Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Maine

Policy Recommendations for Prevention and Intervention

Committee on the
Commercial Sexual Exploitation
of Children in Maine

Prepared by the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault

2025

Acknowledgments

The Committee would like to express gratitude to numerous individuals, organizations, and entities for their support of this project.

There are many ways to approach the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) prevention and intervention, and we intentionally sought a variety of perspectives to produce balanced recommendations. As such, while all the listed partners contributed ideas, research, and/or time spent reviewing draft reports, not all the recommendations will reflect everyone's views. However, we hope that by seeking a diversity of opinions, we have fostered a collaborative, inclusive, and transparent process that is more likely to produce effective and widely supported solutions to the issue at hand.

Report Author

Carlie Fischer, Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault

Report Advisory Committee

The following people participated on the Report Advisory Committee from November 2023 to November 2024. They formed a plan to write the report, engaged with their networks to bring in critical perspectives, made recommendations, and reviewed drafts of the report. A more thorough description of the Report Advisory Committee's activities can be found on page 25.

Carlie Fischer, MECASA, Committee Chair
Alicia Hunter, DHHS Office of Child and Family Services, Committee Chair
Amanda Chambers, Rape Response Services
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Samantha Marquis, Children's Advocacy Center of Kennebec & Somerset Counties
Tricia Grant, Just Love Worldwide

Contributing Community Members

The Report Advisory Committee sought the expertise of the people listed below to form recommendations. This group proposed recommendations specific to their professional discipline (for example, as healthcare providers, attorneys, or teachers) and/or lived experience. A more thorough description of the Contributing Community Members' activities can be found on page 25.

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Alison Grey, Catherine Cutler Institute
Alison Small, Shaw House
Amina Hassan, Her Safety Net
Ariel Ricci, Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous & Tribal Populations
Beverly Hubbard, New Beginnings
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Brynn Cote, Community Care
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Laura Mitchell, Maine Affordable Housing Coalition
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Melissa Brennan, Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project
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Nuna Gleason, Wounded Healers International
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Finally, and perhaps most importantly, **we would like to thank the survivors** who contributed to this report. Sharing stories of lived experiences with childhood trauma and violence can be painful and complicated work. Please know that **we appreciate your labor, we respect your leadership, and we are committed to bringing these recommendations to life** to ensure that we do better for the next generation of youth.

Table of Contents

Introduction

This report was prepared pursuant to the resolve resulting from the 131st Legislature's LD 1092, an Act to Establish an Ad Hoc Committee to Address the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children. The Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault and the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Child and Family Violence formed a coalition of survivors, experts in the anti-trafficking field, and community members from diverse backgrounds to develop a set of recommendations aimed at both prevention and intervention.

Our recommendations are grounded in a public health approach to exploitation prevention. This framework operates on the premise that effective strategies can prevent exploitation before it occurs by fostering conditions in which it cannot thrive. In our efforts, we have ensured that our recommendations focus on change at the individual, relational, community, and societal levels. By taking this comprehensive, holistic approach, we aspire to effect meaningful and sustainable change that promotes safety, happiness, and wellness for all Mainers.

Please note, this report reflects the work and recommendations of contributors within and outside of state government. It does not reflect policy commitments of the Maine Department of Health and Human Services or Office of Child and Family Services and further does not confer support from the Executive Branch for specific legislative initiatives. Policy proposals will be reviewed and commented on by the Department as they arise.

Overview of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children

The commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is a serious and pervasive issue that affects youth across the globe, including those living in Maine. This complex problem encompasses various forms of sexual exploitation driven by profit motivation, systemic oppression, and a desire to exert power and control. CSEC has far-reaching implications, not only for the survivors but also for their families and communities. Understanding the nature of CSEC, its legal context, and its impacts is essential for effective prevention and response.

What is the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children?

In broad terms, CSEC refers to the sexual abuse or exploitation of minors for financial gain.

Relationship between CSEC and human trafficking

CSEC is often described as an "umbrella term" that encompasses various forms of sexual exploitation, with human trafficking being a notable example. As such, not all forms of CSEC are human trafficking, but human trafficking of minors is always CSEC.

Human trafficking is usually charged as a federal crime, but it can also fall under state jurisdiction. The federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 defines "severe forms of sex trafficking in persons" as any action involving the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of an individual for the purpose of engaging in a commercial sex act. This occurs when the commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or when the individual involved is under 18 years of age (22 USC §7102). Similarly, Maine's aggravated sex trafficking statute addresses "knowingly promoting prostitution by compelling someone to enter into, engage in, or remain in prostitution." It also specifically mentions promoting prostitution of minors,

as well as promoting prostitution of individuals with a mental disability that significantly impairs their ability to understand the nature of the conduct (17 MRS §852).

Other activities under the CSEC "umbrella"

Determining whether a specific situation meets the legal definition of human trafficking often requires additional information and careful consideration of the circumstances involved. It is also possible that law enforcement might choose to pursue charges for a different crime within a trafficking scenario (e.g. assault, sexual abuse of a minor), simply given the difficulty and complexity involved with securing a trafficking prosecution. Regardless of how a situation is classified, if there is any form of exploitation, the youth is likely eligible for services and may need or want support.

Examples of CSEC that might not be prosecuted as trafficking include the commercial production of child sexual abuse materials, livestreams of minors engaged in sexual activity, early marriages, and youth performing in adult entertainment venues.[1]

Under Maine law, specific examples of CSEC include:

- Sexual exploitation of a minor – an adult engaging in sexual conduct with a minor, knowing it will be filmed and distributed for profit (17 MRS §282) and
- Dissemination of sexually explicit material – an adult selling explicit images of minors (17 MRS §283).

The criminal penalties for CSEC offenses vary depending on the age of the minor involved, with more severe penalties for younger victims. For example, aggravated sex trafficking in Maine is categorized as a Class B crime for minors aged 15 to 17, while it is escalated to a Class A crime for minors aged 14 or younger.

Overlap between nonsexual labor exploitation and sexual violence

People often discuss commercial sexual exploitation and non-sexual labor exploitation in separate contexts, typically viewing labor exploitation as a less urgent issue. However, it is important to recognize that all forms of exploitation arise from similar dynamics of power, control, structural inequities, and profit motivation.

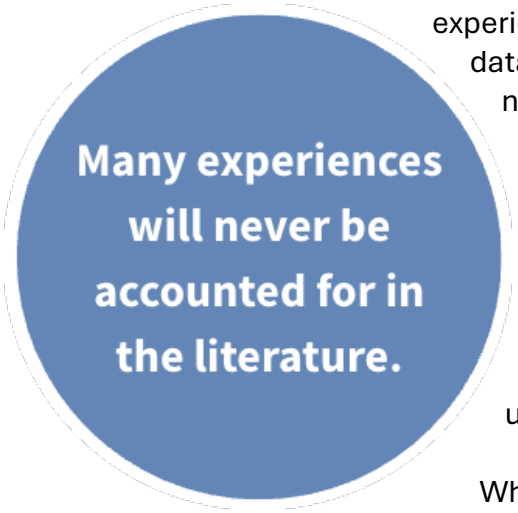
Labor exploitation can occur in any industry, but it is particularly prevalent in sectors with minimal regulation and oversight, such as agriculture, construction, domestic work, and in illicit economies, like drug trafficking. In these environments, individuals may face inhumane working conditions, coercion, and threats. We must address labor exploitation with the same urgency as commercial sexual exploitation because both experiences are harmful and widespread. Further, focusing solely on sexual exploitation may lead to the stigmatization and sensationalizing of sex, while overlooking the complexities and severity

of labor exploitation. Finally, we must acknowledge that individuals in labor scenarios can also encounter severe forms of workplace injuries, such as falls or chemical/pesticide exposure, and abuse, including sexual violence like harassment or assault.

By broadening the conversation to encompass exploitation across all industries, we can better support individuals and communities, recognize diverse experiences, and develop more effective advocacy strategies to combat all forms of exploitation. As such, we wrote this report with youth labor exploitation survivors in mind, and nearly all recommendations will benefit this population.

Scope of the Issue

There is a notable lack of formal data on the prevalence of CSEC in Maine. People who are invested in this issue understand that there is a lot we can learn about this issue by speaking directly with survivors and the people who work with them. These groups consistently state that this issue is greatly underreported, and we know that many experiences will never be accounted for in the available data and literature; the fruits of such conversations are nuanced and hard to document. This is problematic because it is challenging to secure resources and effectively assess the impact of existing programs without a clear understanding of trends and the true scale of the issue. This situation perpetuates a cycle of invisibility and inaction. Therefore, it is essential to invest in high-quality, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive research to better understand this issue and support survivors.



While it is important to emphasize that available data is limited, we do have some valuable information. By examining formal assessments, service provider data, and law enforcement data, we can begin to communicate the magnitude of the issue in Maine.

Formal research

Several studies shed light on Mainers' experiences with commercial sexual exploitation. One notable example was conducted in 2012 at Preble Street Teen Services, which is a Portland-based program for youth aged 12-24 experiencing homelessness. This study focused specifically on respondents' experiences with CSEC. Researchers found that 24% of respondents reported they had been offered substances in exchange for sexual activity with a stranger, and 26% reported they had been asked by someone to have sex with a stranger for payment.[2]

Two other, larger-scale reports—the 2015 Maine Human Trafficking Needs Assessment and the 2022 Maine Crime Victimization Report—explored human trafficking prevalence and dynamics in Maine. As previously stated, human trafficking is just one example of a crime that falls under the CSEC umbrella, and neither of these two studies focused solely on minors. As a result, we cannot generalize findings from these sources, which study human trafficking experiences across the lifetime, to all forms of CSEC. However, these studies provide valuable insights that can enhance our understanding of CSEC and they guide us in identifying future research questions.

The 2015 Maine Human Trafficking Needs Assessment conducted by Hornby Zeller Associates, Inc. used existing statistics, law enforcement surveys, and interviews with service providers, community members, and survivors. This assessment highlighted key characteristics of sex trafficking survivors in Maine, who are predominantly white, female, and 14 to 30 years old. They estimated that Maine has 300 to 400 sex trafficking cases annually and found that many survivor respondents had experienced sexual abuse, domestic abuse, a lack of supportive caregivers in childhood, and substance use disorder. The assessment further revealed that nearly 40% of Maine law enforcement officers had encountered a trafficking case within the past year. Even so, 71% were unfamiliar with local organizations that address human trafficking, and fewer than half of the officers believed their departments were adequately prepared to handle cases involving minors.[3]

Building on this, the University of Maine System, acting through the Southern Maine Catherine Cutler Institute, prepared the 2022 Maine Crime Victimization Report to shed light on the occurrence and nature of various forms of violent crime in the state, including all types of human trafficking. To gather information, the team analyzed anonymous surveys, which collected data from survivors who may not have reported their situations or sought assistance through traditional channels, including police reports. Findings indicate that approximately 3% of adults in Maine have experienced some form of human trafficking in their lifetime. Respondents who reported human trafficking experiences were disproportionately BIPOC, living in households with an income of $25,000 or less, 18 to 44 years old, single or unpartnered, and female.[4]

Service provider data

Ethical and logistical challenges arise when collecting centralized data from service providers because advocacy and social services organizations cannot share confidential client information, like names, addresses, or anything else that might inadvertently identify the individual seeking services. While maintaining confidentiality is essential for protecting survivors and preserving their trust, it complicates efforts to understand how many unique clients seek services; the same individual may be counted multiple times by different service providers, making it impossible to simply sum client data together.

