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## COMMERCIALLY SEXUALLY EXPLOITED CHILDREN TARGETED WITHIN SOCIAL SERVICES

Britny Ragland

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COMMERCIALY SEXUALLY EXPLOITED CHILDREN TARGETED WITHIN  
SOCIAL SERVICES

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Britny Ragland  
May 2024

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## ABSTRACT

This study used a survey to describe social workers' and MSW students' level of preparedness in identifying and providing prevention and intervention for commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC). The purpose of this study was to evaluate perceptions of social workers and social work students have the necessary skills, knowledge, and training to identify, and provide intervention for Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC). Data was collected from thirty-five participants. Findings were that there appears to be no significance between the level of skills, knowledge and training among social workers and social work students in their ability to provide intervention for commercially sexually exploited children. Participants were able to identify several barriers that impact the ability to access and provide interventions to commercially sexually exploited children. Recommendations would include providing more training and knowledge to MSW students and more focus and research surrounding clients individual factors or barriers that create resistance.

## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my entire support system that helped me through this journey, God, my family, and friends.

It was God who gave me the strength, wisdom, and courage to get through my toughest battles. Through times of adversity, I remained prayerful and was able to push through. Every day I spoke to him, and he encouraged me through his grace to keep going no matter what.

Aniyah, my daughter, I thank you for your patience, and for being my driving force. You have been by my side since I first started this journey, and it has not gone without many sacrifices. Quitting has never been an option worth fulfilling because you depend on me, and I strive to make you proud.

Mommy, thank you so much for instilling hard work in me. I've watched you climb mountains that seemed almost impossible. You have continuously motivated me and encouraged me to not only continue to excel past my comfort zone but also never to allow challenges to defeat me. I am forever proud of you and thankful to have you as an example.

Nnenna, my best friend, you may not know this, but you are such a huge inspiration in my life. I admire your tenacity, humbleness, thoughtfulness, hard work, and grace. You have become such a huge part of my family, and you encourage me too always to do more and better. Thank you for being there through the hard times and the best times.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## PROBLEM FORMULATION

### Background Information

Commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC) has been an increasingly prominent issue that continues to rise with very few solution-focused interventions. Research states that nearly 100,000 children are sexually exploited in the United States every year (Gluck, 2014). The biggest concern is how it has affected our child welfare system. At this point, the child welfare system has not developed adequate services and supports to protect foster youth from becoming exploited. What needs to be further addressed is how this vulnerable population is being subjected to such abuse at more frequent rates due to unmet needs and lack of proper supervision (Landers, 2017). Research also indicates that up to 80% of children who have been identified as sex trafficking victims had prior involvement in the child welfare system (Walker, 2013). Furthermore, when we think about where these children are being exposed to such abuse, research states that the majority of the children are recruited within the residential treatment programs and foster homes (Walker, 2013). This study will aim to focus on social work perspective in regard to their level of preparedness in working with sexually exploited children.

Since children placed in these residential treatment programs are at a higher risk of sexual exploitation, there needs to be a shift in focus regarding prevention and intervention (Human Trafficking and Child Welfare: A Guide for

Child Welfare Agencies, 2017). According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, of the over 26,500 at-risk children who are runaways reported to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in 2020, one in six were possible victims of child sexual exploitation (n.d). This is of significant concern because these numbers will only increase with a lack of proper implementation of strategic strategies (Estes,2002). It is essential to understand that we have very minimal control over children being abused and ultimately placed in protected environments for future harm as Child Welfare workers. The problem that disconnects us from this safety plan is that facilities and homes governed and approved by state or county officials are not targeting specific needs that can prevent the prevalence of children being sexually exploited (Clayton et al.,2014). Another prominent and critical factor in child sexual exploitation is when children have had multiple placement disruptions (Pullman, 2020). Ultimately, examining these vulnerabilities and needs in-depth to prevent vital issues such as children running away from foster homes and becoming subjected to sexual exploitation may assist in solution-focused prevention (Pullman, 2020).

### Micro Issues

It is vital to understand the connection between CSEC and the child welfare system as most children have current and prior involvement, which targets their vulnerability. Due to the high prevalence and the high risk that vulnerable children are exposed to such abuse, Social Workers are heavily relied

on for immediate and effective response and prevention. Social Workers are at the forefront of these issues; therefore, they are expected to be equipped with proper training on identifying and intervening when concerns arise regarding commercially sexually exploited children (Human Trafficking and Child Welfare: A Guide for Child Welfare Agencies, 2017). Research suggests that approaching CSEC requires a multidisciplinary approach from local, state, and national sectors (Human Trafficking and Child Welfare: A Guide for Child Welfare Agencies, 2017). Social workers who conduct investigations are at the forefront of the issue as they are expected to investigate, assess, and identify victims. Social Workers are also expected to identify unmet needs that might prevent children from running away or getting recruited within these residential facilities. It is also equally important to ensure proper training is given and updated regularly to assure social workers are equipped to identify and prevent.

#### Macro issues/Policy

The biggest macro issue appears to be centered on the lack of collaboration between micro and macro levels. For example, within the child welfare system, there has been an ongoing concern regarding how individuals creating policy have no insight or experience regarding concerns, making implementations less effective. Furthermore, interventions on a Macro-level need to be developed and implemented to address the needs and vulnerabilities of children who are victims or at risk of sexual exploitation (Franchino-Olsen, 2019).

Although it appears concerns are being addressed through the implementation of policies and procedures due to the rising concern of children within the child welfare system being subjected to sexual exploitation, the current intervention and prevention procedures, and policies are not working effectively. (Human Trafficking and Child Welfare: A Guide for Child Welfare Agencies, 2017). Current policies adopted by the U.S., such as Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014, implement social workers' responsibility to identify and document if there are reasonable concerns regarding a child being victimized or at risk of sexual exploitation (Pullman, 2020). Although much of the Policy is centralized within the individual agencies, some research suggests California has a statewide community response to prevent commercially sexually exploited children (CDSS Programs, n.d). Therefore, supporting the need to reassess current strategies and practical training of all employees working with foster youth children.

