

Issue Brief: Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) and Youth Homelessness

CSEC is A Growing Problem

It is commonly estimated that 100,000 children are victims of commercial sexual exploitation each year.¹ Further, there is evidence that the number of children being exploited is increasing. The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) reports there is an increase in the online solicitation and “grooming” of children for CSEC, the incidence and violence of online pornography involving children, and online advertisements of children available for prostitution.²

CSEC may be growing in part because it is highly lucrative. DOJ reports CSEC is growing in popularity because it conveys greater financial gains with fewer risks than the drug trade and other illegal activities. It is also challenging for law enforcement to combat. Solicitation of prostitution is moving from city streets to online forums and pimps move children frequently between cities. It is difficult, therefore, to identify children victimized by CSEC and when children are identified they are more likely to be arrested for prostitution than those who solicited or exploited them.

CSEC and Human Trafficking

Children who are victims of CSEC and youth over 18 who engage in sexual acts as a result of coercion, fraud, or force are also considered to be victims of human trafficking under federal statute. This applies to children and youth engaged in pornography, sexual entertainment industries, “survival sex” (trading sex to meet youth’s basic needs for food and shelter), and prostitution.³ Children are considered to be victims of trafficking even when they seem to be engaging willingly in sexual acts. CSEC is the most common form of human trafficking of U.S. citizens and runaway and homeless youth are often its victims.

Victims of CSEC Often Fall Through Cracks

Though children engaged in prostitution are victims of trafficking, many law enforcement and legal systems still view them as juvenile delinquents. The State Department acknowledges that within the U.S., “the prostitution of children has traditionally been handled as a vice crime or juvenile justice issue and the anti-trafficking approach ... has been slow to fully permeate state child protection and juvenile justice systems.” As a result, children who have been victimized by CSEC are more likely to be incarcerated in detention facilities than to receive therapeutic services. Advocates argue this undermines efforts to combat CSEC and places children at risk of future victimization.

Federal agencies also report that children victimized by CSEC often go unidentified by runaway and homeless youth providers though the population they serve is at particular risk. As a result, these agencies are not able

¹ This is the most frequently used estimate, however, it is also widely challenged. There is no completely reliable estimate of the prevalence of CSEC nationally.

² This can also reflect the greater use of this technology.

³ The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 defines trafficking in persons as “sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age” 22 U.S.C. § 7102(8).

to protect children from ongoing victimization or connect them to appropriate services and supports that can help them recover.

Runaway and Homeless Youth Are Susceptible to CSEC

It is estimated that 2.2 percent of children under the age of 18 who have a runaway or homeless episode, approximately 39,000 children annually, are sexually assaulted or are victimized by CSEC during that experience. The longer, and more often, children and youth are on the streets, the higher the risk that they will be victimized by CSEC. Children victimized by CSEC often have fractured relationships with their families and most have histories of abuse and neglect.

Runaway and homeless children are vulnerable to CSEC both because of their young age and their circumstances. High numbers of youth who are homeless report having been solicited for prostitution and pimps have been known to actively target locations where homeless children and youth congregate, including on the streets, at foster care group homes, and at runaway and homeless shelter programs.

Law enforcement reports that children are used to recruit other children into CSEC from shelter and drop-in programs for homeless youth. Runaway and homeless youth can also be victimized by those who prey on their emotional vulnerability. Children are often introduced to CSEC by a boyfriend who initially provides loving attention, care, and emotional support before coercing them into prostitution. On the streets or in shelter, they may be seen as easy prey by those who want to take advantage of their desperate need for a place to stay, food, money, or emotional support.

Housing and Service Interventions Are in Short Supply

There is a severe shortage of shelter and transitional housing programs to serve children and youth experiencing homelessness. Most emergency shelters for youth have time limits of three weeks and there can be lengthy waits for longer-term transitional housing. The youth homelessness system simply lacks the capacity to respond to all children at risk of CSEC who are on the streets.

Expanding access to emergency housing options can reduce the risk that runaway and homeless youth will be victims of CSEC but further progress requires minimizing the length of time young people remain homeless. This can be achieved by helping homeless children and youth quickly reunify with family and quickly connecting those who cannot be reunified to long-term transitional housing and support services.

There are also few housing options for children rescued from CSEC. Some children cannot be safely restored to their family or their former foster care home. There are fewer than 100 beds nationally in programs that have been specifically designed for children who are survivors of CSEC. With few alternatives, courts may choose to detain children in juvenile detention facilities simply because other safe temporary housing options do not exist to protect them.