There are many CSEC service providers in Maine, but sexual assault support centers and Preble Street Anti-Trafficking Services (PSATS) are notable for serving clients statewide.

Maine's sexual assault support centers and Children's Advocacy Centers are part of MECASA, and they served a total of 367 CSEC clients between calendar years 2018 and 2023, with an average of 61 per year. These numbers include minor clients who were identified as survivors of all types of commercial sexual exploitation, including but not limited to human trafficking. Just over half (54%) were between 14 and 17 years old at the time of their experience, while 41% were aged 6 to 13, and 4% were under 6.[5]

Similarly, PSATS assisted 32 minor trafficking clients in calendar years 2022 and 2023. This data does not account for minors who experienced other forms of exploitation. Among these clients, 66% were aged 15 to 18, 81% identified as female, and 28% were Black, African, or African American[6], despite only 2.7% of Mainers identifying as Black[7]. The racial disproportionality highlighted in these statistics is indicative of significant systemic issues regarding racial equity in Maine.

Law enforcement data

Data is available for a range of CSEC crimes at both the state and federal levels. However, it is important to recognize that these crimes are notoriously underreported to law enforcement. While the available data can provide some insight, we cannot rely on it as a measure of prevalence.

Local and State Law Enforcement

The Maine Department of Public Safety publishes annual Uniform Crime Report (UCR) data. Managed by the Maine State Police, the UCR is a program where approximately 150 agencies provide monthly information to help produce reliable state crime statistics that the FBI uses in national reports.

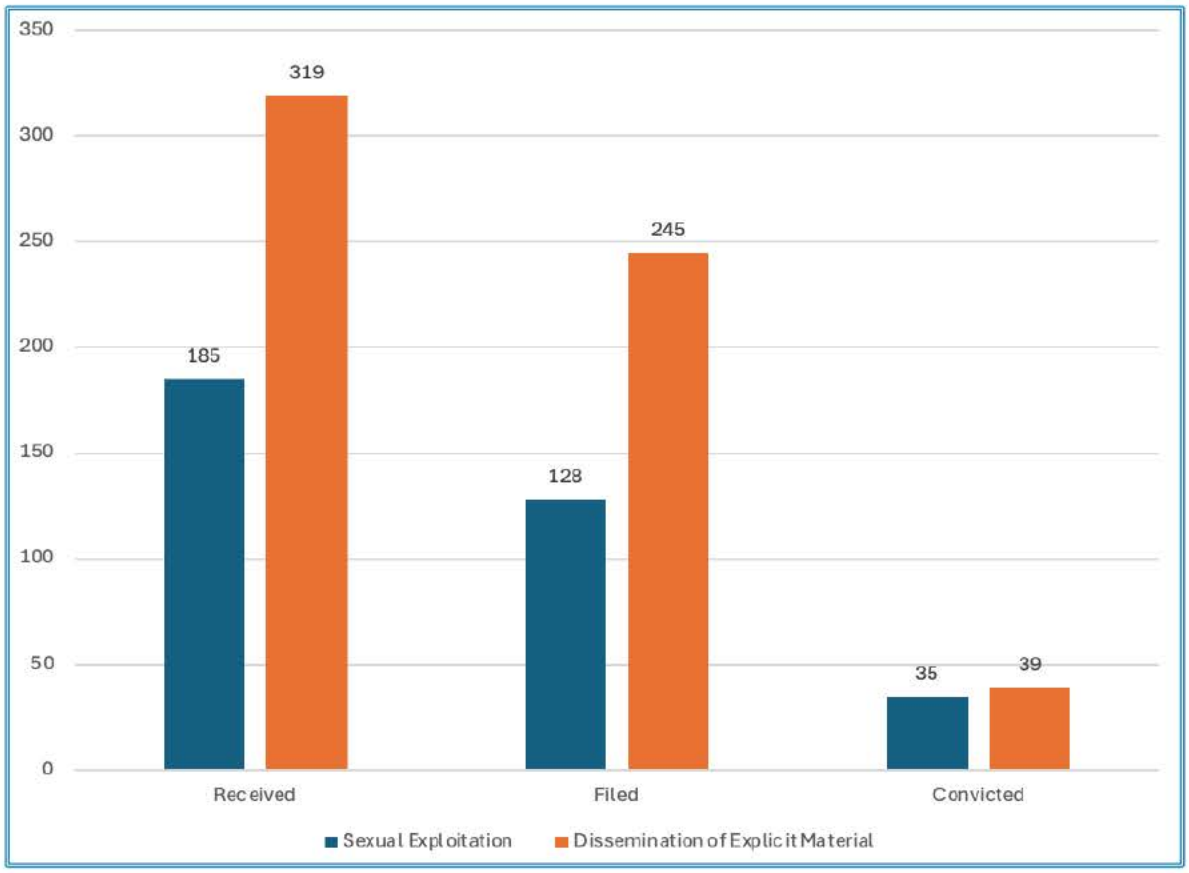
While the UCR is broadly considered one of the leading public safety indicators, the table below[8] highlights how infrequently exploitation, particularly human trafficking, is reported to law enforcement in Maine.

Maine Department of Public Safety Uniform Crime Rate Data			
Crime Type	2021 Number of Victims	2022 Number of Victims	2023 Number of Victims
Human trafficking, commercial sex acts	2	3	3
Pornography/Obscene Material	189	179	205

There are many reasons why the UCR might be lower and less reflective of the scope of human trafficking than it is for other types of violent crime. For example, many trafficking survivors harbor deep-rooted distrust of law enforcement, often caused by previous negative interactions with police, cultural differences, or fears instilled by traffickers. Many survivors come from marginalized communities that have faced systemic discrimination, including racial profiling, violence, and communal neglect at the hands of law enforcement, and so they may perceive that police are not reliable for protection or support. Additionally, language barriers or concerns about being arrested for behavior they have engaged in as part of their trafficking experience (e.g. drug crimes, property crimes) can further discourage survivors from reporting. As such, survivors may hesitate to report trafficking situations if they are afraid law enforcement will not believe them or will further endanger their safety.[9]

Additionally, even when people do report incidents, they may not fully convey the nature of what is happening. UCR refers to the crime that was indicated in the initial police report, but victims or bystanders might frame situations in terms that are more familiar to them. For example, they might report crimes that are relevant but different—like domestic violence assault or engaging a person for prostitution—rather than explicitly identifying an experience as human trafficking. This ambiguity can lead to underreporting and misclassification of cases, which further contributes to the low numbers reflected in UCR data.[10]

For CSEC in Maine, prosecution data is available from the Maine Prosecutors Association (MPA) for two specific crimes: sexual exploitation of a minor and dissemination of sexually explicit material involving a minor. It is important to note that all prosecutorial districts enter data differently. That means the data is inconsistent and incomplete, and these numbers are not fully reflective of the number of CSEC cases moving through the criminal justice system or their outcome. This is simply a report of all information available from calendar years 2019 to 2023.[11]



**Note that "Received" indicates cases referred for prosecution, "Filed" means individuals have been charged in court, and "Convicted" signifies a conviction of that specific crime.*

Federal Law Enforcement

Child sexual exploitation cases in Maine are often prosecuted at the federal level due to the nature and scope of the offenses. Many of these crimes involve the use of the internet or activities that cross state or international borders, placing them under federal jurisdiction. Specific federal laws empower federal agencies like the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) to investigate child sexual exploitation cases, especially when they involve the internet (e.g. possession, production, and distribution of child sexual abuse material). These agencies have access to specialized resources and technology that is critical for investigating internet-based crimes, where people who exploit children utilize encryption and anonymity to avoid detection. Federal resources include victim specialists, a forensic interview program, safety planning tools, and grants that can provide non-federal law enforcement agencies with licenses, technology, and specialized training to enhance investigation skills. Additionally, both the FBI and HSI offer opportunities for local law enforcement to serve as task force officers (TFOs). These TFOs collaborate with federal agents on investigations, which allows for advanced training and access to federal investigative tools that enhance their home agency's capabilities.

Federal jurisdiction can streamline investigations and prosecutions, particularly in cases that span multiple states or countries. In Maine, the FBI and Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) most often lead child sexual exploitation investigations when the victim is located in Maine and the offender is in another state or country, or vice versa. Depending on the nature of the case, prosecution may proceed at the federal level, the state level, or both. Despite the specialized skills and resources available to federal law enforcement, investigation and prosecution statistics are not readily available and do not fully capture child sexual exploitation prevalence. A significant portion of federal data falls within the confidential investigative process. An additional dynamic is child sexual exploitation cases may include international victims and/or crimes committed by USCs in foreign jurisdictions and this can impact the collection of complete and accurate statistics.

As noted in this report, child sexual exploitation investigations and prosecutions face significant challenges, and a federal trauma informed response necessitates balancing victim safety, the most appropriate charge to pursue (which may not be within the context of the victimization but related criminal conduct), and the necessary jurisdiction to do so. Even among the investigated federal human trafficking cases, very few are pursued for prosecution or ultimately charged. Both nationally and in Maine, low prosecution rates highlight the significant challenges in investigating and prosecuting these cases, which are notoriously complex and resource intensive.

As noted in this report, child sexual exploitation investigations and prosecutions face significant challenges. A federal trauma-informed response needs to balance keeping victims safe, choosing the right charges to pursue—often related to crimes beyond the immediate victimization—and ensuring the right jurisdiction to handle the case. Even among federally investigated human trafficking cases, very few are pursued for prosecution or ultimately charged. For example, in the District of Maine, the following table[12] shows the number of defendants whose primary sentencing guidelines were related to offenses such as traveling to engage in sexual activity with a minor, transporting a minor for sexual conduct, sexually exploiting a minor, possessing, receiving, transporting, or soliciting child pornography, or transferring obscene material to a minor, broken down by fiscal year.

FISCAL YEAR	DEFENDANTS SENTENCED
2024	14
2023	14
2022	17
2021	14
2020	3
2019	11

Both nationally and in Maine, low prosecution rates highlight the significant challenges in investigating and prosecuting these cases, which are notoriously complex and resource intensive.

Disproportionate impacts

While CSEC can affect anyone, decades of literature show that people with certain identities and life experiences are targeted at disproportionate rates. Specifically, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), as well as LGBTQ+ youth (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and more) and systems-involved youth are targeted at higher rates than the general population.[13] This disproportionality is attributed to a confluence of systemic, social, and economic factors.

Understanding intersectionality is crucial because it explains how various aspects of identity can compound CSEC risk and affect a survivor's needs. Intersectionality is a concept that examines how various social identities—such as race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and others—interact and overlap to shape an individual's experience of discrimination or privilege. This framework acknowledges that people do not experience their identities in isolation. Rather, the intersections of these identities create unique dynamics that can affect social interactions.