### Findings Contribution and Research

Social Workers and caregivers of foster youth are pertinent in identifying and preventing children from being re-victimized within the child welfare system. Findings from this study can help to identify if social workers are equipped with the proper tools that target being able to address these concerns. Furthermore, it is essential to evaluate training effectiveness in identifying and preventing children from being sexually exploited. The overall purpose of this study is to identify whether social workers are aware of the risk factors and how they are

being addressed. Therefore, the research question is: How prepared are social workers and social work students to identify and provide services to commercially sexually exploited children?

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

This research chapter will examine relevant information that focuses on the needs of children in foster care and residential treatment programs. Each subsection will explore why children are being victimized in foster care and how to prevent child sexual exploitation in foster care homes and residential treatment facilities. This subsection will also identify specific risk factors that impact foster youth and how identifying such factors coincide with the need to educate providers and caretakers on specific topics. Furthermore, this subsection will examine gaps in current prevention strategies to identify what is missing and what is not working. The last section will focus on theoretical approaches such as intersectionality, trauma theory, and ecological model to identify how foster youth are at greater risk of child sexual exploitation.

#### Vulnerabilities

The process of being removed from a familiar environment (their own home) and being placed in a foster care home or residential treatment center places children at risk of victimization (O'Neill, 2018). Research further addresses how children in foster care are easily manipulated, attracting traffickers (O'Neill, 2018). Children who are victims often have a history of trauma, therefore allowing traffickers to take advantage of their vulnerabilities to manipulate victims.



Furthermore, unlike adults, children in foster care are also easily controlled due to their vulnerabilities (Speckman, 2016). Traffickers prey on victims' trauma to portray the role of a protector, which is an unmet need these children seek (Speckman, 2016).

### Homelessness

Homelessness is another risk factor that contributes to the vulnerabilities of children within the foster care system. Children often experience homelessness due to running away (Speckman, 2016). Sexual exploitation following homelessness is linked to a means of survival tactics (Speckman, 2016). Researchers states that youth are recruited directly from out-of-home placements as traffickers know where these placements are located, therefore intentionally targeting vulnerable children (Finigan-Carr, 2019). There has not been enough broad research into why children are running away from group homes and being re-victimized. It has been a concern that, there is also a lack of data regarding trends or frequency of youth who run away from foster care (Latzman et al., 2019). This study will identify the gap between unmet needs within the foster setting that is not being identified or addressed.

It is a concern that due to the lack of supervision in foster care children runaway which leads to homelessness. Due to the trauma history and vulnerabilities of victimized children, there should be a heightened sense of responsibility that ensures children are safe and protected. Many current group homes are less restricted; therefore, children can go AWOL without being

chased. Conner, 2015 states homeless youth involved in child welfare system have also self-reported having negative experiences which include overcrowded homes, no privacy, and feeling unsafe because of behaviors exhibited by other foster youths in the home. This is a concern as there is minimal data or research into why there are no better protocols to assure children are not being re-victimized due to running away. Research states that 22% of youth no longer receiving foster care services also resulted in homelessness (Speckman, 2016).

### Lack of Social Support

Children placed in foster care homes or residential facilities receive less support because they have been removed from their homes (Finigan-Carr et al., 2018). Furthermore, children who are victimized come from exposures to family dysfunction (Finigan-Carr et al., 2018). Due to children being exposed to family dysfunction, this increases the risk of victimization, poor and impulsive decision making, and involvement with negative peer relationships (Finigan-Carr et al., 2018). Research states that the influence of peers is far more significant as most victims reported being recruited by their friends (Curtis et al., 2008). Problematic relationships with caregivers also result in a lack of loving and trusting adult relationships (Speckman, 2016). The lack of social support also ties into concerns regarding a lack of evidence-based intervention and prevention to link how the inability of caregivers in foster care homes or facilities cannot adequately build meaningful relationships with children. Current research addresses how trauma and abandonment contribute to risk factors for victimization or

revictimization, but there is very minimal information linking the connection of relationships with adult caregivers.

### Economic Issues

Although there is minimal research on the correlation between economic issues that contribute to child sexual exploitation of children in foster care, some provide a brief understanding of the effects. Finigan-Carr, 2018 points out several economic factors which contribute to the vulnerabilities of children who are sexually exploited, such as policies, the culture of capitalism, and a lack of awareness within societies and communities. Furthermore, an even broader expansion of the issue is how "forced prostitution and child sex trafficking are directly connected to global inequities of capital law with new viable options in the global economy" (Finigan-Carr, 2019, P.51). Also, studies have shown that children engaging in sexual exploitation are motivated to meet basic needs under these current political and economic systems to ensure independence while disregarding structural disparities (Finigan- Carr, 2019). The current study will aim to identify rather adults working with this at-risk population can identify specific economic issues as a preventative measure against child sexual exploitation. Research in this sector would contribute to a broader, macro-level understanding of this population.

### Poverty

Along with the economic issues contributing to child sexual exploitation, poverty also contributes to this problematic issue. Although poverty has several

contributing factors that would increase the risk of children in foster care, there is limited research on this topic. Research suggests a correlation between limited socioeconomic resources and the risk of trafficking (Finigan-Carr, 2018).

### Economics of Sexual Exploitation

Furthermore, youth involved in sexual exploitation come from environments with high criminal activities, violence, and lower-class neighborhoods (Finigan-Carr, 2018). According to Jaccobson (2015), economics in relation to sexual exploitation is described as an organization which seeks to gain profits. In other words, because sex trafficking or sexual exploitation allows for profits this can be directly associated to economical activities (Jaccobson, 2015). This also ties economics into how the profitable transactions gained from a person being trafficked can strategically base on location therefore, there will be higher profits in a specific area. More research needs to be conducted to further address if a history of poverty prior to placements, or the current socioeconomic status of neighborhoods children are placed in increases the likelihood of children being commercially sexually exploited in foster care homes or residential treatment facilities.

