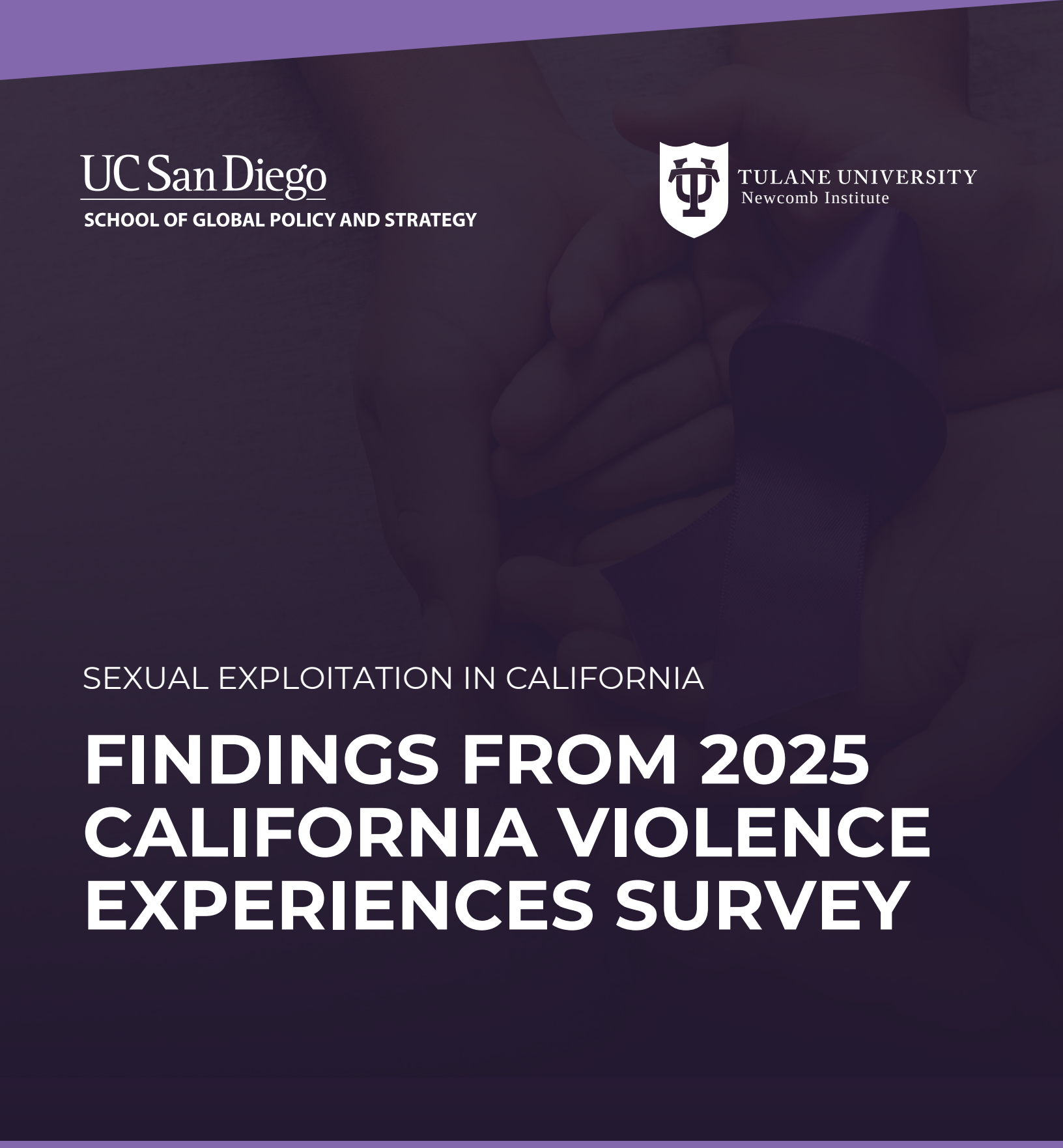


UC San Diego
SCHOOL OF GLOBAL POLICY AND STRATEGY

TULANE UNIVERSITY
Newcomb Institute

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN CALIFORNIA

FINDINGS FROM 2025 CALIFORNIA VIOLENCE EXPERIENCES SURVEY

VEXData
VIOLENCE EXPERIENCES SURVEY

APRIL 2026

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN CALIFORNIA: FINDINGS FROM CALVEX 2025

Sexual exploitation involves forced or coerced sexual behavior taking advantage of an individual's position of relative vulnerability. It can include but is not limited to exchanging sex for money, employment, housing, food, grades, drugs, or other goods or services. The California Violence Experiences (CalVEX) Survey, conducted with approximately 4,000 Californian adults, assesses these experiences. This brief provides details on California adults' experiences with sexual exploitation in 2025.

HOW WE ASKED ABOUT SEXUAL EXPLOITATION:

Statewide Violence Experiences (VEX) surveys, which assess violence across individuals' lifespans, are conducted periodically with state-representative samples in California and across states in the Gulf South. The VEX teams at Tulane University and the University of California San Diego commission NORC, a survey research firm at the University of Chicago, to collect these data using online survey panels. VEX surveys record data on experiences of physical, sexual, and intimate partner violence (IPV) both across the lifespan (hereafter referred to as lifetime/ever) and within the past year, as well as mental health outcomes and demographic data. The 2025 CalVEX survey was fielded between May and June 2025 with more than 4,000 California adults enabling robust population estimates on violence indicators, with sample weights. The full survey and details on the survey methods and sample weighting are available at: https://www.vexdata.org/calvex/.

To assess sexual exploitation, we asked participants whether they had the following experience: "someone forcing or pressuring you to do a sexual act in exchange for something of monetary or other value (such as a good grade, a promotion, a job, drugs, food, money, or something similar), or instead of something (like paying rent or a citation, etc.)."

