



An evaluation of a child welfare training program on the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC)



Jennifer McMahon-Howard*, Birthe Reimers

Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA, United States

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ABSTRACT

With the growing awareness of the nature and scope of the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) in the United States, a few state child welfare agencies have started to develop and implement training on CSEC for their social service staff. Since other state child welfare agencies may adopt a similar training model, it is important to evaluate the effectiveness of these CSEC trainings. Therefore, in the present study, we used a randomized, control group design to evaluate the effectiveness of a CSEC webinar training program for child protective service (CPS) employees. We discuss our findings and make recommendations for child welfare agencies interested in providing CSEC training to their staff. Given the lack of sophisticated research evaluating the effectiveness of child welfare training programs, in general, and CSEC training programs, more specifically, this study fills a gap in the literature and offers a training model that could be replicated with child protection systems in other states.

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1. Introduction

There is a critical need to evaluate child welfare training programs. While child welfare agencies spend a considerable amount of time, money, and effort training their staff on how to address a number of social problems (i.e., child abuse and neglect, mental illness, poverty, substance abuse, etc.), there is very little research evaluating the effectiveness of these trainings (Collins, Amodeo, & Clay, 2007). As Collins (2008) notes, child welfare “training programs are repeatedly delivered without adequate empirical evidence of their effectiveness” (p. 241).

Even when training evaluations are conducted, they usually lack the content and methodological rigor needed to satisfy the requirements for publication in peer-reviewed journals. In a study of training evaluation approaches used by child welfare agencies in 47 states, Collins (2008) found that six states did very little to evaluate their trainings, ten states relied on simple satisfaction forms, sixteen states utilized pretest–posttest questionnaires measuring participants’ self-perceptions of their knowledge and skills immediately before and after the training, five states conducted follow-up evaluations (i.e., three to six months after the training), and ten states performed more extensive evaluations. There were no evaluations of child welfare trainings that utilized a randomized, control group design.

Since child welfare staff is trained to protect children from abuse and exploitation, we must ensure that the training that they receive is effective in providing them with the knowledge and skills needed to protect these vulnerable children. Since many child welfare agencies may lack the time and resources needed to conduct sophisticated training evaluations (Collins et al., 2007), child welfare agencies can benefit from working with a university partner to conduct these evaluations. In this article, we present the results of such an evaluation. Specifically, the first author partnered with a child welfare agency and other government and nonprofit groups to conduct an evaluation of a training designed to improve child protective service (CPS) employees’ beliefs and knowledge about the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC).

2. Background

For over a decade, child and victim advocates have worked to raise awareness about CSEC (Boxill & Richardson, 2007), which is defined as the “exploitation of children entirely, or at least in part, for financial or other economic reasons” (Estes & Weiner, 2001, p. 10). Since prostituted youth were primarily viewed and processed through the criminal justice system as juvenile delinquents, these advocates pointed out that many CSEC victims end up being arrested for prostitution or a related offense instead of being provided with needed services. Therefore, the initial CSEC awareness efforts focused on encouraging law enforcement agencies to view and treat these youth as victims instead of offenders (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2010). As a result, we are

* Corresponding author at: Kennesaw State University, 1000 Chastain Road, MD 2204, Kennesaw, GA, USA. Tel.: +1 678 797 2643; fax: +1 770 499 3423.

E-mail address: jmcmaho7@kennesaw.edu (J. McMahon-Howard).

starting to see a shift toward conceptualizing CSEC as a unique form of child maltreatment (Mitchell et al., 2010). With this growing awareness of CSEC, states have passed new laws that provide tougher punishments for traffickers and exploiters, and victim assistance programs have been established to help CSEC victims (Todres, 2010).

The key to prosecuting CSEC cases and assisting victims, however, is being able to identify the victims. Since a large percentage of CSEC victims have a history of involvement with CPS prior to entry into CSEC (Estes & Weiner, 2001), CPS employees are in a unique position to identify CSEC victims as well as children 'at risk' for CSEC. Therefore, more recently, some CSEC awareness efforts have been focusing on providing CSEC awareness trainings for CPS employees. Although child welfare agencies in a few states, such as Massachusetts, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, and Connecticut, have led the way in training their social service staff to screen for CSEC (Connecticut Department of Children and Families, 2012; Kaufka Walts, French, Moore, & Ashai, 2011; Piening & Cross, 2012; Shared Hope International, End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography, Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT-USA), & the Protection Project of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, 2006), "this process has not been adopted by all state child welfare agencies" (Fong & Cardoso, 2010, p. 314). As the child protection system is already involved in the lives of these youth, it is important for all CPS agencies to train personnel on the specific CSEC risk factors to look for because this can have a significant impact along the continuum of prevention and intervention.