### Job Opportunities

Due to the youth's age this can be a barrier to making money and finding suitable and appropriate employment, subjecting them to sexual exploitation (Finigan-Carr, 2018). This further draws parallel correlation in how financial needs are unmet therefore making a youth more vulnerable. Income and several

other wants or needs appears to be the enticing factors that allow such vulnerable populations to be manipulated and subjected to exploitation. Urrutia (2022), states even former foster youth do not have adequate opportunities to a professional career path that will provide a sustainable income. In a social worker role, it should be imperative that further trainings be provided to discuss the association of how a vulnerable youths income needs being met might deter chances of exploitation.

### Theories Guiding Conceptualization

The theories used to conceptualize the views in this study are intersectionality and trauma theory. The theories are used to gain an understanding of how the identity of a person being a foster youth, along with other characteristics, places them at greater risk of sexual exploitation.

Intersectionality explains how children being in foster care increases risk and vulnerabilities. Intersectionality takes the approach of qualitative research to interpret and understand the individual, which is the research study focus (Atewologun, 2018). Other characteristics such as race, age, and gender also conceptualize intersectionality within this at-risk population (Atewologun, 2018). Such characteristics are described as disadvantages to this particular population, increasing the risk. This study focuses on children, which further explains the intersectionality with age, as research has reported that children as young as 12 have been victims of sexual exploitation (Rand, 2010). Research also states how

race intersects with age, class, and gender, which causes minority girls to be disproportionately victimized (Uclalaw, 2019).

Trauma theory aims to not only explain and interpret an understanding with foster youth but also generalize how negative experiences make foster youth more susceptible to sexual exploitation. Trauma theory is a psychological framework used to understand the effects of traumatic experiences on individuals. It suggests that experiences of violence, abuse, neglect, or other events that threaten one's physical or psychological integrity may have lasting impacts on their mental health and wellbeing (Hebenstreit, 2020). Trauma can occur prior to being a victim of commercial sexual exploitation. Children in foster care are placed because they are victims of abuse or neglect. History of abuse increases the vulnerabilities and risk. Trauma theory also explains another element which is trauma bonding. Trauma bonding is when the child may develop an attachment to the perpetrator based on a history of traumatic experiences (Howes, n.d). For example, children in foster care who may have experienced sexual abuse may have self-blaming and shame characteristics, which allow perpetrators to prey on those vulnerabilities by grooming and being nice prior to being sexually exploited (Howes, n.d). Furthermore, research explains traumatic sexualism, which is when a Child's sexuality prior to maturing is developed at an inappropriate time due to a history of abuse (Howes, n.d). This study will explain the importance of knowing such vulnerabilities and trauma

history to address and approach CSEC while intervening prior to children being placed in foster care and becoming re-victimized.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

This study identifies social workers' and social work students preparedness in identifying and providing prevention and intervention for commercially sexually exploited children. This chapter will provide details regarding the study and how it has been accomplished. The sections covered in this chapter include study design, sampling, data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis.

#### Study Design

The purpose of this study was to evaluate perceptions of social workers and social work students have the necessary skills, knowledge, and training to identify, and provide intervention for Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC). In previous studies, the research identified risk factors and resources for CSEC. However, this study will explore personal and professional barriers and identify practical approaches that directly impact outcomes for CSEC. This study utilized quantitative method to gain perspective and precise analysis through the view of the participants. The study utilized the information provided directly by participants through surveys to identify specific information that participants need to know to prevent and address child sexual exploitation in foster care and treatment programs.



Furthermore, the use of phenomenology to focus on individual knowledge and background in social services was used in the data analysis. A strength of this study is the ability to utilize a population that works directly with commercially sexually exploited children and who will be working with commercially sexually exploited children (MSW students). A limitation would be the participants' ability to interpret their knowledge and provide honest responses that reflect their professional experience and educational background.

### Sampling

The data collected from this study used a convenience sampling method using fellow social workers within the child welfare agency, outside the agency, and fellow MSW students. Any social services worker whom works with foster youth rather they are actively working or previously worked with this population were also invited to participate in the survey. The social workers and MSW students varied in counties and programs. Participants were provided the survey, utilizing direct personal networking outside of county communication to send surveys via personal email, phone numbers, and group messaging chat app (GroupMe). Student participants were recruited directly from the MSW program. MSW students were sent the survey via their student email accounts and group messaging chat app (GroupMe). Researcher compiled a list of potential participants and obtained their personal emails and/or phone numbers and once they agreed to participate their contact preference was shared. Social workers and MSW students voluntarily participated in the self-administered electronic

research survey. Upon request, a letter of support and approval was provided for current social workers participating in the survey. Thirty-five completed the survey.

This particular population was utilized to target individuals who currently or previously work directly with commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC) or who will service the CSEC population in the future. The specific sample of social workers and MSW students will aim to provide an understanding of the interactions this population may have with this particularly vulnerable population and what specific skills they are equipped with to service commercially sexually exploited children. Criteria for selection and participation required participants to have any social work background within a child welfare agency or as a graduate-level MSW student.

#### Data Collection and Instruments

Quantitative data was used in the study and collected from the survey participants. The instrument used was provided by a previous MSW student, Kennisha Lesley. Permission was granted from Kennisha Lesley in order to utilize the questionnaire. Some questions from the original survey were not used as the researcher tried to shorten the survey by only including relevant questions to the hypothesis. Also, the researcher added some of the questions to the survey to assure relevance to the hypothesis. The questionnaire consisted of 27 questions divided into three domains (Appendix C). The first section of the survey assessed social workers and social work students' level of preparedness,

experience, and knowledge of the CSEC population. The second section of the survey assessed social worker's and social work students' perceptions in engaging the CSEC population. These two sections used an ordinal level of measurement to collect the quantitative data with the utilization of open-ended questions, a few yes or no questions but primarily Likert scale questions.