By applying an intersectional lens, it becomes clear that some youth encounter compounded forms of discrimination, which can lead to heightened risk and less access to appropriate resources and support.

BIPOC youth

While much of the published data on sex trafficking fails to include the racial or ethnic backgrounds of survivors, we know that racial disparities exist both in Maine and nationally. For example, a study conducted between 2008 and 2010 found that 40% of federal human trafficking victims were Black women, while only 26% were white women.[14] Similarly, BIPOC Mainers report a lifetime trafficking rate of 12%, compared to just 2% for non-Hispanic white individuals.[15] Structural and systemic racism contributes to social and economic disenfranchisement, which exacerbates the effects of generational trauma and historical oppression, increasing the likelihood that BIPOC youth will be targeted for exploitation.

There is a notable lack of data regarding the number of Indigenous youth who experience CSEC. This gap is partly due to the historical underrepresentation of Indigenous communities in research. Several factors contribute to this underrepresentation, including ongoing power disparities between researchers and Indigenous communities, insufficient representation of Indigenous individuals within academia, and a narrow definition of "research" that often prioritizes academic qualifications.[16]

Despite this, some information is available about trafficking rates in Indigenous communities—but it should be noted that neither of the cited sources examined forms of commercial sexual exploitation beyond human trafficking, and neither was specific to minors. For example, a well-known study focusing on commercial sexual exploitation among Native women in Minnesota revealed that nearly half of participants reported experiences that met a "conservative legal definition of sex trafficking".[17] Additionally, a survey conducted by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) between 2014 and 2016 found that 27 out of 132 tribal law enforcement agencies reported initiating human trafficking investigations with an Indigenous victim.[18] These statistics point to significant issues of racial equity and disproportionality, especially considering that only 2.9% of the U.S. population identifies as American Indian or Alaska Native.[19]

Further, Indigenous women in the United States are murdered ten times more frequently than the national average[20], and they also go missing at an alarming rate. Unfortunately, the federal government has not adequately addressed or tracked these cases; by 2016, out of the 5,712 Indigenous women and girls reported as missing, only 116 cases had been recorded in the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System.[21] This inadequate investigation and tracking of these cases is rooted in deep, historic systemic racism[22], and it has made it difficult to determine exactly how many cases can be linked to trafficking. However, abuse and exploitation are clearly associated with homicides among women[23], and we can infer that many Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women have experienced trafficking or exploitation.

Noting how BIPOC communities experience overlapping forms of oppression sheds light on systemic inequities that increase risk. For example, Maine has seen a notable rise in

homelessness between 2019 and 2023, with approximately 47% of unhoused individuals coming from Black communities.[24] Furthermore, poverty rates in 2022 demonstrated stark differences, with 10.2% of white Mainers living below the poverty line, compared to 13% for Hispanic Mainers, 17% for Indigenous Mainers, and 29% for Black Mainers.[25] Additionally, as of 2020, Black workers in Maine earned, on average, only $0.63 for every dollar earned by their white counterparts.[26]

BIPOC youth also face significant disparities within the child welfare[27] and juvenile justice systems, exacerbated by issues like poverty and trauma. These youth are disproportionately prosecuted and incarcerated for behaviors that result from CSEC victimization, like truancy and substance use.[28] Additionally, sociocultural stereotypes portray BIPOC youth as more sexually mature than their white peers. This can lead authorities to incorrectly treat them as consenting adults in exploitative situations, failing to recognize that they cannot legally consent and should be viewed as crime victims who may want or need support. This systemic bias reinforces harmful racist and sexist stereotypes and perpetuates cycles of exploitation.[29]

LGBTQ+ youth

Many LGBTQ+ youth face a heightened risk of CSEC due to societal failures to treat them with respect and address their fundamental needs. Systemic homophobia and transphobia, coupled with a lack of support and understanding, often leave these youth in unstable situations, leading some to turn to commercial sex as a means of meeting their needs; one study showed that nearly half of youth involved in commercial sex identify as LGBTQ+.[30] However, under federal law, anyone under the age of 18 who exchanges sex for anything of value is classified as a trafficking victim, and so we must acknowledge an urgent need to address homophobia and transphobia as critical root causes of exploitation.

Research indicates that LGBTQ+ youth are disproportionately subjected to abuse. Nearly 48% report feeling ashamed of their identity due to family attitudes, 73% have faced verbal threats related to their identity, and 70% experienced bullying at school. Additionally, a 2022 survey from the Trevor Project revealed that nearly 40% live in communities that are somewhat or very unwelcoming to LGBTQ+ individuals, contributing to their isolation and negative mental health outcomes. The judgment and isolation experienced by LGBTQ+ youth can make them more likely to be targeted by those seeking to exploit their need for acceptance and belonging.

LGBTQ+ youth are also commonly targeted for exploitation by people who take advantage of their unmet basic needs. They face a disproportionate risk of homelessness, being 120% more likely to become homeless than their non-LGBTQ+ peers. While only 7-10% of the general youth population identifies as LGBTQ+, an estimated 20-40% of homeless youth belong to this group. Family rejection plays a significant role, often leading these young people to run away or face expulsion from their homes. A 2015 study by the Williams

Institute found that forced eviction and running away are the primary causes of homelessness among LGBTQ youth. This instability creates pressing needs for safety and support.[31]

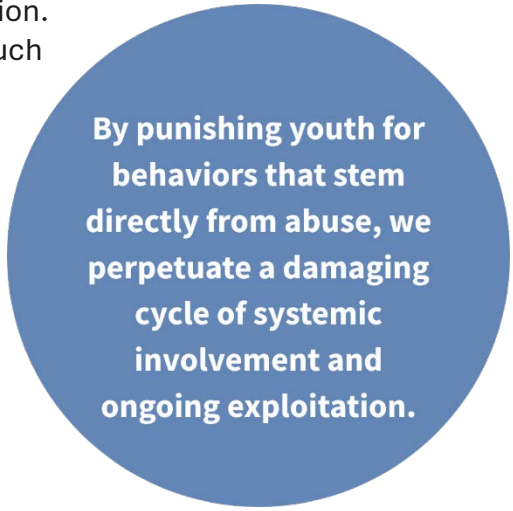
Systems-involved youth

Systems involvement is among the most predictive variables for CSEC involvement. Up to 85% of CSEC survivors have had prior contact with the child welfare system, while 52% have been placed in juvenile justice facilities.

Additionally, between 3% and 15% of youth in the child welfare system have experienced CSEC. Up to 26.7% of youth in the child welfare system are considered high-risk, and this is especially true for those in out-of-home placements or if their basic needs are unmet. Youth with CSEC histories are also nearly 15 times more likely to have multiple runaway episodes and four times more likely to experience multiple placements.

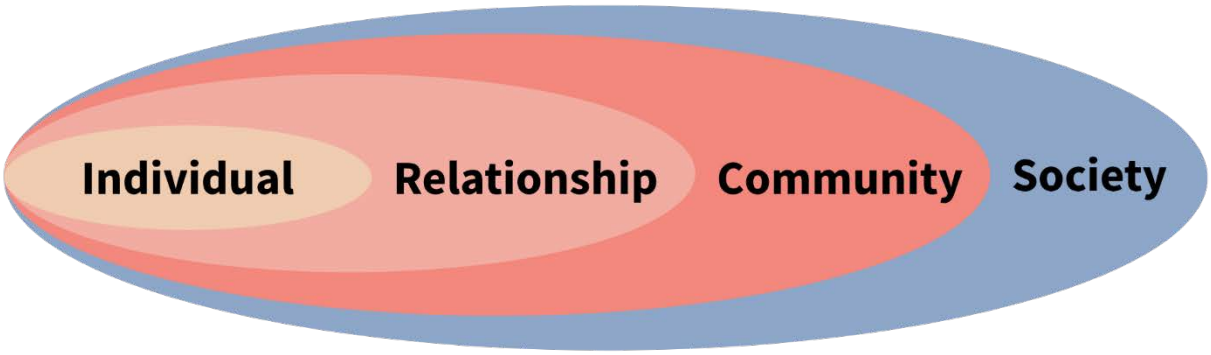
Further, involvement of youth with both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems—known as dual system contact—heightens risk; it is estimated that 45% to 70% of youth on probation have had prior contact with child welfare services. CSEC survivors are also more likely to face detention and have higher rates of re-offending, partly due to longer periods spent in out-of-home care and a higher level of instability in their lives. Dual system contact contributes to increased housing instability, harsher justice penalties, and higher recidivism rates, affirming that systems involvement is one of the most significant factors associated with CSEC.[32]

Ultimately, the criminalization of victimization plays a significant role in these dynamics. By punishing youth for behaviors that stem directly from abuse, we perpetuate a damaging cycle of systemic involvement and ongoing exploitation. Instead of receiving the critical support they need, such as mental health care, housing stability, or educational opportunities, CSEC survivors often find themselves stuck within punitive systems that cannot address the root causes of their circumstances. The stigma associated with a juvenile criminal record can exacerbate social isolation, pushing youth back into exploitative situations as a means of getting their needs met. This interplay highlights the urgent need for Maine to shift its approach, focusing on support and rehabilitation rather than punishment to prevent exploitation effectively.



Impacts of CSEC

The socioecological model is a framework that provides insight into the complex interactions influencing behavior and outcomes related to violence. This model highlights that violence impacts not only individual survivors but also their relationships, communities, and society as a whole. While we typically understand that individual survivors suffer significant consequences, it is less commonly understood that even those who are not directly exploited can feel the effects, experiencing heightened fear, insecurity, and oppression that can detract from their overall well-being.



Moving beyond individual experiences, the socioecological model emphasizes that behavior inevitably creates ripple effects, for better or worse. By understanding violence through the socioecological model, we can appreciate its multifaceted nature and the necessity of addressing it at all levels to foster effective solutions for prevention and healing.[33]

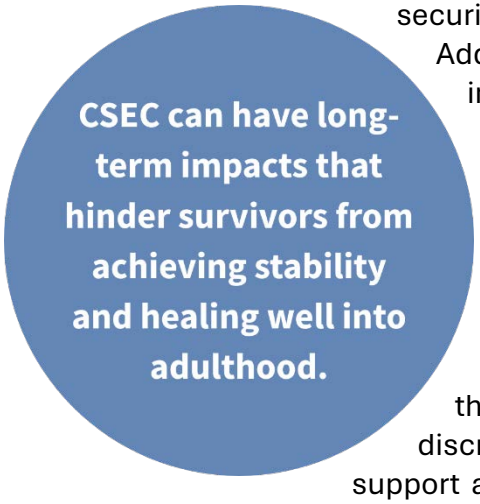
Individual level impacts

The impacts of CSEC at the individual level are profound and can lead to long-lasting consequences for survivors. Those who experience CSEC often struggle with mood disorders and anxiety, feelings of shame, increased isolation, and suicidality, all of which are exacerbated by the societal stigma associated with their exploitation. Additionally, survivors of CSEC commonly suffer from high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, which manifests through debilitating symptoms like flashbacks, severe anxiety, and emotional numbness.[34] A history of violent trauma can significantly impair a person's capacity to engage in daily activities, making it difficult to form healthy relationships and maintain stable employment. Regardless of formal diagnosis, mental health issues can lead to maladaptive coping strategies. These include substance use, aggression, and self-injurious behavior, which complicate interpersonal relationships and hinder one's ability to seek help or access supportive services.[35]

Further, research indicates that survivors of childhood sexual abuse (including CSEC) are at a significantly higher risk for developing cardiovascular diseases, obesity, and chronic

pain conditions in adulthood, even after exiting abusive situations. Prolonged stress associated with these traumatic experiences can disrupt the body's stress response systems, worsening overall health problems. Furthermore, survivors of childhood abuse face an increased risk of autoimmune disorders, given that the stress from their trauma can weaken the immune system and make them more susceptible to conditions such as lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, and multiple sclerosis. This dysregulation of the body's stress response can create a cycle of ongoing health challenges because heightened anxiety and hypervigilance interfere with normal physiological functions. Even so, many survivors may avoid seeking medical help due to fear of judgment or a lack of trust in healthcare providers, leaving their physical and mental health issues untreated.