If individuals indicated yes on this item, they were subsequently asked both whether the experience occurred before age 18 and if within the past year. These items allow us to assess experiences of sexual exploitation that occurred in one's lifetime, during the past year, and before they were 18 years old.

KEY FINDINGS:

Sexual exploitation is not uncommon in California, with women and gender non-conforming (GNC) people at greater risk relative to men.

- One in 16 California adults (6%) have experienced sexual exploitation in their lifetime.
  - 1 in 33 Californians (3%) were sexually exploited before they were aged 18 years.
  - 1 in 200 Californians (0.5%) were sexually exploited within the past year
- Women and GNC people are about 2x as likely as men to have ever experienced sexual exploitation.
  - 8% of women and 9% of GNC people, compared to 4% of men, have been sexually exploited in their lifetime.

Californians with some college education are more likely to have experienced sexual exploitation than those without any college education or those with postgraduate training. Respondents were three times more likely to experience sexual exploitation if they had lower vs. higher income.

- We examined associations between select sociodemographic characteristics and a lifetime history of sexual exploitation and found higher risk for those who were:
  - *Lower income compared with higher income.*
    - 9% of those with an annual household income < $29,000 compared with 5-6% of those with $30,000-149,999 income, and 3% of those with an annual household income > $150,000 had been sexually exploited.
  - *College educated versus those with no post-secondary education and those with graduate training:*
    - Higher prevalence was seen among those with some college/associate degree or a bachelor's degree (9% and 7%, respectively), compared with all others, including individuals without any college education (4-5%) and those with postgraduate education (4%).
- No differences were observed for age, metro versus non-metro residence, or region of residence in the state (e.g., Southern California, Central Valley, etc.).

CalVEX
CALIFORNIA VIOLENCE EXPERIENCES SURVEY

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Sexual exploitation affects a measurable share of California's adult population, including experiences occurring before age 18 and within the past year. Overall, 6% of adults –around 1.89 million Californians—report lifetime sexual exploitation.

Risk is not evenly distributed. Women and gender non-conforming (GNC) adults are approximately twice as likely as men to report lifetime sexual exploitation. Lower-income Californians also face elevated risk. At the same time, higher prevalence among those with some college or a bachelor's degree suggests that individuals pursuing educational advancement, especially those facing financial constraints, may encounter increased vulnerability in settings where economic dependence and institutional authority power imbalances and abuse of power intersect.

These findings indicate that exploitation often occurs in contexts involving financial need, educational level or employment opportunity, and power imbalances.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

1 Integrate sexual exploitation into statewide violence surveillance, prevention, and accountability systems.

Sexual exploitation is not consistently captured in existing sexual violence indicators, nor uniformly addressed under mandates such as the federal Title IX protection of college students from sexual harassment, violence, or discrimination. State agencies should incorporate standardized measures into surveillance systems, reporting requirements, and prevention frameworks to ensure consistent identification, monitoring, and coordinated response across sectors. Currently, identification of cases and coordinated response falls heavily on the U.S. human trafficking hotline and tracking prevalence relies on the number of calls made to the hotline (1).

2 Prioritize populations facing disproportionate risk.

Women, gender non-conforming (GNC) individuals, and lower-income Californians report substantially higher prevalence of sexual exploitation. Prevention strategies, access to reporting and protective enforcement mechanisms, and treatment/services for survivors of sexual exploitation should be designed to reach those most affected. Efforts to address economic barriers, workplace inequities, and financial instability are relevant to reducing vulnerability.

3 Strengthen oversight in educational and employment settings.

Because exploitation often occurs where individuals depend on grades, financial aid, internships, or job opportunities, institutions should implement clear reporting channels, enforce anti-retaliation protections, require supervisory transparency, and conduct regular compliance reviews. Postsecondary institutions may be key sites for targeted intervention, including campus counseling and health centers, and assistance for jobs, housing, and food. Service providers and campus personnel should be trained in sexual exploitation detection and protection. All students should be given more training and information on how to detect and prevent sexual exploitation from happening to them and others. Another recent California study found that 1 in 5 college students were forced, coerced, or tricked (frauded) into selling sex (2).

4 Reduce economic conditions that increase vulnerability to coercion.

Housing instability, income insecurity, and limited worker protections can increase exposure to exploitative exchanges. Policies that strengthen economic stability and workplace safeguards may reduce risk.

RESOURCES AND REFERRALS

Individuals seeking support, or agencies seeking referral partnerships, may contact:

- National Sexual Assault Hotline (operated by RAINN)
  800-656-HOPE (4673) | Online chat: rainn.org
  Confidential, 24/7 support nationwide.
- ValorUS (VALOR)
  valor.us
  National and statewide network of sexual assault service providers and prevention programs.
- California Partnership to End Domestic Violence
  cpedv.org
  Policy, prevention, and service coordination resources.
- National Human Trafficking Hotline
  888-373-7888 | Text 233733 | humantraffickinghotline.org
  24/7 confidential reporting and support.
- California Civil Rights Department
  calcivilrights.ca.gov
  Enforcement of workplace and housing anti-discrimination and harassment protections.
- 211 California
  Dial 211 | 211ca.org
  Local referrals for housing, food, financial assistance, and crisis services.
- The Safe House Project | 507-769-0819
  info@SafeHouseProject.org

REFERENCES

1 National Human Trafficking Hotline. Available online at: https://humantraffickinghotline.org/en/statistics/.

2 Urada LA and Weitensteiner A (2026) Policy implications for halting human trafficking and sexual exploitation at U.S. colleges and universities: results from a 12-campus survey. Front. Psychiatry 17:1773818.

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CITATION

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