Many advocates and legal professionals argue that child welfare agencies should provide for the long-term care of children victimized by CSEC who cannot be restored to their families. Local child welfare agencies are reportedly often reluctant to absorb responsibility for these children, particularly those over the age of 15. As a result, children victimized by CSEC may fall through the cracks between local juvenile justice and child welfare systems, never receiving appropriate care.

Federal Efforts to Combat CSEC

There are multiple efforts to combat CSEC and human trafficking nationally and internationally. While multiple federal agencies participate in interagency efforts and task forces, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) is taking a lead role in combatting human trafficking domestically.

DOJ recently released *The National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction*. The report sets forth an overarching goal of preventing commercial sexual exploitation from occurring in the first place and identifies combating the prostitution of minors as a top priority. Among other initiatives to combat CSEC, DOJ funds over 40 local multi-disciplinary task forces in jurisdictions with high rates of CSEC. The *Innocence Lost Initiative* brings together state and federal law enforcement, prosecutors and social service providers (including child welfare and runaway and homeless youth providers) at the local level to respond to CSEC. Over a six year period, local task forces have recovered over 1,200 children.

The U.S. Attorney General submits a report to Congress annually detailing progress being made across all federal agencies and departments in combating human trafficking, including CSEC, and identifying the new approaches that are needed. Multiple cross-agency working groups are dedicated to meeting the goals delineated in each year's report to combat CSEC.

Legislation has been introduced in both the House and Senate in 2011 to reauthorize the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. This legislation would enhance efforts to combat sexual and labor trafficking nationally and internationally. Among other provisions, the Senate bill would provide funding for block grants to state or local governments to combat the sexual exploitation of minors. The House bill would require child welfare agencies to improve their responses to victims of CSEC. States would be required to describe plans to prevent CSEC and assist both foreign and citizen victims. Such plans may describe how the child welfare agency will partner with agencies that serve high-risk populations, including runaway and homeless youth, and improve prevention education and training to combat CSEC. Both the House and Senate bills have received bipartisan support.

State Efforts to Combat CSEC

Combatting sexual exploitation of children and other forms of human trafficking is also receiving increased attention from state governments. Polaris, a national advocacy, research, and technical assistance organization, regularly rates states' based on their progress combatting human trafficking. In August 2011 Polaris identified:

- 11 states with state-sanctioned commissions or task forces charged with combatting human trafficking;
- 45 states that adopted statutory language criminalizing sexual exploitation through fraud, force, or coercion; and
- 7 states that have adopted statutes protecting children who are victimized by CSEC from incarceration and promoting the provision of appropriate services to children who are recovered.

Advocacy Efforts to Combat CSEC

Many national organizations are working to end CSEC, including organizations with a primary focus on law enforcement, juvenile justice, public education, human rights, child protection, women's rights, and domestic violence. Through coordinated and independent efforts, national organizations are combatting CSEC in the following ways.

- Public awareness campaigns
- Improving data
- Research
- Training and technical assistance
- State-level policy education and advocacy
- Federal-level policy education and advocacy
- Direct service provision to survivors
- Peer support to survivors

Ending Youth Homelessness and CSEC

Stable housing in a context that provides relationships with responsible, caring adults offers an excellent defense against CSEC. Cultivating partnerships between organizations committed to ending homelessness and those on the forefront of combating human trafficking could strengthen both causes. The two movements have a shared goal of protecting youth from remaining on the streets to prevent incidences of CSEC and facilitating the recovery of those who are victimized. An agenda that minimizes youth homelessness and thus the risk they will be victims of exploitation should include the following.

- *Prevent youth homelessness.* Youth homelessness should be prevented whenever possible through the provision of family preservation and reunification assistance, support to help youth safely exit unsafe homes without having to go to a shelter (including options provided by extended family, child welfare, host homes, etc.), and improved discharges from foster care and juvenile justice placements.
- *Minimize street homelessness.* An immediate crisis response should be available to all homeless children and youth so that they are never without a safe place to stay. Youth on the streets, including those in prostitution markets, should be actively targeted for outreach, and efforts should be in place to ensure that barriers to stable housing are removed so that youth are not denied access to services.
- *Facilitate long-term stability.* Youth should quickly be placed in settings that will provide long-term stability, safety, and access to needed services, including family reunification and other stable housing.

Selected Resources For More Information on CSEC and Human Trafficking

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| ECPAT-USA | http://ecpatusa.org/ |
| Girls Educational & Mentoring Services (GEMS) | http://www.gems-girls.org/ |
| National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) | www.missingkids.com |
| Polaris Project | http://www.polarisproject.org/ |
| Rebecca Project for Human Rights | http://www.rebeccaproject.org/ |
| Shared Hope International | http://www.sharedhope.org/ |