



Child Sex Trafficking and Commercial Sexual Exploitation

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Keywords

- Sex trafficking • Commercial sexual exploitation • Trauma-informed care
- Health care • Health care professional

Key points

- Child sex trafficking/commercial sexual exploitation (CST/CSEC) is associated with numerous physical and mental health consequences, and health care professionals (HCP) in a variety of settings are likely to encounter exploited youth.
- Spontaneous disclosure of exploitation by the victim to the HCP is not common so the provider must be attuned to social, behavioral, and physical risk factors, and possible indicators of exploitation.
- A trauma-informed, rights-based approach to patient care is helpful. Key elements of this approach include fostering a sense of safety, demonstrating respect, maintaining transparency, showing sensitivity to trauma triggers, obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality and privacy, and engaging with the patient in a way that is free of bias and discrimination.
- A trauma-informed approach may be embedded in all aspects of the medical visit, from gathering the medical history in a sensitive manner, to obtaining informed consent for all steps of the examination and diagnostic evaluation, to engaging the patient in developing a safety plan and identifying appropriate resources in the community.

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INTRODUCTION

A 15-year-old transgender girl is told to leave home. While living on the streets she exchanges sex to pay for hormone treatment. A 13-year-old suburban girl is seduced by an older man she met online. He convinces her that before they can build a wonderful life together they need to get some money and they can do that if she agrees to have sex with some men he knows. A 12-year-old boy from El Salvador flees the violence in his home country, migrates to the United States, and cannot locate his relatives. He ends up living on the street and having to exchange sex to obtain money for shelter and food (survival sex).

In the United States, the terms “child sex trafficking” (CST) and the “commercial sexual exploitation of children” (CSEC) describe similar phenomena: the engagement of a child (less than 18 years of age) in any sexual activity that involves the exchange of something of perceived value (eg, money, food, shelter, luxury items, drugs) [1–3]. This may involve prostitution (with or without the involvement of a third-party controller), producing child sexual exploitation materials [4] (formerly referred to as child pornography), sexual exploitation in the context of travel and tourism [4] (formerly referred to as sex tourism), the mail-order-bride trade and early marriage, and performing in sexual venues [3]. Importantly, neither CST nor CSEC require the presence of force, fraud, or coercion, although these elements are often demonstrable [5–8]. Similarly, neither requires movement/transportation of a victim.

Accurately estimating the incidence and prevalence of a public health problem is important but these statistics are elusive for CST/CSEC because of the criminal nature of the activity, lack of a centralized database, differences in interpretation of definitions, underrecognition of exploited persons by authorities [9], and underreporting by victims^a themselves [3,10]. Globally, the International Labor Organization estimates that approximately 4.8 million persons are victims of child sexual exploitation or forced adult sexual exploitation (excluding forced marriage); 21% of these are children. Of note, boys and transgender youth are likely underrecognized, and this may distort total estimates and proportions of victims based on gender [11–14].

Child victims may be trafficked/exploited within their own countries (domestic trafficking) or in nearby or distant countries (international trafficking). Buyers, themselves, may travel to close or distant locales to exploit children, or may use the Internet to reach their victims. A 9-year-old girl in the Philippines may perform sex acts in front of her home webcam at the behest of her mother and the American “buyer” who has purchased her time and can dictate the acts she performs (live web-streaming). In short, globalization, improvements in transportation, and development of the Internet facilitate

^a“Victim” is used here in its objective, legal sense as indicating a person who has been harmed as a result of some event or action or who has suffered because of someone else’s actions. It does not refer to how the person may feel or perceive himself or herself as a result of the events and is not intended to be used to label that person.

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