2.1. CSEC in the United States

Due to the underground nature of CSEC, it is difficult to get a reliable estimate of the scope of CSEC in the United States. The most widely cited estimate is that approximately 300,000 children are *at risk* for commercial sexual exploitation each year in the United States (Estes & Weiner, 2001). CSEC includes child pornography, the prostitution of minors, and child sex trafficking. Although there is some debate over the conceptualization of CSEC and the true extent of the problem (Marcus et al., 2012), there has been an increase in research on CSEC in the United States over the past several years. This research indicates that while a small proportion of CSEC victims are children who are kidnapped and/or sold to a pimp/trafficker, the majority of CSEC victims in the United States are children who are sexually abused at home and end up being forced or recruited into prostitution and/or pornography (Albanese, 2007). In some cases, the sexual abuse of the child is photographed and/or videotaped and sold as child pornography. In other cases, the child is prostituted by a parent or caregiver. The largest proportion of cases, however, are abused children who run away from home to try to escape the abuse; these children are often recruited into pornography and prostitution off the street by pimps and/or same age peers (Albanese, 2007; Curtis, Terry, Dank, Dombrowski, & Khan, 2008; Estes & Weiner, 2001).

The average age of entry into CSEC is between 11 and 15 years old (Curtis et al., 2008; Estes & Weiner, 2001). Researchers have identified a number of factors that put children at high risk for CSEC. These risk factors include poverty, family dysfunction, physical and/or sexual abuse, parental substance abuse, personal substance abuse, school failure, and prior involvement with CPS (Estes & Weiner, 2001; Fong & Cardoso, 2010; Mitchell, Jones, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2011; Reid, 2011). Runaway and homeless youth are at the highest risk for CSEC. Abused girls are especially at risk for "running away, initiating substance use at earlier ages, and higher levels of sexual denigration of self/others," which, in turn, increases the likelihood of prostitution as a minor (Reid, 2011, p. 146). While some engage in 'survival sex' out on the streets, many

of the girls end up under the control of a pimp or trafficker (Albanese, 2007; Curtis et al., 2008; Estes & Weiner, 2001).

Researchers agree that girls are more likely than boys to be exploited by pimps and traffickers (Curtis et al., 2008; Estes & Weiner, 2001). While some pimps and traffickers kidnap, rape, and then force the girls into prostitution, others offer these vulnerable girls false promises of love, affection, and safety (Curtis et al., 2008; Estes & Weiner, 2001; Lloyd, 2011; Reid, 2011). That is, "traffickers often present themselves as caring and strong boyfriends who promise to rescue minors from abuse or trouble" (Reid, 2011, p. 147). After several weeks or months of providing them with a place to stay and buying them food, clothes, jewelry, etc., the boyfriends/pimps tell the girls that they need to start bringing in some money and they start exploiting the girls through prostitution. Instead of being protected from abuse, many of these girls end up being physically and mentally abused by pimps and customers (Curtis et al., 2008; Estes & Weiner, 2001; Lloyd, 2011).

While all forms of CSEC involve some type of child physical and/or sexual abuse, it is important for law enforcement and social service providers to understand that the effects of CSEC victimization are unique. Therefore, CSEC victims may require specialized services (Fong & Cardoso, 2010). Service providers who work with minor domestic sex trafficking victims recognize that these are victims of sexual abuse, but they also report that the level of trauma these victims experience is much greater (Clawson & Goldblatt Grace, 2007). In addition to experiencing physical health problems (e.g., broken bones, sexually transmitted diseases, malnutrition, etc.), commercially sexually exploited children also experience a number of mental health problems (e.g., anxiety, fear, and/or post-traumatic stress disorder). They also engage in self-destructive behaviors (e.g., drug/alcohol abuse, suicide attempts, etc.) and struggle with developing healthy relationships and a new identity outside of "the Life" (Clawson & Goldblatt Grace, 2007). Supporting these findings, Heilemann and Santhiverran (2011) reviewed the literature on the hardships experienced by prostituted girls and found that "teenage girls involved in prostitution suffer from sexual and physical assaults, substance abuse, health problems, post-traumatic stress disorder, social stigmatization, and isolation" (p. 57).

Furthermore, the effects of CSEC victimization are compounded by having multiple perpetrators (Fong & Cardoso, 2010). Prostituted children are victimized by pimps and traffickers who force or coerce them to engage in prostitution and by the multiple "johns" who purchase them for sex. Similarly, children whose sexual abuse is photographed/videotaped and distributed to consumers of child pornography are victimized by the person(s) who sexually abused them and they are revictimized by those who purchased/viewed the images of their abuse.

2.2. CSEC in Georgia

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (2005) identified Atlanta, Georgia, as one of the 14 cities in the United States with the highest number of CSEC cases. This was no surprise to a coalition of women in Atlanta who came together in 2000 in response to growing concerns about the number of CSEC cases in Fulton County, Georgia (Boxill & Richardson, 2007). This coalition of women in Atlanta successfully raised awareness about CSEC and lobbied the legislature to change the offense of pandering a child from a misdemeanor to a felony. Non-profit organizations, such as the Juvenile Justice Fund (JJF),¹ joined in the efforts to raise awareness, lobby for changes in the law, provide CSEC training to law enforcement and community members, and provide specialized

¹ Juvenile Justice Fund recently changed its name to youthSpark (youthSpark, 2012).

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