Equally important are the effects of CSEC on survivors' access to basic needs. Many survivors experience oppression, poverty, instability, and lack of resources, which can make securing essentials like food, housing, and healthcare difficult. Additionally, the disruptions caused by CSEC often result in interrupted education, thereby limiting future employment opportunities and perpetuating cycles of poverty. The lack of stable housing frequently leads to high rates of homelessness, further obstructing access to education and employment opportunities.[36] While the trauma associated with exploitation can impair a person's ability to advocate for themselves or navigate systems designed to provide assistance, we must also recognize that these individuals often encounter very real discrimination from the systems that are meant to provide support and assistance. As such, the barriers survivors face are frequently exacerbated by systemic bias and oppression.[37]



It is critical to understand that CSEC does not just inflict immediate harm on the individual; it can have long-term impacts that hinder survivors from achieving stability and healing well into adulthood. When individuals are unwell and face chronic obstacles to seeking help or accessing services, they remain at heightened risk of being targeted for further abuse or exploitation, and the cycle will continue until effective supports are put in place.

Relationship level impacts

Families of individuals who have experienced exploitation often face significant emotional challenges. The trauma associated with CSEC can create stress within family dynamics, leading to feelings of concern, confusion, and helplessness among family members. Caregivers and siblings may experience emotional distress themselves, including anxiety and depression, which can complicate their relationships and create barriers to effective support.[38]

Additionally, families must often navigate complex systems such as mental health services, legal support, and educational resources to help their children heal and seek justice. These processes can be overwhelming, especially in the face of societal stigma surrounding CSEC, which may lead families to feel judged or isolated from their community. This stigma can hinder open conversations and prevent families from accessing the necessary help, perpetuating feelings of overwhelm and ultimately increasing the risk of familial separation.[39]

Community level impacts

At the community level, CSEC can contribute to broader social issues that affect everyone. The presence of exploitation can strain social services, making it challenging to provide adequate support to survivors and their families. Educational institutions may also struggle to create a safe and supportive environment for all students when some are affected by exploitation, further impacting the overall community atmosphere.

There may also be economic repercussions, as communities known for high rates of exploitation might experience decreased tourism, property values, and willingness from residents to invest or engage fully with community activities. Particularly in a state like Maine, where tourists spent $9 billion in 2023,[40] this decline can impact local businesses and services, creating a cycle of economic instability. Furthermore, costs of health care utilization, often via emergency department usage, from the health impacts described above put a strain on an already taxed system.[41]

Additionally, when communities witness populations being disproportionately impacted by CSEC, it can lead to confirmation bias. Instead of highlighting the impacts of oppression, this situation can reinforce the stereotypes and prejudices that allowed these populations to be targeted to begin with.

Societal level impacts

When communities frequently encounter CSEC, desensitization can shift perceptions. In such circumstances, people may view violence and exploitation as sad but ordinary parts of life rather than serious issues that need to be addressed. As society accepts CSEC as a norm, a sense of apathy can develop. Community members may feel that the problem is too big or complex for them to tackle, resulting in a lack of accountability. This can hinder prevention efforts and discourage individuals from taking action, thereby perpetuating cycles of abuse.

Primary Prevention Model of Public Health

Many approaches to preventing CSEC focus on identifying exploited children and connecting them with services. This strategy assumes that exploitation is inevitable. While it may reduce the long-term harm for exploited youth, it suggests that we cannot prevent them from being harmed in the first place.

But what if we gave ourselves permission to be optimistic? What if CSEC *could* be stopped before it occurs?

When we focus the conversation on prevention rather than response alone, we challenge the idea that exploitation is unavoidable. By adopting a preventive mindset, we shift the discourse from individual responsibility to avoid harm to collective responsibility to create something better, thereby recognizing that society as a whole has a role in violence prevention. This shift allows us to examine the systemic issues contributing to CSEC, such as poverty, lack of access to education, and unhealthy relationships.

If we start with the goal of prevention, we could ask different questions:

- What factors increase risk?
- How can we create environments that allow youth to grow and explore safely?
- How can we eliminate the societal conditions that allow exploitation to thrive?

By changing our perspective, we also move away from viewing youth as passive victims and towards seeing them as active participants in their own lives—youth who deserve safety, agency, and more comprehensive, compassionate strategies to uphold their dignity and rights.

Looking to public health for answers

Over the past two decades, the field has increasingly recognized the importance of using a public health model to understand and prevent CSEC. This perspective emphasizes the need to address the root causes and social dynamics that create environments where exploitation can thrive. The public health model confirms what many survivors have long understood—youth are safest when their basic needs are met and their humanity is acknowledged.

When discussing CSEC prevention, it is essential to consider a wide range of risk and protective factors at all levels of the socioecological model. Some factors may not immediately seem relevant to discussions of CSEC, especially since we have historically focused preventative efforts on awareness education and the identification of harm. However, looking at broader community- and societal-level factors can provide valuable insights into how we can create safer environments for youth. For example, socioeconomic conditions, access to education, and community support systems all play crucial roles in CSEC prevention.

To illustrate this point, we can consider bike safety measures. While a significant amount of attention has been placed on rider behaviors—such as using hand signals, wearing helmets, and wearing reflective gear—structural changes in the riding environment often yield more impactful results. These changes include creating bike lanes, widening road shoulders, reducing speed limits, installing traffic lights, and increasing enforcement of traffic laws. By addressing both individual behaviors and environmental factors, we can significantly reduce bike accident injuries and fatalities.

In the context of CSEC, rather than simply observing the dangers that surround youth and either blaming them for failing to take precautions or focusing our resources on responding to the aftermath of exploitation, we must prioritize making the environment safer. This means recognizing the various risk and protective factors in neighborhoods and communities that may not directly relate to CSEC but still contribute to the larger picture of safety.

We do not have to wait for youth to experience exploitation to intervene. By adopting a public health approach, we can create a comprehensive strategy that ensures youth are never harmed to begin with.

Moving beyond education

Identifying the various elements within community health and prevention can often be challenging, particularly when our thinking is primarily centered around educational initiatives. Many of us default to viewing solutions through the lens of traditional educational programs, which can limit our understanding of the broader picture and the multifaceted nature of prevention strategies.

While education plays a crucial role in raising awareness and informing individuals about health issues, it is not enough on its own to create lasting change. Simply providing information does not address underlying social determinants of health, structural barriers, or the broader environmental factors that influence behaviors and outcomes. Education

must be part of a larger strategy that includes community engagement, policy advocacy, and systemic change to effectively address the root causes of CSEC.

To help expand perspectives beyond just educational approaches, the Prevention Institute created the Spectrum of Prevention. This framework encourages a more comprehensive approach to prevention, emphasizing the importance of considering various levels of intervention. It recognizes that effective prevention requires action on multiple fronts and that education must be integrated with other strategies to foster meaningful change.

LEVEL OF SPECTRUM	DEFINITION OF LEVEL
6. Influencing Policy & Legislation	Developing strategies to change laws and policies to influence outcomes
5. Changing Organizational Practices	Adopting regulations and shaping norms to improve health and safety
4. Fostering Coalitions & Networks	Convening groups and individuals for broader goals and greater impact
3. Educating Providers	Informing providers who will transmit skills and knowledge to others
2. Promoting Community Education	Reaching groups of people with information and resources to promote health and safety
1. Strengthening Individual Knowledge & Skills	Enhancing an individual's capability of preventing injury or illness and promoting safety

The Spectrum of Prevention outlines several levels at which we can implement changes, including individual behaviors, community initiatives, and policy development. The framework seeks to mobilize efforts across all these levels, promoting a holistic approach to public health and violence prevention.

By broadening our focus and integrating strategies across this spectrum, we can create a more robust and effective prevention landscape. This comprehensive approach not only enhances individual awareness but also fosters community involvement and drives systemic change. Ultimately, it helps shift the narrative from merely educating individuals to empowering entire communities and advocating for policy changes that support long-term health and well-being.[42]

Integrating prevention and intervention

Finally, prevention and intervention are interconnected and should not be seen as separate processes. Systems and communities that hold individuals accountable for causing harm, while also supporting and believing survivors, foster environments that do not tolerate exploitation. Additionally, when we equitably serve survivors of all identities and strive to coordinate resources, we contribute to shifting the power imbalances that enable CSEC.

In this way, effective intervention helps to prevent sexual violence, and prevention efforts support the goals of intervention. Like the wheels of a bicycle, both elements drive each other and must work together to create meaningful progress.[43]

Report Committee Structure

This report addresses the urgent need for effective strategies to prevent and respond to CSEC in Maine, as mandated by the 131st legislature in LD 1092, A Resolve to Establish an Ad Hoc Committee to Address the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children. DHHS OCFS collaborated with the MECASA to facilitate the completion of this important work.

The writing process began with the intentional invitation of a diverse, core group of members to collaborate as the Report Advisory Committee (RAC). Several RAC members have lived experience with CSEC, and all have expertise in working with youth at risk of or experiencing exploitation. The group was intentionally multidisciplinary because varied perspectives and specialized knowledge are critical for producing comprehensive, broadly impactful recommendations.

During their first meeting, the RAC focused on understanding the current landscape of CSEC services and relevant state laws. This foundational work allowed them to identify both the strengths and critical gaps in existing infrastructure. Then, to facilitate the research and writing processes, the RAC was divided into subcommittees, each concentrating on specific aspects of the CSEC experience: basic needs access, social and community factors, healthcare, and systems involvement. Each subcommittee included RAC members assigned based on their expertise, as well as external community members recruited to offer insight related to their professional disciplines. Subdividing into four groups allowed for in-depth exploration of complex issues, and members conducted research, brainstormed innovative solutions, and drafted targeted recommendations that addressed protective and risk factors associated with CSEC within each of the four broad categories. The subcommittee members documented their insights and recommendations throughout the process, effectively capturing the group's collective expertise.