The third section of the survey also consisted of 1 open ended question that aimed to identify current knowledge and interventions that will help to improve interactions and preventative measures with CSEC. Qualitative data was used with a nominal level of measurement for the following question: What barriers exist when engaging with CSEC victims? The other original open-ended questions utilized in this survey were removed to ensure the questions were relevant to the hypothesis.

For quantitative analysis, the following questions were utilized in collecting research; Have you ever worked with a victim of child sexual exploitation?, Can you identify risk factors for the CSEC population?, Are you able to identify and assess current vulnerabilities CSEC are harmed or influenced by?, Are you prepared to engage and interview a child who could have been sexually exploited? All questions used aimed to construct a social network analysis to identify some common themes or areas of concern.

The research question is, what level of preparedness do social workers and MSW students have to identify and provide services to foster youth who have been commercially sexually exploited? The question will aim in the direction

of an exploratory and descriptive approach. Due to the gaps in research regarding effective interventions and assessments that would prevent child sexual exploitation in foster care homes, this study will clearly understand the facts and concerns involved. Furthermore, we will be able to examine a broader understanding of the effectiveness of training and preparedness of participants serving this specific at-risk population. By utilizing descriptive questions, the study will aim to analyze different participant groups based on experience, length of time in position, and relationship or contact with sexually exploited children.

A limitation of this study is the need to understand the barriers or challenges social workers face when working with the CSEC population. The survey also consisted of a non-standardized questionnaire. Therefore, potential participants were provided the survey to review the questions and give feedback before the final revision. A strength of the questionnaire is the target population and how questions are designed to assess essential knowledge and skillset to identify rather social workers are prepared to intervene and provide services to CSEC.

### Procedures

The participants were recruited from the researcher's professional networks (LA County employees), personal networks, and peer relationships through the MSW graduate program. The researcher sought to understand what is already known by social workers and social work students regarding commercially sexually exploited children, as well as their knowledge of services

to intervene and prevent this problem. All participants who agreed to participate in the survey were provided with the questionnaire via an email link, text link, or QR code. Within the email, the following information will be provided: a description of the study and its purpose, informed consent, and completion deadline. The questionnaire link directed the participants to the Qualtrics website, where their responses were recorded. The researcher did not ask any identifying information other than an email response. All participants were informed that participation in the survey was completely voluntary and that no other incentives would be provided. Participants were also advised that the survey was completely anonymous; therefore, no identifying information was collected.

#### Protection of Human Subjects

The participant's identity remained confidential. All surveys were sent via email, or messaging app with an attached informed consent to complete the survey voluntarily, and no identifying information was requested or stored. The participants were never advised as to whom specifically was completing the survey, and the researcher also had no access to any identifying information of any participant who completed the survey once it was completed. The study held no foreseeable risks to the participants and was completely voluntary. After completing the survey, each participant was provided with a debriefing statement. The debriefing statement thanked each participant for their participation, provided a summary and overview of the survey's purpose, and provided a contact email if they have further questions.

## Data Analysis

The survey was compounded into three domains. Data was collected from each participant with the use of Qualtrics and SPSS was used to analyze the descriptive statistics and compare different variables. The scale used descriptive statistics to analyze the demographics and social workers level of preparedness to identify, prevent and provide services to sexually exploited children.

Demographics assisted in descriptive analysis and provided analysis of other factors that influenced the hypothesis. This first domain which consisted of ordinal level of measurement identified if a social worker or social work student's level of preparedness influences their ability to identify and provide services to CSEC. The research will also identify if social workers and students need to be trained better. This will assist in effective prevention and intervention strategies.

## Summary

This study examined the preparedness of social workers and social work students to identify and provide services to commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC). The research can be utilized to gain a broader understanding of the gaps in knowledge and barriers to identifying and intervening with CSEC. Furthermore, the research can also be used to assess the needs of the participants and the CSEC population. The quantitative design was selected because it encompasses a broader understanding of the areas of knowledge and services. The survey utilized all volunteers to complete the questionnaire, and it was then submitted to Qualtrics via the online database. A shared QR code was

provided via email and messaging services communication for further convenience.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

This Chapter provides an overview of the results and the analysis of the research conducted. A detailed report of the collections, descriptive statistics and thematic analysis of the data collected will be provided. This chapter will also summarize the results of the qualitative data collected through the analysis of survey themes such as lack of experience, lack of training, client factors/resistance, and limitations in programs/services. Looking at the demographics can assist in identifying potential barriers that may have influence on the outcomes or background variables.

#### Demographics

The sample size consisted of thirty-five participants gathered through the Qualtrics survey and an analysis was performed using SPSS to examine the preparedness of social workers and social work students regarding identification and provision of services to CSEC. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected from all participants. The demographic characteristics of the survey participants were collected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the sample population. Due to a small number of participants identifying under the job title other and one participant each identifying as a supervisor, adoption worker and dependency investigator these participants were grouped together to qualify the validity of data. The gender distribution of the participants indicated



that 8.6% identified as male, while 91.4% identified as female. Regarding current employment status, 8.6% of participants worked 0-16 hours, 8.6% worked 17-30 hours, and the majority, 82.9%, worked 30 or more hours. Regarding years of experience working with CSEC a standard deviation score of 3.4(4.3) was computed.

