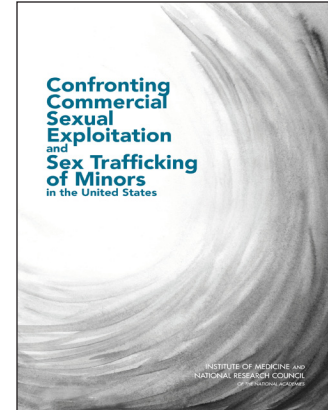


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# Confronting Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Minors in the United States



**Every day in the United States**, children and adolescents are victims of commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking. Despite the serious and long-term consequences for victims as well as their families, communities, and society, efforts to prevent, identify, and respond to these crimes are largely under supported, inefficient, uncoordinated, and unevaluated.

With support from the Department of Justice's (DOJ) Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council formed a committee to conduct a study of these crimes as they affect U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents of the United States under age 18. The committee was asked to make recommendations concerning strategies for responding to commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors in the United States, new legislative approaches, and a research agenda.

In its report, *Confronting Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Minors in the United States*, the committee concludes that efforts to prevent, identify, and respond to commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors in the United States require better collaborative approaches that build upon the capabilities of people and entities from a range of sectors. In addition, such efforts will need to confront demand and the individuals who commit and benefit from these crimes.

**In its report, the committee concludes that efforts to prevent, identify, and respond to commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors in the United States require better collaborative approaches that build upon the capabilities of people and entities from a range of sectors.**

## Overlooked and Underreported Crimes

Although commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors refer to a range of crimes, for its study, the committee focused primarily on trafficking

for purposes of prostitution, exploiting a minor through prostitution, and survival sex—which is the exchange of sex or sexual acts for money or something of value.

The committee based its deliberations on three fundamental principles: that these crimes should be understood as acts of abuse and violence against children and adolescents, that minors who are commercially sexually exploited or trafficked for sexual purposes should not be considered criminals, and that identification of victims and survivors as well as any interventions should do no further harm to these victims.

Numerous factors contribute to a lack of understanding and awareness of commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors in the United States. These crimes may be overlooked, as they often occur at the margins of society and behind closed doors; victims may not come forward; and those who routinely interact with victims and survivors may lack awareness or tools to properly identify and assist victims. Therefore, there is no reliable estimate of the incidence or prevalence of these crimes, and many victims go without help.

In order to better prevent, identify, and respond to commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors in the United States, the committee recommends increased awareness and understanding, strengthening of the law's response, strengthening of research to advance understanding and to support the development of prevention and intervention strategies, support for multi-sector and interagency collaboration, and creation of a digital information-sharing platform. Whenever possible, the committee urges leveraging of existing resources to implement these recommendations.

### **Increasing Awareness**

Many professionals and individuals who interact with youth—such as teachers, health care

providers, child welfare professionals, and law enforcement—are unaware that these crimes occur and often are ill-equipped with how to respond to victims, survivors, and those at risk.

The committee recommends that OJJDP—in partnership with the Departments of Education (DOE) and Health and Human Services (HHS)—engage relevant sectors in developing, implementing, and evaluating training activities for professionals and other individuals who routinely interact with children and adolescents on how to identify and assist victims and survivors. In addition, public awareness campaigns need to be developed with special focus on increasing awareness among children and adolescents to help them avoid becoming victims. These training activities and campaigns should be carefully designed to engage the public and service providers to act on the behalf of victims and survivors without doing further harm.

### **Strengthening Laws, Improving Understanding and Prevention**

Minors who are victims of commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking in the United States can still be arrested, detained, and given permanent records as offenders. The committee supports laws that redirect young victims of these crimes from criminal or juvenile justice systems to the child welfare system or other agencies—and recommends that all national, state, local, tribal, and territorial jurisdictions develop such laws and policies.

In addition, despite the diligence of law enforcement and prosecutors as well as laws in every state enabling prosecution of individuals who purchase sex with a minor, function as exploiters or traffickers, or otherwise sexually exploit children and adolescents, individuals guilty of these acts have largely escaped accountability. The committee therefore recommends that all national, state, local, tribal, and territorial

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jurisdictions review, strengthen, and implement laws that hold exploiters, traffickers, and solicitors accountable for commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors. In particular, these jurisdictions should consider how these laws can be used to deter demand and prevent commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors.

There is an extremely limited evidence base related to these crimes, particularly related to areas of prevention and intervention, and the committee found much variability in the quality of current research in these areas. The committee concludes that it would not be useful to devote a large amount of resources to refining estimates of the overall prevalence of these problems. Instead, the committee recommends that DOJ, HHS, and DOE collaborate and partner with others—such as the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, academic and research institutions, and foundations and nongovernmental organizations—to implement a national research agenda with the following aims:

- advancing knowledge and understanding of commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors in the United States;
- developing effective, youth-centered, multi-sector interventions designed to prevent minors from becoming victims or exploiters and to assist victims; and
- forming strategies and methodologies for evaluating the effectiveness of prevention and intervention laws, policies, and programs.

### **Collaboration and an Information-Sharing Platform**

No one sector, discipline, or area of practice can fully understand or respond effectively to the complex problems surrounding commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors. Therefore, participation from and cooperation among numerous individuals and entities—including victim and support service providers, health and mental health care providers, legislators, law enforcement personnel, prosecutors, public defenders, educators, and the commercial sector—is required.

The committee recommends that the U.S. Coordinating Council on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, which includes a number of federal agencies, in partnership with national, state, local, tribal, and territorial government and nongovernmental entities, should develop guidelines on and provide technical assistance to support multi-sector collaboration and information sharing.

In order to better share information, the committee recommends that OJJDP create and maintain a digital information-sharing platform to deliver reliable, real-time information about how to prevent, identify, and respond to commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors in the United States. For increased effectiveness, OJJDP should partner with an independent, unbiased entity with robust technological capabilities to create and maintain this platform.



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## Conclusion

A nation that is unaware of these problems or disengaged from solutions unwittingly contributes to the ongoing abuse of minors. If acted upon in a coordinated and comprehensive manner, the committee's recommendations can help advance and strengthen the nation's emerging efforts to prevent, identify, and respond to commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors in the United States. 

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