After all subcommittees submitted their recommendations, the RAC co-chairs collaborated to revise and organize the content into a cohesive report reflective of the contributions of participants.

By incorporating insights from a diverse, large group of community members, the co-chairs sought to ensure findings and recommendations that reflect the complexity of the issues at hand. Recognizing and integrating different viewpoints enriches our understanding and strengthens our ability to identify effective solutions together.

Recommendations

As noted earlier in the report, the recommendations do not necessarily reflect policy commitments of the Maine Department of Health and Human Services or Office of Child and Family Services, and further do not confer support from the Executive Branch for specific legislative initiatives. Policy proposals will be reviewed and commented on by the Department as they arise.

Increase Access to Basic Needs

The public health model of violence prevention underlines the importance of addressing systemic issues and root causes rather than just responding to consequences. As such, ensuring access to basic needs is critically important to CSEC prevention because it greatly reduces the risks that come from instability and poverty. Youth are often targeted for exploitation and trafficking based on these risk factors because there is a perception that they can be more easily forced or coerced into dangerous situations to meet their basic needs or to support their loved ones.[44]

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs offers insight into why basic needs access is a critical place to begin the conversation. Credited to Abraham Maslow in the 1950s, it is a psychological theory that categorizes human motivations within five tiers of increasing importance, starting with basic physiological needs and escalating to higher-level psychological needs, like self-actualization.[45]

This framework is relevant in the conversation about CSEC prevention because when youth's fundamental, bottom-tier needs—including housing, warmth, and safety—are unmet, strategies to meet higher-level needs will likely be insufficient. For example, if a youth is experiencing housing insecurity, someone might take advantage of that situation by offering them a place to stay. With no viable alternative for safe shelter, the young person will need to weigh the consequences of remaining in an exploitative situation versus sleeping outside, where they will be at increased risk of physical violence, exposure to the elements, and property crimes. As such, attempting to convince this young person that they would be better off without their trafficker may be ineffective.

The following recommendations support increased access to basic needs—with a specific focus on housing—as a means of both preventing and responding to CSEC in Maine.

Support projects that map assets, gaps, opportunities, and action plans

- **Fund Gini index assessments in Maine communities.** The Gini index measures how equally income is distributed in a community or country, with a score of 0 meaning everyone has the same amount and 1 meaning one person has all the money.[46] It's useful for preventing community violence because places with high income inequality (scores closer to 1) tend to have more tension and conflict.[47] By identifying areas with high inequality using the Gini index, steps can be taken to make wealth distribution more equal, like introducing policies that help everyone have better access to resources.

Minimize barriers to receiving and spending income

- **Utilize direct cash transfers (DCTs).** DCTs are a critical component of support, offering immediate relief, empowerment, and a foundation for rebuilding one's life with dignity and self-determination. Additionally, they can be more efficient and tailored to the unique needs of each survivor compared to in-kind donations or services. This flexibility ensures that the assistance provided is directly relevant and immediately useful to the individual's specific situation.[48]
- **Fund place-based work.** Place-based work involves strategies tailored to address the unique challenges and leverage the strengths of a specific geographic area. This approach is important because it ensures solutions are directly relevant to a community's needs, encouraging efficient use of local resources and fostering community engagement and empowerment. By focusing on localized assets and involving key partners in decision-making, place-based work promotes sustainable development and long-term positive impacts. It values innovation and is designed to address issues at their root, leading to more effective and lasting change within communities.[49]

Build transportation infrastructure

- **Expand access to affordable transportation, particularly in rural communities.** Rural access to multiple forms of transportation can create safer communities by enhancing mobility and connectivity. When residents have access to varied transportation options, such as buses, rideshares, and safe walking paths, it can lead to a reduction in isolation, making it easier for individuals to access essential services, employment, and social support networks. This accessibility helps build stronger, more resilient communities where people are more engaged and look out for each other, contributing to overall safety. Additionally, diverse transportation options can reduce the incidence of risky behaviors, such as driving under the influence, by providing alternatives. This enhanced connectivity fosters a sense of community cohesion and safety.[50]

Develop more affordable housing units

- **Increase the State Historic Tax Credit from $5 million to $10 million.** This would address the financial challenges associated with renovating historic buildings. Since construction costs have risen 85% since 2008,[51] the additional funding makes these projects more feasible for developers. By transforming historic buildings into affordable housing, the initiative preserves cultural heritage and alleviates the housing crisis. This approach ensures that historical architecture is maintained while simultaneously providing much-needed affordable living spaces, making it a win-win solution for communities.
- **Establish a state Housing Appeals Board (HAB).** New Hampshire's HAB can override local opposition, facilitating the development of much-needed housing projects. This approach balances local concerns with broader housing needs, ensuring that essential projects can proceed without undue delays. Additionally, it offers a more predictable and less politicized process for resolving disputes, encouraging investment in new housing developments.[52]
- **Allocate a $100 million Affordable Housing production bond to subsidize the construction of affordable housing through Maine Housing's Low Income Housing Tax Credit program, Rural Affordable Rental Housing Program, and Affordable Home Ownership program.** This could be a powerful tool for tackling the affordable housing crisis, offering widespread benefits that extend beyond merely increasing the housing stock to stimulating economic growth, fostering community wellbeing, and promoting environmental sustainability.[53]
- **Find a sustainable funding source for the construction of affordable housing**. This would address critical housing shortages, support economic stability by making living costs more manageable, promote social equity by ensuring access to safe housing for all income levels, encourage environmentally sustainable building practices, and foster community development through improved infrastructure and services. This approach not only meets immediate housing needs but also supports long-term community growth and resilience.[54]

- **Set housing production targets based on the 2023 Maine Housing Study at the municipal level and encourage communities to make 10-15% of their housing stock affordable for individuals earning up to 80% of the area median income.** This approach would address shortages and affordability issues by setting clear production targets based on comprehensive local data. Encouraging municipalities to dedicate a portion of their housing stock as affordable helps ensure that individuals and families earning up to 80% of the area median income have access to suitable living options. This strategy not only promotes inclusivity and economic diversity within communities but also supports the broader goal of sustainable and equitable urban development.[55]
- **Streamline Department of Environmental Protection permitting processes for affordable housing projects.** By simplifying and speeding up the regulatory approval process, developers can more quickly begin construction, thereby increasing the availability of affordable housing units. This approach also encourages sustainable development practices by ensuring environmental standards are met without unnecessary delays, ultimately supporting the goal of providing more people with access to affordable, environmentally safe housing.[56]

Incentivize landlords to accept vouchers

- **Create a pathway for unemancipated 16- and 17-year-olds to become leaseholders.** Housing insecurity is one of the most highly correlated variables with CSEC, and this risk is exacerbated when youth lack adequate parental or guardian support due to estrangement, neglect, or abuse.[57] Incorporating policies that facilitate unemancipated 16- and 17-year-olds in becoming leaseholders, as seen in Missouri and Oregon, provides these youth with a viable pathway to stable and independent living conditions. In Missouri, the consent of a parent or legal guardian for a minor to live independently can be implied by the act of forcing the youth out of the home, refusing to provide financial support to the youth, or abuse or neglect. Consent can also be demonstrated by a letter from a homeless service provider or school district homeless liaison.[58] Furthermore, Oregon's legislation permits unemancipated minors aged 16 or 17, as well as those who are pregnant or parenting and living with their child, to contract for a residential dwelling unit and utility services, if living apart from legal guardians.[59] These policies empower minors by recognizing their capacity to make responsible decisions about their living arrangements under certain conditions. By considering comparable policy changes, the Maine legislature would be taking important steps towards recognizing the independence and agency of minors, providing them with the tools they need to navigate challenging situations more effectively.
- **Expand the Landlord Liaison Program.** The Maine Landlord Liaison Program offers sign-on bonuses and repair fee benefits to landlords willing to rent to tenants who have been or are at risk of being unhoused.[60] Enhancements to this program should include increasing funding to provide larger sign-on bonuses, which may be more appealing and effective as an initial incentive compared to repair fees. This shift in

focus could help alleviate concerns landlords might have about property damage, encouraging more participation. Additionally, extending these incentive programs to landlords who offer private, non-voucher subsidized housing could significantly increase housing options for individuals with a history of housing insecurity. Given the challenges posed by the current housing market and the scarcity of Housing Choice Vouchers[61], introducing incentives for private housing landlords could provide crucial support for those in need of stable housing but without access to voucher programs.

Support transitional living and transitional housing programs

- **Allocate funding for the development of site-based and scattered-site transitional living programs, ensuring a focus on both rural and urban areas.** Transitional living programs are designed to bridge the gap for young individuals transitioning from situations like homelessness, rehabilitation, or incarceration back into society. These programs provide essential support including housing, job training, and life skills education. Such investments could significantly reduce rates of recidivism and housing insecurity, while also fostering economic stability among youth at the highest risk of exploitation. By investing in transitional living programs across diverse settings, we can create a more inclusive and supportive framework for youth, ultimately leading to stronger, more resilient communities.[62]
- **Fund short-term transitional housing programs**, which are designed to bridge the gap between emergency shelter situations and permanent housing. These programs, typically lasting under 24 months, provide crucial support for families of youth who have experienced trafficking. Transitional housing is vital because it offers a safe and supportive environment for individuals recovering from trauma, allowing them time and resources to transition to a more stable, independent living situation.[63] It is essential that these programs operate on a voluntary services model[64] and ensure inclusivity across the gender spectrum.[65]
- **Mandate housing authorities to allocate several housing choice vouchers (HCVs) to people coming out of transitional housing to support long-term stability**. Transitional housing, while critical, is designed to be a temporary solution. Without a clear and accessible exit strategy, individuals may find themselves stuck in a cycle of temporary housing solutions or back to housing insecurity. Easier access to HCVs would provide more stable and permanent housing solutions for people who are at the highest risk of exploitation, including those who are recently homeless, fleeing violence, and/or living with substance use disorder.[66]

Bolster gender-inclusive young parent/family programs

- **Fund parent-child programs to prevent removal while providing appropriate support.** This approach is helpful because it directly targets the preservation of family units, which is essential for the healthy development of children and the stability of communities.[67] Existing funding mechanisms, including TANF block

grants, can be used to maximize the impact of support services,[68] making it a practical and effective strategy for prevention and support.

- **Fund programs to address family conflict to encourage family reunification and/or to keep families together.** When a youth does not have a strong support system at home—whether due to family conflict, neglect, or separation—they may turn to others to meet their physical and emotional needs. Traffickers often target these youth by offering alternative support, including housing, money, validation, and a sense of belonging. By addressing family conflicts before they escalate, these programs can limit traffickers' capacity to exploit these unmet needs. When families receive support to manage disputes and navigate difficult circumstances, youth are more likely to stay in a safe, nurturing environment where they feel valued and protected. In addition to helping keep families together, this approach enhances broader community safety and resilience.