The racial composition of the sample was diverse, with 5.7%, identifying as White/Caucasian, 22.9% as African American/Black, 57.1% of Hispanic American, 8.6 % as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 5.7% as mixed race (See Table 1). In terms of education level, 51.4% of participants held an undergraduate degree, 31.4% had a Master of Social Work degree, 11.4% had another master’s degree, 2.9% had a doctoral degree, and 2.9% indicated “other” For the one participant that indicated other, they reported having a BA in Psychology and minor in sociology. See Table 1.

Table 1. *Participant’s Demographics (N=35)*

<b>Table 1</b>			
<i>Sample Characteristics</i>			
Variables	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M (SD)</i>
Age			37.3 (7.2)
Gender			
Male	3	8.6	
Female	32	91.4	
Race			
White	2	5.7	
African American/Black	8	22.9	
Hispanic American/Latinx	20	57.1	
Asian/Pacific Islander	3	8.6	

Mixed Race	2	5.7	
Highest Level of Education			
Undergraduate Degree	18	51.4	
Master's of Social Work	11	31.4	
Other Master's Degree	4	11.4	
Doctoral	1	2.9	
Other			
Years Working in Social Services			8.5 (6)
Years Working w/CSEC Population			3.4 (4.3)
Hours of Work Per Week			
0-16 hours	3	8.6	
17-30 hours	3	8.6	
30+ hours	29	82.9	
<i>Note. N = 35.</i>			

### The Survey

The first section of the survey assessed social workers and social work students' level of preparedness, experience, and knowledge of the CSEC population. The second section of the survey assessed social workers' and social work students' perceptions in engaging the CSEC population. These two sections used an ordinal level of measurement to collect the quantitative data with the utilization of open-ended questions, a few yes or no questions but primarily Likert scale questions. The third section of the survey also consisted of 1 open ended question that aimed to identify current knowledge and interventions that will help to improve interactions and preventative measures with CSEC.

The Likert scaled questions were tested based on the dependent and independent variables from the research hypothesis. Based on the hypothesis, social workers' and social work students' level of preparedness and necessary skills/knowledge/training to identify and provide services to commercially sexually exploited children the dependent variable is preparedness, and the independent variable is knowledge. Two additional variables comfort and training were included to increase validity. In the SPSS software, correlations were conducted between various factors related to working with CSEC. Specific questions were grouped into two categories: "knowledge" (composed of questions 10, 17, and 18) and "comfort" (composed of questions 14, 15, 20, and 23). These questions were deviated in seven variables; years working with CSEC, feeling prepared to engage/interview CSEC, knowledge of CSEC, comfort working with CSEC, provided with training/resources on CSEC, and number of trainings on CSEC completed.

Furthermore, outcomes of the relationships resulted in the following positive relationships. A positive correlation between feeling prepared to engage/interview and assess CSEC (0.9\*\* and 0.8\*\*). A positive correlation between knowledge of CSEC and feeling prepared to assess CSEC (0.8\*\*). A positive correlation between comfort working with CSEC and being provided with training/resources on CSEC (0.8\*\*). A positive correlation between the number of trainings completed on CSEC completed and feeling prepared to assess (0.6\*\*). A positive correlation between years working with CSEC and feeling prepared to

engage/interview CSEC and feeling prepared to assess CSEC. Results also indicate a negative correlation between the number of years working with CSEC and comfort with CSEC. See Table 2.

The negative correlation indicates an interesting relation as it suggests that as social workers or MSW students spend more time working with CSEC, their level of comfort in engaging with this population decreases. There are several factors that might explain this negative correlation. Over time, individuals may become desensitized to the challenges and complexities of working with CSEC, leading to a decreased sense of comfort or sensitivity in addressing their needs. With more experience, individuals may become more aware of the harsh realities and trauma experienced by CSEC, which can impact their level of comfort due to the emotional and ethical challenge involved. Lastly, as social workers encounter more diverse and complex cases over time, they may feel less comfortable due to the intensifying nature of the issues they are facing.

Table 2. *Correlations across variables*

<i>Correlation between Years Working with CSEC, Feeling Prepared, Knowledge, and Training</i>										
Variables	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Years working with CSEC	3.4	4.3	35	1						
2. Feel prepared to engage/interview CSEC	4.7	1.7	34	.3*						
3. Feel prepared to assess CSEC	4.7	1.6	34	.4*	.9**					
4. Knowledge of CSEC	5.6	0.8	35	0.2	.8**	.8**				
5. Comfort working with CSEC	5.2	1.1	35	-0.1	.5**	.5**	.7**			
6. Provided with training/resources on CSEC	4.9	1.6	35	0.3	.8**	.8**	.8**	.4*		

7. Number of trainings on CSEC completed	4.3	3.6	35	0.3	.5**	.6**	.6**	0.3	.7**	1
* $p < .05$ , ** $p < .001$ , two-tailed.										

To further examine the relationship between preparedness and job titles, one way ANOVA tests were performed. The dependent variable in these tests was the combined responses to questions 10, 17, and 18 (related to preparedness) against the job titles: mental health worker, human services worker, continuing services, emergency response, and others. The results indicated no significance between the preparedness variable and job titles, suggesting that a job title did not significantly impact the level of preparedness of individuals in addressing the needs of CSEC. Furthermore, one-way ANOVA was conducted with the dependent variable “knowledge” against all job titles, and no significance was observed. This finding suggests that job titles did not significantly influence the level of knowledge related to commercially sexually exploited children among participants.

In addition, a one-way ANOVA was performed with the variable “trainings” using questions 14 and 15. Question 14, “I have been provided with the training and resources to work with the CSEC population”, yielded a significant result, indicating differences among job titles. Continuing services workers, emergency response workers, and other job titles were provided with more training and resources than mental health workers on CSEC, as evidenced by the significant variation in responses across the titles. Moreover, one-way ANOVA was

conducted with the dependent variable “comfort” against all job titles, and similarly, no significance was observed. This suggests that job titles did not significantly impact the comfort levels of individuals in engaging with and providing services to commercially sexually exploited children.

