

# UNH Receives \$1.8 Million to Evaluate Prevention Program for Sexual Exploitation of Children

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DURHAM, N.H.—The physical and emotional harm caused by commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking of children and youth has been well documented but there is little research looking at preventative measures to help protect those at risk. Researchers at the University of New Hampshire have received a five-year grant totaling \$1.8 million from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to study the effectiveness of a child trafficking prevention program and its implementation through Minnesota’s Safe Harbor Initiative. UNH researchers will be working closely on the study with partners at the University of Minnesota’s School of Nursing and the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH).



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“These victims are children, and they are often struggling with other issues like homelessness which increases their likelihood of being taken advantage of,” said Lisa Jones, research associate professor of psychology at UNH and principal investigator. “The goal of this work is to evaluate and improve programs so communities can help prevent the sexual exploitation of these youth by educating them and giving them the tools to keep them safe.”

The study will take a closer look at *Not a Number*, an education program developed by the nonprofit victim service agency Love 146 that helps youth identify and use support systems to reduce vulnerability to sexual exploitation. The research will focus on MDH’s Safe Harbor program which implements *Not a Number* in partnership with statewide grantees. The randomized controlled study will use rigorous methodologies to evaluate the impact of the program on preventing the sexual exploitation and victimization of children and youth. The researchers hope the findings will improve future iterations of the program and inform new initiatives and policies aimed at protecting children.

“We need to hold ourselves accountable and ensure that we are having the impact we intend to,” said Aria Flood, director of U.S. prevention at Love 146. “This evaluation will allow us to assess our impact on preventing children from being exploited, make improvements in our programming and inform future anti-trafficking prevention efforts.”

Lauren Martin, associate professor at the University of Minnesota’s School of Nursing, will lead local research implementation in collaboration with UNH and MDH. Other researchers, all at UNH, include Kimberly Mitchell-Lema, research professor at the Crimes Against Children Research Center; Jennifer O’Brien, assistant professor of social work; and Suzanne Graham, associate professor of education.

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This award is part of the CDC's effort to improve the research base on prevention of child and youth sexual victimization.

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## Media Contact

[Robbin Ray '82](#) | Communications and Public Affairs |  
[robbin.ray@unh.edu](mailto:robbin.ray@unh.edu) | 603-862-4864



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