Expand McKinney-Vento programming

- **Fund additional McKinney-Vento Liaison positions.** The McKinney-Vento Act helps students who do not have a stable place to live by making sure they can stay in school. It gives them rights like being able to stay in their school even if they move, getting transportation to school, and receiving help with school supplies and clothes. Having funded liaison positions is important because these liaisons are the ones who make sure homeless students know their rights and get the help they need. They work directly with the students, schools, and communities, acting as a crucial bridge to ensure that these students do not fall through the cracks and can focus on their education.[69]
- **Sustain state funding for the Pilot Program for Preventing Student Homelessness overseen by the Maine Department of Education to assist families and unaccompanied homeless youth.** Through this program, SAUs can spend up to $750 per student on rental assistance and critical home repairs. This approach helps families maintain educational continuity and stability for students by ensuring they have a consistent place to live and study.[70]

Expand eviction protections

- **Implement a universal right to counsel for tenants facing eviction.** Numerous studies have shown that tenants with legal representation in eviction proceedings are far more likely to remain in their homes. Despite the legal complexity of evictions, most tenants face court proceedings without an attorney, primarily due to the high costs of legal services. By implementing a universal right to counsel, jurisdictions can ensure a fairer legal process and significantly reduce the number of evictions, contributing to housing stability and preventing homelessness.[71]

Build Stronger Communities

Youth in strong, connected communities benefit from a support system that promotes healthy development. Access to resources, positive role models, and a sense of belonging are critically important for wellbeing. Conversely, when people are isolated or living in disorganized communities, they often experience increased stress and conflict, ultimately contributing to a higher risk of violence. A youth's community may include their school, neighborhood, recreational opportunities, and virtual spaces, all of which must be considered in violence prevention efforts.[72]

The following recommendations address strategies for creating healthier, more connected communities that value respect and inclusion.

Recognize that disconnection increases risk

- **Respond to truancy as a symptom of trauma rather than willful misconduct.** This perspective recognizes that absence from school might be a manifestation of deeper issues, such as stress within the family unit, health challenges, or a lack of environmental safety that a child is trying to escape or cope with. By understanding the root causes of truancy, educators and caregivers can provide the appropriate support and interventions that address the student's underlying needs, rather than punishing them for behaviors they may not fully control.[73]
- **Protect all students' right to a full school day.** Approximately 1 in 5 youth who have experienced sex trafficking receive special education services at some point during their education.[74] Special education students often miss instruction time, despite their right to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Shortened school days for special education students, while tailored to individual needs, can inadvertently limit their opportunities for social interactions and engagement with their school communities. This decreased exposure to peer groups and extracurricular activities can hinder the development of social skills, reduce the sense of belonging and community, and potentially impact the student's ability to build and maintain friendships. Furthermore, these limitations might also reduce the students' exposure to diverse experiences and learning opportunities that occur naturally through extended social interactions within the school environment. As such, finding a balance that supports both the educational and social development needs of special education students is crucial.[75]
- **Provide low-barrier opportunities for after-school recreation.** Such activities provide safe, structured environments that keep children occupied during peak times for abuse. They also foster positive relationships, social skills, and a sense of belonging, diverting children from harmful behaviors and influences.[76]
- **Fund community "greening" projects.** Community greening projects transform vacant or underused spaces into vibrant areas with plants, trees, and community gardens. These initiatives beautify neighborhoods and promote social cohesion by bringing residents together to work on a common goal, fostering a sense of pride

and ownership over their environment. This increased community engagement can lead to reduced violence in several ways: it strengthens neighborhood ties, making people more likely to look out for one another; it decreases opportunities for crime by revitalizing neglected areas; and it reduces stress and aggression through the calming effects of nature. Overall, community greening can create safer, more connected communities.[77]

Center voices of impacted communities, including young people

- **Involve youth in funding and creating programs for children, teens, and young adults.** Centering the perspectives of young people in program creation fosters more relevant and effective initiatives, promotes their engagement and empowerment, and ensures diverse and inclusive solutions.[78]

Eliminate racism and mitigate its impacts

- **Recognize that anti-racism is anti-trafficking.** Systemic, intentional racism has upheld dynamics of exploitation by embedding inequalities within social, economic, and political structures. Because of the ways that racism has manifested in various institutions—including education, social services, immigration, and the criminal justice system—people of color have been historically excluded and silenced in mainstream American culture. Such disenfranchisement explains why youth of color are at higher risk of exploitation than their white peers. Exploiters target youth who have unmet basic needs and who they know are less likely to receive adequate support from existing intervention and response systems; racism can lead to these youth not getting the attention or help they need because of stereotypes that affect how they are seen and treated. By addressing racism, we can work through the deep-seated issues that allow exploitation to thrive and ensure that everyone receives the support and protection they need. This approach helps make the fight against exploitation more effective and fairer for everyone.[79]
- **Challenge cultural norms that hypersexualize young women of color.** Young women of color are often hypersexualized through the portrayal of stereotypes that depict them as inherently more sexual than their white peers. This is evident in movies, music videos, and advertising, where they are frequently cast in roles that emphasize their sexuality over other attributes or talents. Such portrayals not only narrow the public's perception of these women to their physicality but also contribute to a culture that undervalues their individuality and humanity. This hypersexualization can lead to real-world consequences, including discrimination, objectification, and an increased risk of sexual harassment and violence. It perpetuates harmful stereotypes that affect how young women of color see themselves and how they are treated by others.[80]
- **Fund equitable, culturally responsive research to better understand how youth of color experience CSEC.** Such research acknowledges and addresses the systemic inequalities and cultural nuances that may influence the prevalence and nature of CSEC among youth of color. By tailoring approaches to the specific needs

and contexts of these communities, efforts to prevent and combat CSEC can be more effective and impactful. This approach not only helps in creating more inclusive and effective support systems but also contributes to the broader goal of achieving social justice and equality.[81]

- **Invest resources and capacity into community-based organizations working with young people of color.** These organizations understand the specific challenges and needs of the communities they serve, offering culturally relevant support and programs. This helps young individuals feel more connected, minimizes social isolation, and provides them with necessary support. Additionally, these organizations serve as advocates, amplifying the voices of young people of color and ensuring their needs are considered in broader societal discussions. This investment promotes equity, inclusion, and community resilience.[82]

Address the over institutionalization and disenfranchisement of youth with disabilities

- **Advocate for ending guardianship for young adults in favor of alternatives such as supported decision-making, granting power of attorney, and ensuring the release of school information.** Guardianship can severely limit an individual's ability to make decisions about their life, from financial choices to medical care and living arrangements. It is important that young adults with disabilities can retain their rights and agency, making choices about their lives with the necessary supports in place, rather than being subjected to decisions made on their behalf without their consent. This approach aligns with broader goals of inclusivity, equality, and respect for the dignity of individuals with disabilities.[83]
- **Develop CSEC screening tools for disability service providers.** Individuals with disabilities are at a heightened risk of exploitation, but they may experience different dynamics. Disabilities can sometimes lead to isolation, making it harder for these youth to access help or recognize that they are being exploited. Additionally, communication barriers can prevent youth with disabilities from reporting abuse or understanding their rights. Tailored screening tools can help identify and protect this population by ensuring that warning signs are recognized early, enabling timely intervention and support.[84]
- **End use of restraints in schools.** Ending the use of restraints on disabled teens in schools can reduce CSEC risk in several ways. Restraints, whether physical or chemical, can exacerbate feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability. They can also lead to isolation and prevent the development of self-advocacy skills, limiting the ability of individuals to seek help or resist manipulation. Furthermore, the use of restraints can normalize control and abuse,[85] making coercive practices by traffickers seem less alarming. By eliminating restraints, teens are empowered, better able to establish boundaries, and more likely to recognize and report exploitation, thereby reducing their risk of being targeted.

Specialize support for LGBTQ+ youth

- **Establish culturally specific services, spaces, and networks for LGBTQ+ youth where they can express themselves, share their experiences, and receive support without judgment.** These can include LGBTQ+ youth centers, support groups, and moderated online forums. In these environments, youth can find solidarity and advice, creating pathways to holistic safety and reducing feelings of isolation that traffickers often exploit.[86]
- **Implement comprehensive training for law enforcement and social service providers on recognizing and appropriately responding to the unique needs and risks of LGBTQ+ youth.** As a result of homophobia, transphobia, and other intersecting forms of discrimination, LGBTQ+ youth often experience stress, harassment, and disconnection from their communities. Exploiters target LGBTQ+ teens because of this lack of community care. Therefore, it is imperative that adults are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and empathy required to effectively support this population. Without proper understanding and training, officials might overlook critical signs of distress or inadvertently contribute to the youths' feelings of mistrust and isolation. By fostering a more informed and empathetic approach, these professionals can build trust with LGBTQ+ youth, encouraging them to seek help in the ways that are most helpful to them. This tailored response not only aids in prevention and early intervention but also supports overall wellbeing and safety.[87]
- **Discuss gender-affirming care holistically.** To ensure the well-being and support of transgender and non-binary youth, it is important to adopt a broad understanding of gender-affirming care. Gender-affirming care can include medical interventions like hormone replacement therapy and surgeries, but it also incorporates psychological support, social acceptance measures, and practical adjustments in daily life, like name and pronoun changes, haircuts, and shopping for new clothes. By addressing the multifaceted needs of this population through a broad spectrum of support, we can significantly alleviate mental health challenges, promote healthy development, reduce health disparities, and foster an inclusive society.[88]

Acknowledge that CSEC affects youth of all genders

- **Understand that while gender affects CSEC risk, youth of all genders need supportive services.** There is widespread recognition that cisgender and transgender girls experience high rates of sexual violence, and there has been a greater focus on them in discussions about CSEC. However, this focus has led to a lack of awareness, prevention, and intervention strategies for masculine youth, including cisgender boys, transgender boys, and masculine nonbinary youth. This gap is both a cause and an effect of the misconception that boys and men cannot experience sexual violence, which is rooted in harmful beliefs about masculinity and sexuality. It is important to expand the conversation about CSEC to include all young people, regardless of their gender, and to recognize that everyone deserves protection and support. By doing so, we can ensure a more inclusive approach that provides targeted support services for young people of all genders.[89]

Support faith leaders in offering supportive, culturally response care

- **Translate and adapt outreach materials in a manner that is culturally and spiritually resonant with specific faith communities.** Engaging members from these communities in the development process ensures that the materials are linguistically accurate, culturally sensitive, and relevant. This approach fosters trust and improves the effectiveness of the outreach efforts because materials created with an understanding of the community's values and beliefs are more likely to be received positively and acted upon.[90]

Train school personnel to identify and respond to CSEC

- **Specifically address CSEC in existing child sexual abuse prevention and response policies.** By implementing comprehensive, thoughtful, and effective prevention and response strategies for CSEC in existing Child Sexual Abuse Prevention and Response policies, schools could demonstrate a commitment to safeguarding students' rights and facilitate better training and awareness among staff and educators to recognize signs of exploitation and take appropriate action.[91]
- **Support schools in addressing online sexual harm in Title IX policies.** All educational institutions receiving federal funding must establish and implement a Title IX policy to prevent and address gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment, ensuring that all students have access to a safe and equitable learning environment. With the rise of online communication among youth, the scope of what constitutes harassment has changed. Therefore, schools must proactively address Title IX issues that arise both online and off-campus (including social media interactions and nonconsensual image sharing), as these incidents can significantly impact students' educational experiences. To effectively support students who have experienced online sexual harm, schools must establish protocols that provide immediate and compassionate assistance from trained staff, such as referrals to school-based counseling services or peer support groups. Institutions should ensure transparent communication about available resources and the processes in place to address survivors' needs. Additionally, promoting a culture of openness and understanding around non-consensual image sharing is vital; encouraging students to report incidents without fear of judgment or retaliation can help dismantle the stigma surrounding these experiences. By focusing on support and reasonable accommodations rather than solely on punitive measures, schools can create a safer environment where students feel empowered to seek help and have their experiences validated.
- **Tailor Title IX policies to the needs of Maine students.** Prioritizing solutions that best serve Maine students, rather than relying solely on federal guidance, allows schools to create policies tailored to the specific needs of their student population, leading to more effective responses to Title IX issues. Additionally, with frequent federal changes introducing instability, state-specific solutions can provide a consistent framework. Involving parents, students, educators, and community members in decision-making promotes inclusive and responsive policies.