Overall, the results provide insights into the relationship between job titles and preparedness, knowledge, training, and comfort levels of individuals in addressing the needs of commercially sexually exploited children.

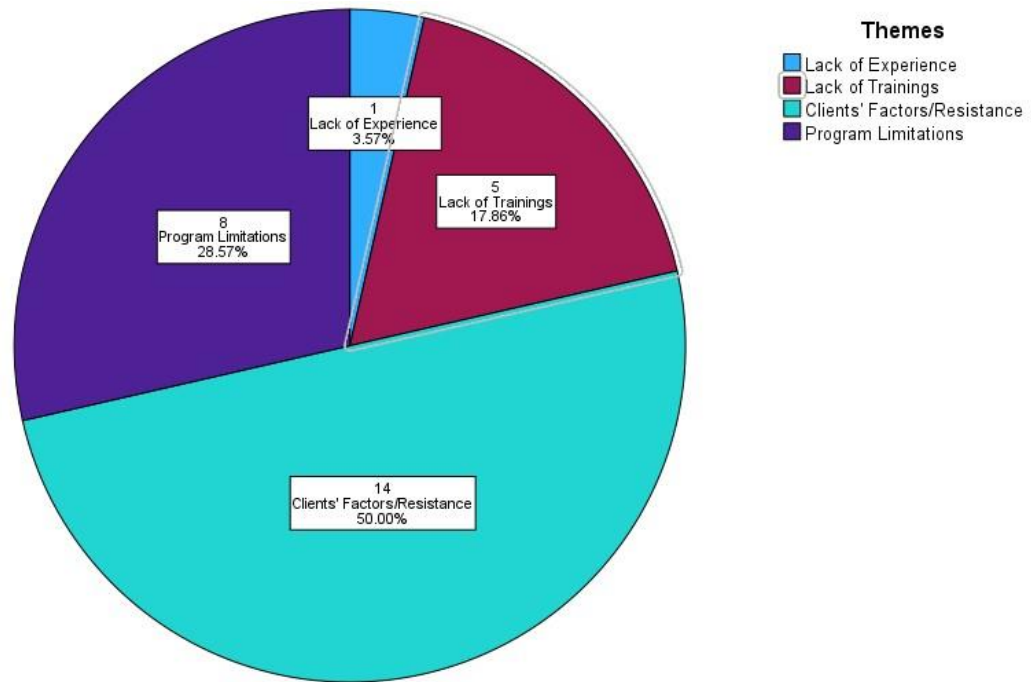
The last domain of the survey consisted of one open-ended question aimed at measuring social workers' current approaches and interventions to improve engagement with commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC). A systematic thematic analysis was utilized to examine the responses provided by the thirty-five participants, with twenty-eight participants completing this section. The responses were grouped into the following themes: lack of experience, lack of training, client's factors/resistance, and program limitations. See Figure 1. The results of the thematic findings reflect the following: lack of experience, 3.57% of the participants indicated a lack of experience in effectively engaging with CSEC, lack of trainings, 17.86% of the participants expressed the need for more comprehensive training to effectively engage and support CSEC, client factors/resistance, 50% of the participants highlighted challenges related to client factors and resistance as a significant barrier to engagement and intervention with CSEC, and program limitations, 28.57% of the participants identified

limitations within existing programs as an obstacle to effectively addressing the needs of CSEC.

The identified themes in the open-ended responses reflect the hypothesis that social workers and social work students may lack the necessary level of preparedness, skills, knowledge, and training to identify and provide services to commercially sexually exploited children. The theme of lack of experience directly aligns with the hypothesis, suggesting a potential lack of practical experience in engaging with and providing services to CSEC. This lack of experience may contribute to a reduced level of preparedness among social workers, impacting their ability to effectively address the needs of CSEC. The theme of lack of trainings emphasizes the need for more comprehensive and targeted training programs. This theme reflects how the current level of training may not be sufficient to equip social workers with necessary skills and knowledge to identify and provide services to CSEC. The theme of client factors/resistance underlines the significance of client-related challenges as a barrier to effective engagement. This theme demonstrates the potential impact of client factors on the preparedness and necessary skills of social workers. It highlights the complex nature of engaging with CSEC and the need for specific strategies to address client-related resistance. Lastly, the theme of program limitations draws attention to systemic challenges with existing programs. This theme reflects the hypothesis by indicating that structural and programmatic limitations may hinder

the level of preparedness and necessary skills of social workers in effectively addressing the needs of CSEC.

Figure 1. Barriers Themes



### Summary

The survey for this research study was conducted using Qualtrics, a widely used online survey platform. Participants were recruited through email invitations and messaging, which included a shareable QR code for easy access



to the survey. A total of 35 responses were recorded, with all 35 participants completing most questions in the quantitative portion of the survey. Additionally, 28 participants completed the qualitative portion of the survey, providing valuable insights through open-ended responses.

The quantitative data provided statistical insights into the relationship between variables such as years of experience, level of knowledge, and effectiveness in engaging with CSEC. The qualitative data captured participants' perspectives on challenges and barriers faced in their work with CSEC, highlighting themes such as lack of experience, inadequate training, client resistance, and program limitations. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data offered a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing participants' preparedness and ability to identify and provide services to commercially sexually exploited children.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

The discussion chapter provides a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the research findings on the preparedness of social workers and social work students in addressing the needs of commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC). This section delves into the implications of the study, practical recommendations for social work practice, and suggestions for policy and program development to enhance the support and intervention strategies for this vulnerable population.

#### Discussion

The study aimed to investigate the preparedness, knowledge, and training of social workers and social work students in identifying and providing services to CSEC. The data gathered through quantitative and qualitative measures revealed valuable insights into the factors that influence participants' ability to engage with and support CSEC. The findings indicated a positive relationship between years of experience, level of knowledge, and effectiveness in engaging with CSEC, highlighting the importance of ongoing training and professional development in this area. Additionally, the thematic analysis of qualitative responses shed light on the challenges faced by participants, such as lack of experience, inadequate training, and program limitations, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions and support mechanisms.

