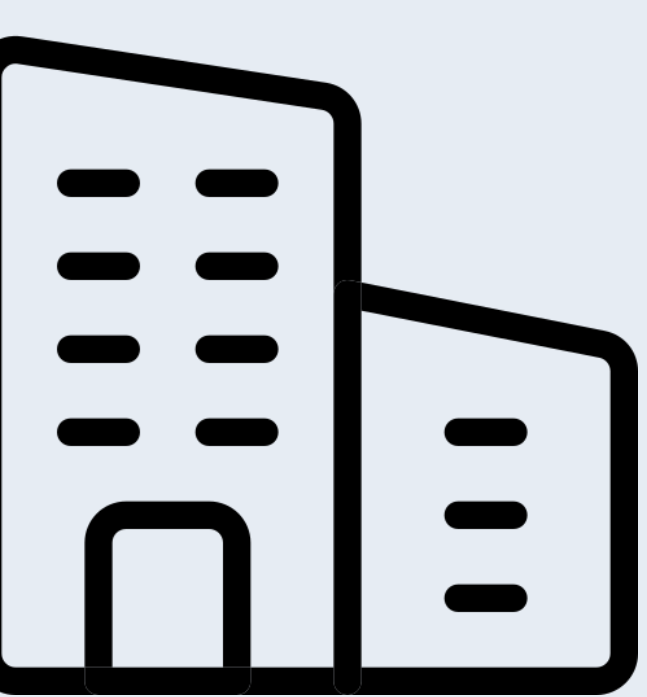
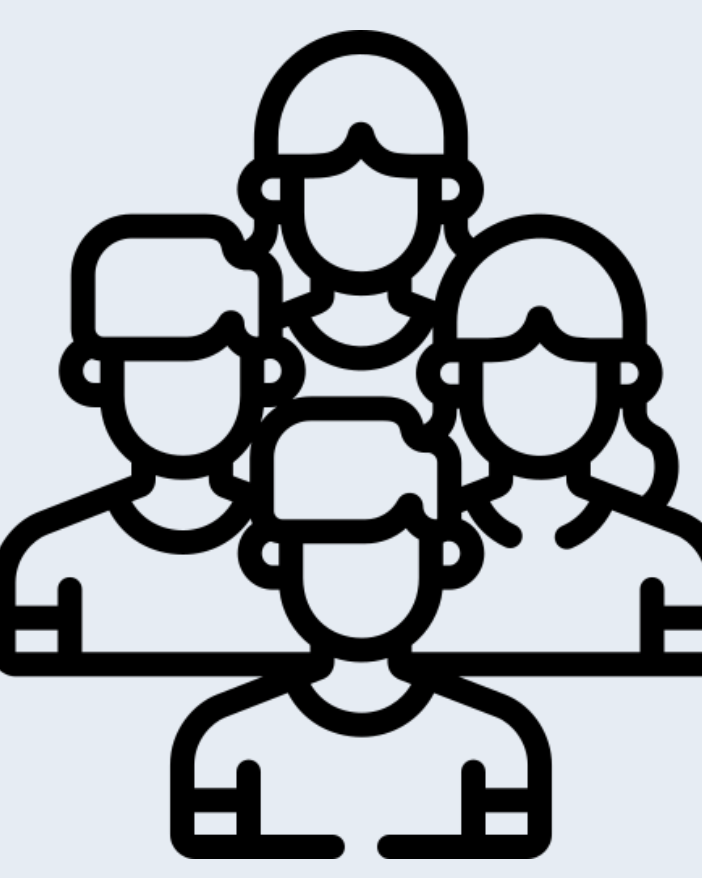
Foster Homes

- Challenges in caregiver recruitment delayed foster home availability. Without established foster homes, service providers are reluctant to refer youth.
- Many people do not want to bring a new person into their family during a pandemic.
- COVID-19 hindered staff outreach efforts, as it was more challenging to attend meetings, groups, and gatherings to recruit caregivers.
- Additional challenges to caregiver recruitment include Bay Area housing costs and stigma surrounding CSE.



DISCUSSION

There are several unique challenges to engaging with youth impacted by commercial sexual exploitation (CSE), many of which were worsened in the context of COVID-19. Virtual engagement can be especially challenging because youth are often living on the street in high risk-situations. It is important to meet youth where they are at and spend time building trust, with an understanding that progress may be slow, especially in the context of COVID-19. One approach to addressing these unique challenges is to create a youth-centered in-person space that provides resources and support tailored to the needs of youth. This type of space can facilitate youth engagement while allowing the time to build trust until youth are ready to transition to a more permanent home.



"I think just we haven't really done much outreach and I feel like COVID was a big factor in that, right. We can't really go out to these groups and speak to them"

"Those youth are still on the street. They're very unstable. Their lives are really erratic. We can't even get near them to have a conversation with them."

"I think the biggest barrier was COVID. Nothing anybody could do about that, but nobody's gonna bring a stranger into their home in the middle of the pandemic."

"Going from street to placement even if it's with a foster home, is 0 to 60 for these young people. It's very unrealistic to expect the young person to just land in a structured place with a supportive adult and have that feel good for them or comfortable or even like it's something they want. We need—we need like a 30 miles per hour kind of place."

"I think it's a challenge to develop rapport in a virtual space for young people who maybe have been on camera all day at school. It's definitely a challenge for youth who are not in placement. We don't know where they are."