- **Integrate a CSEC module into the existing mandated reporter training for all school faculty and staff.** In Maine, all school personnel are required to take a state-approved mandated reporter training every four years.[92] Adding a module to an existing training is an efficient way to ensure that all faculty and staff are equipped with information about identifying and responding to CSEC. Additionally, specialized training should be tailored and implemented for school resource officers, mental health professionals, and special education faculty to address their unique roles in identifying and responding to abuse.
- **Mandate the posting of information about CSEC in public schools.** The Department of Transportation launched an awareness campaign to educate millions of travelers on recognizing and reporting human trafficking.[93] A similar strategy in schools could significantly contribute to CSEC awareness and prevention, given that public schools are a central hub of activity for youth and families.
- **Consider involving students, caregivers, and families in training.** Schools are uniquely positioned to offer community violence prevention training because they are central community hubs where youth and families regularly engage. This environment offers a consistent platform for education and communication, allowing schools to effectively disseminate information, foster a culture of safety and respect, and directly impact students' and caregivers' attitudes and behaviors regarding violence prevention.[94]

Expand students' access to developmentally appropriate, medically accurate, comprehensive sexual education.

- **Broaden the topics covered in sex education and beyond.** Sex education helps prevent sexual violence by teaching individuals about consent, boundaries, and healthy relationships. It empowers young people to recognize harmful behaviors and promotes respectful communication. To be most effective, curricula should include lessons on recognizing grooming, gender identity, sexual orientation, online sexual behavior and safety, and consent in a range of classes, not just health classes.[95] This approach would ensure that all students receive this crucial information, including those with intellectual and developmental disabilities who often do not receive traditional sex education.[96] Additionally, teachers must receive the necessary training to adapt these lessons to be accessible to all students, regardless of their learning styles and abilities.

Support safer online sexual behavior

- **Ban the creation and distribution of synthetic (AI-generated) explicit images of minors.** Artificial intelligence creates synthetic images of real people. This process is done by showing the system pictures of human faces and bodies so it can learn how to make new ones that look authentic. This technology can be used to create synthetic child sexual abuse material using the faces of real minors.[97] Banning the creation and distribution of these images could deter individuals from seeking or

creating such content, as the clear legal boundaries would increase the risk of prosecution. Further, it would help maintain the integrity and safety of online spaces by ensuring that they are not flooded with harmful and illegal material, creating a safer digital environment for all users, especially youth.[98]

- **Focus on consent, respect, and culture change rather than risk reduction for individuals.** Sexual assault risk reduction strategies often place the responsibility on potential victims to avoid being assaulted. It suggests that by following certain precautions—such as avoiding certain places, dressing in specific ways, or not consuming alcohol—individuals can reduce their chances of being assaulted. However, this perspective can inadvertently lead to victim-blaming, suggesting that those who do not adhere to these precautions are somehow responsible for the assaults against them. It overlooks the fundamental issue that the responsibility for sexual assault lies with the person causing harm. In contrast, focusing on consent, respect, and culture change shifts the burden, implying that sexual violence is never the fault of the person who is harmed and that everyone has a role in creating safer communities. [99]
- **Discuss nonconsensual image sharing as a form of sexual violence.** Having explicit images or videos shared without consent can be very distressing, and it is increasingly common, particularly among youth[100]. Taking this form of sexual violence seriously is an important step in fostering a more supportive and validating environment for survivors, driving policy and educational efforts to combat this issue, and contributing to a broader cultural shift towards respecting consent, respect, and privacy in all interactions, both online and offline.

Expand Medical and Mental Healthcare Infrastructure

Healthcare providers play a critical role in addressing the physical and emotional harm caused by violence and exploitation. They are in a unique position to recognize, treat, and refer individuals who have been affected by CSEC to appropriate services. Additionally, healthcare settings often serve as safe spaces for youth and families affected by CSEC, so it is imperative that healthcare professionals are prepared to support them.[101] As such, by targeting efforts within the healthcare industry, we can effectively address and prevent the harmful impact of CSEC on individuals and communities.

The following recommendations outline action steps for healthcare providers and facilities to improve CSEC identification, response, and support to affected youth and families.

Form partnerships within and beyond the healthcare field

- **Encourage interdisciplinary collaboration within the primary care team, including nurses, physicians, and administrative staff, to ensure a coordinated approach when CSEC is suspected or identified.** Such practices encourage the sharing of information and resources, enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the response to suspected CSEC cases. This collaboration also helps in creating a

supportive environment for the patient, reducing the likelihood of re-traumatization, and promoting a pathway to recovery.[102]

- **Include healthcare providers in multidisciplinary partnerships to coordinate care and support for patients.** Collaboration should include information-sharing protocols to protect patient privacy while ensuring their safety. This approach ensures that all aspects of the patient's needs are addressed, from immediate medical care to long-term mental health support and social services.[103]
- **Establish a network of supportive care providers, including mental health professionals trained in trauma and CSEC.** This type of network allows providers to confidently refer patients to experts who are best suited to handle their specific challenges.[104] This not only enhances the quality of care but also helps in building a supportive community around survivors, reinforcing the message that they are not alone and that their experiences are validated and understood.

Leverage medical expertise to influence awareness and policy change

- **Encourage healthcare providers to actively participate in public awareness campaigns and advocacy efforts aimed at preventing CSEC and supporting survivors' rights.** By leveraging their trusted status and extensive platforms, medical professionals can play a crucial role in educating the public and influencing policies and legislation to include health perspectives in anti-trafficking efforts.[105]
- **Enhance family education.** Provide caregivers with information about CSEC indicators and the importance of open communication with their children. Providing informational brochures or online resources during visits can help parents recognize and respond to potential risks.[106]

Expand insurance coverage

- **Advocate for comprehensive insurance coverage.** Policies should cover comprehensive services for CSEC survivors, including mental health and social services, to ensure that patients receive the full spectrum of care they need without financial barriers.[107]
- **Protect pathways that allow providers to bill MaineCare using Z codes only**.[108] Z codes are used in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) to recognize the impact of social, economic, and environmental factors on an individual's health status. By permitting billing with Z codes, it acknowledges that mental health is influenced not just by biological factors but also by a wide range of psychosocial and environmental issues. Further, they help in identifying and documenting issues that may not be classified as illnesses or injuries but are critical for the diagnosis, treatment, and management of patients. This approach supports a more holistic and comprehensive treatment plan for mental health care.[109]
- **Provide enhanced MaineCare rates for therapy that is provided to youth in foster care.** Youth in foster care often have complex emotional and behavioral health needs stemming from trauma, abuse, neglect, and the instability of moving

between living situations. Enhanced rates can ensure access to high-quality, consistent, specialized therapeutic services that these youth require for healing and development. Higher reimbursement rates can also incentivize more therapists and mental health professionals to accept MaineCare, increasing the availability of services for foster youth.[110] This is particularly important in rural or underserved areas where access to mental health services may be limited.

- **Require third-party insurance companies to reimburse clinician time spent on coordination and collaboration with system partners such as child protective workers, guardians ad litem, schools, and foster parents.** This ensures a more integrated approach to patient care, as clinicians can effectively communicate and collaborate with various partners involved in a patient's life. This is particularly important when patients are navigating complex situations, such as those in foster care or with specific legal or educational needs, ensuring that all aspects of their well-being are addressed cohesively. It also results in reduced duplication of services, increased accountability, and recognition of clinicians' effort, which often goes uncompensated under current systems.[111]

Consider the physical environment

- **Display posters, brochures, and other visual materials in exam rooms and waiting areas that provide information on CSEC, including hotlines and other resources.** This is important for increasing awareness among patients and visitors, discreetly providing essential resources and support to young individuals who may not feel comfortable speaking out, and fostering a culture of support within the healthcare setting. Materials should be available in multiple languages.[112]
- **Implement protocols to establish confidential and safe environments for evaluating children potentially affected by CSEC.** This protocol should include creating private spaces for assessments, enhancing privacy in waiting areas, and clearly communicating reporting mechanisms to youth, their families, and staff. The goal is to ensure disclosures of exploitation occur without fear of retribution and away from potential exploiters, in compliance with legal requirements, thereby safeguarding the patient's well-being and enhancing identification and response.[113]
- **Invest in dedicated resources in hospitals, such as on-site social workers or case managers trained in trauma and exploitation.** Having these resources readily available in hospitals facilitates a seamless, immediate, and tailored transition from emergency care to ongoing support services, thereby enhancing the overall response to and recovery from exploitation.[114]
- **Utilize trauma-informed, third-party interpreters that can act as cultural brokers.** Such professionals facilitate communication by speaking multiple languages fluently, and they also help bridge cultural gaps by offering context around social norms, values, and practices, ensuring that all parties feel understood and respected. This approach is important because it increases the accuracy of the messages being conveyed, while also promoting mutual understanding and trust. It also acknowledges the potential impact of past traumas

on individuals (including cultural, generational, and historic traumas) to create a safer and more supportive environment for effective communication.