Based on the research findings, practical recommendations for addressing the needs of CSEC include implementing specialized training programs to enhance social workers' skills in identifying and providing services to CSEC, establishing collaborative partnerships with law enforcement, healthcare providers, and community organizations to create a comprehensive support network for CSEC, and developing culturally sensitive interventions that take into account the unique experiences and vulnerabilities of CSEC. Furthermore, to assure social workers are addressing the emotional and therapeutic needs of CSEC it is proposed that there should be more trauma-informed care and mental health services to support the healing and recovery of CSEC. Also, offering individual and group therapy sessions to help CSEC process their experiences and develop coping mechanisms. This further may address the large number of participants' concerns related to client resistance and barriers. Lastly, evaluating and enhancing existing programs to ensure they are responsive to the evolving needs of CSEC.

From a macro perspective there can also be policy suggestions that can improve support and intervention for CSEC. This would include advocating for legislative changes to strengthen protections for CSEC and enhance the enforcement of anti-trafficking laws. Establishing new guidelines and protocols for agencies and organizations working with CSEC to ensure a coordinated and effective response. Lastly, allocating more effective resources and funding to support the development and implementation of policies that prioritize the well-

being and rights of CSEC. It's also equally important to ensure that social workers' and social work students have access and knowledge to such supportive services to assure effective interventions and preventions.

### Limitations of Study Design

The study faced limitations, including sample size constraints, self-report biases, and the use of a cross-sectional design that may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should consider longitudinal studies and larger sample sizes to provide a more robust understanding of the factors influencing the preparedness of social workers and social work students in working with CSEC.

### Recommendations for Social Work

Considering the study findings, recommendations for social work practice and research include continuously updating and enhancing training programs for social workers to ensure they are equipped to effectively engage with a support CSEC. This should include topics such as trauma-informed care, safety planning, and legal considerations. It is also imperative to ensure that interventions and services are culturally competent, considering the diverse backgrounds and experiences of CSEC. Providing language-specific resources and services could also address any barriers related to how social workers connect and engage with CSEC populations. Based on the feedback obtained from the thematic analysis client resistance/factors had the greatest percentage in regard to the

programmatic limitations. Due to this it is highly recommended that there should be an established peer support program where CSEC can connect with peers who have similar experiences, providing emotional support and guidance.

Regarding further research there should be exploration of long-term outcomes of interventions for CSEC and identify best practices in providing holistic care and support. Explore such factors that contribute to resilience and successful outcomes. There should also be research conducted that evaluates the effectiveness of interventions and support programs for CSEC, assessing their impact on mental health, well-being, and long-term recovery. This research can help address the mentioned theme regarding programs as being a limitation to intervention and prevention with CSEC.

Lastly, delving into broader research there could be an expansion of research to community-based and evidenced based interventions being inquired. Bridging the gap between research findings and practice by disseminating research results in accessible formats and collaborating with practitioners to implement evidence-based interventions would be valuable. Lastly, by engaging in community-based participatory research to involve CSEC, advocates, and community members in the research process, ensuring that their voices and perspectives are central to the study. This can be implemented using qualitative research to conduct interviews through individual engagement or participation through collaborative meetings to gain a broader understanding. By implementing these practice and research recommendations, social workers, and

researchers can enhance their support for commercially sexually exploited children, contribute to the development of effective interventions, and advocate for systemic changes to address the root cause of the exploitation and trafficking.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the study underscores the importance of addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by commercially sexually exploited children. By implementing targeted interventions, enhancing training and support programs, and advocating for policy changes, social workers and social work students can play a crucial role in safeguarding the well-being and rights of CSEC. Moving forward, collaborative efforts across multiple sectors are essential to create a comprehensive and sustainable system of support for this vulnerable population.

APPENDIX A  
INFORMED CONSENT

## INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to evaluate whether social workers and social work students have the necessary skills, knowledge, and training to identify, prevent, and provide intervention for Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC). The study is being conducted by Britny Ragland, a graduate student, under the supervision of Dr. Nicole Arkadie, Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at CSUSB.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of the study is to examine if social workers and social work students have the necessary skills, knowledge, and training to identify, prevent, and provide intervention for Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC).

**DESCRIPTION:** Participants will be asked several questions on the knowledge, risk factors, interventions, and barriers surrounding CSEC victims.

**PARTICIPATION:** Your participation in the study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Your responses will remain confidential, and data will be reported in group form only.

**DURATION:** It will take 10 to 15 minutes to complete the survey.



**RISKS:** Although not anticipated, there may be some discomfort in answering some of the questions. You are not required to answer and can skip the question or end your participation.

**BENEFITS:** There will not be any direct benefits to the participants. However, findings from the study will contribute to our knowledge in this area of research.

**CONTACT:** If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Britny Ragland, Student Researcher, anytime at [raglandb@coyote.csusb.edu](mailto:raglandb@coyote.csusb.edu), or Nicole Arkadie, Research Supervisor at (909) 537-7475.

**RESULTS:** Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2024.

I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older to participate in your study, have read and understand the consent document and agree to participate in your study.

