

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: Indicators and Recommended Inquiries and Responses for Social Workers

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Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is a significant social problem in the United States. As defined by the [Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 \(TVPA\)](#), *sex trafficking* includes “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act” (p. 1). Victims under the age of 18 years are not legally able to consent to commercialized sex; therefore, evidence of force, fraud, coercion, or deception is not necessary to establish acts as CSEC ([Adelson, 2008](#)). Although we know that CSEC can result in negative physical, psychological, developmental, and social consequences for victims ([Greenbaum & Crawford-Jakubiak, 2015](#)), we have no credible statistical estimates of the number of children victimized annually by CSEC even though cases have been identified in all 50 states across many demographic groups ([Stransky & Finkelhor, 2008](#)).

Schools are key sites for identifying and responding to CSEC victims, because of the amount of time youths spend in school. Moreover, traffickers can use school settings and other students to recruit youths into CSEC ([U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Healthy Students \[ED, OSHS\], 2015](#)). Therefore, it is critical for school social workers (SSWs) to know how to identify and respond to CSEC victims and connect them with resources.

RISK FACTORS AND WARNING SIGNS

Any youth can experience CSEC, so it is important not to make assumptions based on students’ social identities (for example, race, gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status) ([Shandro et al., 2016](#)). Although any child might

experience CSEC, some students may be particularly vulnerable to exploitation, including those with problems often seen by SSWs (for example, child maltreatment, sexual abuse, mental health problems) ([Franchino-Olsen, 2019](#)). Key CSEC warning signs include the following: student is having difficulty in school, often misses or is late to class, arrives to school exhausted, or has frequent visits to the health office ([Franchino-Olsen, 2019](#)). Students may suddenly and uncharacteristically appear with expensive items such as cell phones, new clothes, or jewelry ([Franchino-Olsen, 2019](#)). When students show such signs and risks, SSWs should seek students out for CSEC assessment.

APPROACH

Critically important for assessing CSEC is the need to establish rapport with students. Strategies for establishing rapport include the following: using caring, nonaccusatory ([Grace, Starck, Potenza, Kenney, & Sheetz, 2012](#)), nonjudgmental, and developmentally appropriate tone and language ([Becker & Bechtel, 2015](#)), as well as limiting fact-finding or investigatory questions ([Bourke, Prestridge, & Malterer, 2016](#)). Asking intrusive questions or using criminalizing or direct language, including terms like “trafficking” or “coercion,” could alienate students and prevent their CSEC disclosures ([Becker & Bechtel, 2015](#); [Macy & Graham, 2012](#); [Shandro et al., 2016](#)). SSWs’ skills of expressing their openness through nonverbal communication and listening without distraction would be particularly useful in their meetings with students who may be at risk of or who are experiencing CSEC ([Grace et al., 2012](#)). By responding to CSEC in a trauma-informed and

culturally sensitive way (Macy & Graham, 2012), SSWs will empower and promote dignity, self-worth, and decision making.

Prioritizing victim safety and privacy (for example, by meeting in a private space; Bourke et al., 2016), as well as building rapport with the potential victim (Grace et al., 2012) are important first steps. It also is important to be aware of and disclose to the youth the limits of confidentiality (for example, mandatory reporting laws) (Greenbaum & Crawford-Jakubiak, 2015). Furthermore, depending on school policy and state law, the SSW may need to obtain consent from the youth's caregivers before speaking to the youth,

which can have added complexity in cases of CSEC involving caregivers as traffickers (Greenbaum & Crawford-Jakubiak, 2015). For all these reasons, SSWs should know their state laws and any existing school policies or protocols on how to report trafficking and should make decisions accordingly (ED, OSHS, 2015).

QUESTIONS TO ASK

There are no CSEC screening tools designed specifically for school settings, although CSEC screening tools for medical providers do exist (Schwarz et al., 2016). Therefore, Table 1 lists some questions that SSWs may use to inquire about CSEC, other abuses,

Table 1: Questions School Social Workers Can Ask if They Suspect CSEC

Area	Possible Questions to Ask
CSEC and other abuses	<p>Have you ever exchanged sex for food, money, shelter, or drugs?</p> <p>Did you ever do anything that made you feel unsafe or in danger?</p> <p>Have you ever been forced to perform sex acts?</p> <p>Has anyone ever asked you to have sex with another person?</p> <p>Have you ever taken your clothes off for a photograph or an audience?</p> <p>Has someone made money off you doing these things?</p>
Home	<p>Where were you staying last night?</p> <p>Where do you stay or sleep?</p> <p>Do you sleep in a bed, on a cot, or on a floor?</p> <p>Are you living with anyone? If so, who are you living with and what is your relationship to them? Do you move often?</p> <p>Have you ever run away from home?</p> <p>What are your living conditions like?</p> <p>Are there locks on the doors and windows where you stay?</p> <p>Are you afraid to leave?</p>
Relationships	<p>Are you dating anyone? If so, how old are they? Where do they go to school?</p> <p>Does the person you are dating go by other names?</p> <p>Are you allowed to talk to people outside your home or job?</p> <p>Does someone supervise, control, or monitor your actions?</p>
Money and work	<p>Do you have a job?</p> <p>Are you paid for your work?</p> <p>What are some things you bought for yourself over the past month?</p> <p>Do you owe anyone money?</p> <p>Are you in charge of your own money?</p> <p>Has anyone lied to you about the type of work you would be doing at your job?</p> <p>Are/were you able to walk away when you wanted?</p>
School	<p>What is your school attendance like?</p> <p>How are you doing in school?</p> <p>I noticed you were sleepy/asleep in class yesterday. Were you up late?</p>
Identification documentation	<p>What are names you used prior to the one you are using now? Who has your identification papers?</p> <p>Has anyone threatened you with deportation if you tried to leave your job?</p>

Note: CSEC = commercial sexual exploitation of children.

the home environment, relationships, money and work, school, and identity documentation.

IMMEDIATE RESPONSE AND CONNECTIONS WITH RESOURCES

After an SSW has identified a student who is experiencing or is at risk of experiencing CSEC, the next step is to connect the student with resources. The best way to ensure a positive referral process for students is for SSWs to proactively establish close partnerships with agencies or organizations in the community that can help students experiencing CSEC. Social workers are encouraged to build their awareness of both their local and national resources (for example, the National Human Trafficking Hotline, <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/>). This coordination can result in the youth being able to receive multiple types of needed services without having to continually repeat their story. The SSW's response would also be enhanced by having community experts in the area of CSEC offer training to youths and school personnel and assist in developing clear school and state-specific protocols to ensure that the school is prepared to adequately respond to incidents of CSEC (Rizo et al., 2019).

The National Human Trafficking Resource Center's hotline is just a phone call away for SSWs seeking support as they help students navigate resources and processes. The hotline can also assist in connecting SSWs with local resources if the school does not yet have relationships with relevant partners for addressing the needs of CSEC victims (Macy & Graham, 2012). The SSW should become knowledgeable about their reporting responsibilities, including whether they need to notify child protection agencies or law enforcement. Any steps that the SSW takes should be discussed with the youth, even if the action must take place because it is required by law (Becker & Bechtel, 2015).

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

SSWs frequently work closely with youths who are at risk of experiencing CSEC or who are experiencing CSEC. There is a need for evaluation and testing of programs developed for SSWs to identify and respond to CSEC. Until this evidence exists, it is still critical that SSWs learn to recognize warning signs that youths are experiencing CSEC, ask appropriate follow-up questions, approach youths in a trauma-informed way, and provide immediate response and connection to resources to

help their students receive support that can provide life-saving healing, recovery, and safety from CSEC. **SW**

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