APPENDIX B  
DEMOGRAPHICS

Current Social Worker: Yes, No

Years of Experience in Social Work: Fill in - varied

Current Employment Status: Not working, Working, Part-time/On-Call

Age: Fill in - varied

Ethnicity: Caucasian, African American, Latinx, Asian, Mixed, Other

Gender: Male, Female, non-binary/third gender, Other

Education: High School, Undergraduate, MSW, Another Master's Degree, Doctoral,

Other

Years of Experience Working with CSEC: Fill in – varied

Years of Field/Practice with CSEC: Fill in - varied

APPENDIX C  
SURVEY

## **Social Workers Engaging the CSEC population**

### **SW's Background, Experience, and Readiness to engage the CSEC population**

1. Is your current profession a social worker/social work practitioner?

a. Yes

b. No

If yes please select

a. Mental Health Worker

b. Human Services Worker

c. Adoption Worker

d. Dependency Investigator

e. Continuing Services/ Emergency response

f. Supervisors

g. Other

2. How many years of past experience do you have in social services?(Please specify in number of years):

3. What is your current employment status?

a. 0-16 (hours)

b. 17-30 (hours)

c. 30 + (hours)

d. on call

4. What is your current age in years? (Please specify in years):

5. What race(s) do you identify with?
- a. White/Caucasian/Euro-American
  - b. African American/Black
  - c. Hispanic American/Latinx
  - d. Asian/Pacific Islander
  - e. Native American
  - f. Mixed Race/Biracial/Triracial
  - g. Other (Please specify):
6. What is your gender?
- a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. non-binary / third gender
  - d. Other (Please specify):
  - e. I prefer not to answer
7. What is your highest achieved education level?
- a. High School Graduate or Equivalency Exam
  - b. Some College/ Associates Degree
  - c. Undergraduate graduate
  - d. Master of Social Work (MSW)

e. Another Master's Degree

f. Doctoral

g. Other (Please specify):

The next series of questions will focus on the commercially sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) which is a commercial transaction that involved the sexual exploitation of a child, or person under the age of consent.

8. How long have you worked with children that are at-risk to be sexually exploited or are victims of sexual exploitation? (Please specify in years);

9. How many years of field/practice have you had working with the CSEC population? (Please specify in years):

10. When I see the term CSEC, I have an understanding of the population it describes.

a. Strongly disagree

b. Disagree

c. Somewhat disagree

d. Neither agree or disagree

e. Somewhat agree

f. Agree

g. Strongly agree

11. I can identify risk factors for the CSEC population.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Somewhat disagree
- d. Neither agree or disagree
- e. Somewhat agree
- f. Agree
- g. Strongly agree

12. I am able to identify and assess current vulnerabilities CSEC are harmed or influenced by.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Somewhat disagree
- d. Neither agree nor disagree
- e. Somewhat agree
- f. Agree
- g. Strongly agree

13. I have been provided with training and resources to work with the CSEC population.



- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Somewhat disagree
- d. Neither agree nor disagree
- e. Agree
- f. Strongly agree

14. How many trainings about Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC) have you completed? Please specify using numbers:

15. I found these trainings and/or resources useful to my work with clients.

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. I did not have training

**Start of Block: Social Worker's perceptions of engaging the CSEC population**

16. I feel prepared to engage and interview a child who could have been sexually exploited.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Somewhat disagree
- d. Neither agree nor disagree
- e. Somewhat agree

f. Agree

g. Strongly agree

17. I feel prepared to conduct an assessment of a child who could have been sexually exploited.

a. Strongly disagree

b. Disagree

c. Somewhat disagree

d. Neither agree nor disagree e.

Somewhat agree

f. Agree

g. Strongly agree

18. Is there a specific protocol for investigating CSEC within the agency you currently work for?

a. Yes

b. No

c. I do not know

19. When engaging CSEC victims, have you worked with a client who appeared to be withholding information.

a. Yes

b. No

20. When engaging and assessing a client, I am comfortable asking a client if they are forced to do anything that they have not wanted to do or perform.

- a. Strongly disagree
- B. Disagree
- c. Somewhat disagree
- d. Neither agree nor disagree
- e. Somewhat agree
- f. Agree
- g. Strongly agree

21. I have received pushback or unresponsiveness from CSEC victims when engaging them.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Somewhat disagree
- d. Neither agree nor disagree
- e. Somewhat agree
- f. Agree
- g. Strongly agree

22. I am aware that some living situations lead to higher risk of child sexual exploitation.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Somewhat disagree

d. Neither agree nor disagree

e. Somewhat agree

f. Agree

g. Strongly agree

23. I feel comfortable providing services to children whom have experienced or whom are at risk of sexual exploitation

a. Strongly disagree

b. Disagree

c. Somewhat disagree

d. Neither agree nor disagree

e. Somewhat agree

f. Agree

g. Strongly agree

24. I am aware of the appropriate interventions needed when a child is reporting sexual exploitation.

a. Strongly disagree

b. Disagree

c. Somewhat disagree

d. Neither agree nor disagree

e. Somewhat agree

f. Agree

g. Strongly agree

25. I feel my agency provides adequate services to sexually exploited children.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Somewhat disagree
- d. Neither agree nor disagree
- e. Somewhat agree
- f. Agree
- g. Strongly agree

26. I am aware of services in my area that focus on CSEC population.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Somewhat disagree
- d. Neither agree nor disagree
- e. Somewhat agree
- f. Agree
- g. Strongly agree

**SWs current approaches & interventions to improve engagement with CSEC**

27. In your own words, what barriers exist when engaging CSEC victims? Please specify:

Developed by Kennisha Lesley, Improving Social Worker Engagement with CSEC

APPENDIX D  
IRB APPROVAL

May 30, 2023

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Administrative/Exempt Review Determination

Status: Determined Exempt

IRB-FY2023-47

Nicole Arkadie Britny Ragland

CSBS - Social Work

California State University, San Bernardino

5500 University Parkway

San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Nicole Arkadie Britny Ragland:

Your application to use human subjects, titled “Commercially Sexually Exploited

Children Targeted Within Social

Services” has been reviewed and determined exempt by the Chair of the Institutional

Review Board (IRB) of CSU,

San Bernardino. An exempt determination means your study had met the federal

requirements for exempt status

under 45 CFR 46.104. The CSUSB IRB has weighed the risks and benefits of the study to

ensure the protection of

human participants.

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