Incorporate screening into routine assessments

- **Identify short, evidence-based screening protocols specifically tailored for primary care, urgent care, and/or emergency settings.** To effectively identify youth and families who may be in need of services, healthcare facilities should adopt concise, evidence-based screening protocols tailored for pediatric assessments. This is particularly important in primary, urgent, and emergency care settings.[115] These protocols should focus on social determinants of health and adverse childhood experiences, utilizing tools like the Childhood Trust Events Survey (CTES) and the HEADSS assessment. Pediatric intake forms should also be revised to include questions that could indicate exploitation, such as details about living situations, employment, and relationships with adults.[116] Finally, it is critically important that training on screening incorporates information about bias, cultural awareness, and the criminalization of familial poverty.
- **Conduct behavioral and mental health assessments during routine checkups for pediatric patients.** These assessments are vital for spotting potential signs of trauma related to CSEC and should be embraced as part of a holistic patient care strategy.[117]

Invest in clinical mental healthcare

- **Offer scholarships and loan forgiveness for clinicians who specialize in providing trauma-informed care.** These initiatives can serve as powerful incentives, encouraging more professionals to specialize in this essential area of mental healthcare.[118] The current reluctance among many clinicians, particularly those in private practice, to work with youth with extensive trauma histories is largely due to the complexities and challenges associated with trauma cases.[119] By reducing financial barriers and providing targeted support, we can significantly expand the pool of skilled clinicians ready to offer the specialized, trauma-focused treatment that youth experiencing CSEC need. Expanding the workforce of trauma-informed care professionals not only addresses the immediate needs of affected youth but also contributes to the broader goal of creating a more resilient and supportive community.
- **Find creative solutions to fund system collaboration.** Insurance and healthcare reimbursement systems often have specific criteria for what types of services and care coordination activities are covered. These criteria typically focus on direct patient care services. System collaboration efforts, which involve coordinating care among different service providers, advocating for patient needs across various systems (like education, child welfare, and healthcare), and managing complex cases, may not fit neatly into the categories of services that are traditionally reimbursed. This lack of reimbursement for system collaboration can disincentivize clinicians, especially those in private practice who rely on reimbursement to sustain

their operations, from engaging with youth in the child welfare system. These youths often require extensive coordination between multiple systems to address their complex needs effectively, making the care provision more time-consuming and less financially viable for clinicians under the current reimbursement structures.[120]

- **Increase funding to mental health agencies that provide outpatient therapy to ensure that clinicians are paid competitive wages and have money for specialized training.** This helps attract and retain talent, improve the quality of care, expand access to services, support specialized treatment, and promote innovation in the field.[121]
- **Considering providing an enhanced rate for case managers who work with this population.** With adequate resources, case managers can provide more consistent, comprehensive, and tailored services, including mental health support, legal assistance, and rehabilitation programs, facilitating the youth's recovery and reintegration into society.[122]
- **Fund an intensive outpatient program (IOP) specifically for youth identified as experiencing or at high risk for CSEC.** CSEC is associated with complex social and emotional needs. By providing a specialized program, we can offer targeted interventions focusing on recovery and skill-building. IOP programs allow flexible treatment options that accommodate unique needs while allowing youth to remain in their communities. This approach promotes social support and avoids the developmental and stigmatization concerns of residential treatment facilities. Furthermore, early intervention through such a program is protective against future exploitation.

Ensure that healthcare providers are prepared to respond to substance use disorder in youth

- **Educate healthcare providers on recognizing and responding to substance use disorder (SUD) in youth, including methods for conducting proper interviews and developing treatment plans.** SUD is strongly correlated with CSEC. Young people with SUD are often targeted because substances can be used to control or coerce them into exploitative situations.[123] As such, it is crucial for healthcare providers to recognize and treat SUD early to prevent further exploitation and start the recovery process. They should have direct knowledge of community resources or know who to contact within their practice or community for assistance, because SUD treatment is complex and requires personalized, often multisystemic care.[124] It may be helpful to develop a toolkit for all healthcare providers in Maine to ensure that care is consistent across the state.
- **Continue to fund evidence-based, effective SUD prevention and treatment programs.** By continuing to support specialized programs, like the Office of Behavioral Health's pediatric team focusing on SUD treatment in adolescents and initiatives by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention aimed at SUD prevention and community engagement, we can not only target the immediate effects of substance use but also address the broader societal impacts.[125] Funding these programs ensures a comprehensive approach to SUD that includes

prevention, treatment, and community engagement, ultimately leading to healthier individuals and communities.

Train a variety of providers

- **Ensure that all emergency room staff, including doctors, nurses, and support personnel, undergo regular mandatory training to recognize and respond to CSEC.** This training should also be offered to medical providers who interact with populations at highest risk of CSEC, including urgent care clinic staff, Indian Health Service personnel, and paramedics. The training should be evidence-based, updated regularly to reflect the latest research in the field, and developed in collaboration with CSEC experts. It should cover indicators, risk factors, and trauma-informed response practices.
- **Offer regular continuing education opportunities to medical facility staff on the evolving nature of CSEC, the latest research, and effective intervention strategies.** This can include workshops, seminars, and access to online resources.
- **Create awareness campaigns to educate healthcare staff across all departments about CSEC.** This is important for fostering facility-wide culture change and ensuring more consistent identification of youth and families who may benefit from services or specialized supports. It equips all staff members with the knowledge to recognize signs of exploitation, leading to early identification and intervention, ultimately contributing to a safer, more supportive environment for patients.[126]

Specialize care

- **Ensure that all emergency rooms are required to have Sexual Assault Forensic Examiners (SAFEs) on staff or on-call 24/7 to provide specialized care for people who have experienced sexual exploitation and assault, including minors.** SAFEs are healthcare professionals trained to conduct detailed medical and forensic examinations of individuals who have experienced sexual assault or abuse. They play a crucial role in child sexual abuse response by collecting evidence in a way that minimizes trauma to the patient, providing necessary medical care, and offering expert testimony in court cases. Their specialized skills ensure that evidence is properly preserved for legal proceedings while addressing the physical and emotional needs of the survivor.[127] All SAFEs should be trained to recognize signs of CSEC and collaborate with other healthcare providers and social services to ensure comprehensive care.
- **Protect youths' access to gender-affirming care.** Conversations about youth gender identity and acceptance are increasingly common among policymakers, and protecting access to gender-affirming care is critically important for health outcomes. When access to such care is restricted or denied, young people may experience increased feelings of anxiety, depression, and isolation, and suicide risk increases considerably. Additionally, without proper medical guidance, they might

be unable to make informed decisions about their bodies, leading to health issues and compounding ripple effects that negatively impact other aspects of their lives.

- **Expand access to gender-affirming medical and mental healthcare.** Gender-affirming care creates a supportive and understanding environment that is essential for the well-being of transgender and non-binary youth, who are disproportionately affected by CSEC. By affirming their gender identity, healthcare providers can build trust and open lines of communication, making it more likely that youth will engage with resources that can bolster their health, well-being, social support networks and sense of community. Moreover, gender-affirming care seeks to support youth who have intersecting risk factors for exploitation, including experiences of discrimination, housing insecurity, abuse from caregivers, and mental health issues. Ultimately, gender-affirming care supports holistic wellness, which is crucial to preventing CSEC and aiding in intervention efforts.[128]
- **Bolster supports for Indigenous youth within Indian Health Services and Wabanaki Public Health and Wellness.** Native Americans experience higher rates of violence due to racism, historical trauma, systemic marginalization, and socioeconomic disparities.[129] The legacies of colonization and forced assimilation have had lasting effects that must be considered in CSEC prevention and intervention efforts, including the healthcare response. By implementing culturally competent care that respects and incorporates Indigenous traditions, we can improve the relevance and accessibility of health services. This approach not only fosters trust between healthcare providers and Indigenous communities, encouraging the utilization of care, but also promotes early intervention and preventative care. Additionally, it promotes environments where Indigenous youth can more safely advocate for their health and well-being. Strengthening these supports is a step towards not just better health outcomes, but also towards respecting cultural identities and fostering wellness within Indigenous youth communities.[130]

Fund paid peer support programming

- **Pay survivors to mentor youth experiencing or at risk of CSEC.** Mentorship programs are helpful because they provide youth with support from individuals who have had similar experiences. This peer-to-peer approach fosters a unique understanding and trust, helping youth feel less isolated and more understood. Through shared experiences, mentors can offer practical advice and emotional support, aiding in the healing process. This approach also encourages a sense of community and belonging, which is crucial for long-term recovery and resilience.[131] It is imperative to pay mentors to recognize their contribution, elevate the role to a professional level, promote sustainability, attract and retain talent, and promote equity. Finally, for many peer mentors, particularly those who have overcome significant challenges themselves, receiving payment can be empowering. It provides not only financial support but also a sense of achievement and recognition of their progress and contribution.[132]

- **Invest in culturally specific, community-based mentorship programming.** Programs tailored to specific cultural backgrounds can offer a more relevant and sensitive approach to mentoring. This relevance can encourage stronger connections between mentors and mentees, as they often share common cultural understandings, experiences, and languages. Such connections are vital in creating an environment where individuals feel seen, heard, and understood, fostering a sense of belonging and community.[133]

Fund treatment-focused, rather than punitive, residential programming

- **Create a residential trafficking program designed to offer holistic, treatment-focused support and rehabilitation services for youth acutely experiencing CSEC.** A program of this nature should be centered around intensive case management, offering a wide array of services to cater comprehensively to the needs of its participants. These services ought to include various mental health treatments such as interpersonal psychotherapy, Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TFCBT), and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR).[134] Alongside these, substance use treatment, peer support via survivor mentorship, educational programs, recreational activities, and job training opportunities should be provided. To ensure personalized attention and maximize effectiveness, the program should limit its cohorts to 6-8 youth, not exceeding a total capacity of 24 participants.[135] It must be inclusive, catering to a diverse age range and welcoming youth of all gender identities. Participation should be strictly voluntary, with thoughtful policies allowing individuals the flexibility to rejoin if they decide to leave, thereby respecting each participant's autonomy in their healing journey. Further, the program must carefully establish exclusion criteria to preserve a supportive and safe environment. Maintaining ongoing connections with participants through long-term after-care services is crucial, supported by a dedicated team available 24/7. Leadership within the program should give priority to employing individuals who have personally experienced exploitation, ensuring a support network that is both empathetic and understanding.[136] From a financial standpoint, it is essential for the program to accept MaineCare to guarantee accessibility for all. Additionally, there should be a focus on prioritizing referrals from the Department of Corrections (DOC) and the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS), recognizing the need for targeted support among the most affected populations.

Develop systems for remote engagement with patients

- **Implement proactive follow-up protocols for youth who may be at increased risk of CSEC.** Regular check-ins and monitoring allow healthcare providers to build trust and rapport, creating a dynamic where patients feel seen and heard. This consistent support is vital in identifying any signs of distress or changes in behavior that might indicate new or ongoing exploitation. Moreover, proactive follow-up protocols can allow for ongoing education, resource sharing, and specialized care

and support services tailored to the patient's needs, thereby promoting healing and recovery.[137] Telehealth is a valuable tool for ensuring consistent communication, particularly with patients living in rural parts of the state.

Recognize the importance of school-based services

- **Mandate that all students attending middle and high schools have access to a full-time Registered Nurse (RN) who possesses the necessary credentials as defined by the Department of Education (DOE).** RNs are trained to notice signs of exploitation, such as physical injuries and emotional distress. Their presence allows for early identification and intervention, providing immediate care and an opportunity for affected students to seek support. RNs also play a crucial role in educating students about healthy relationships and personal safety, which are key to preventing CSEC. Additionally, they can facilitate connections to further medical, psychological, and legal resources, enhancing the support system for students at risk of or experiencing exploitation.
- **Fund school-based mental health services, including school social worker and school psychologist positions.** Investing in school-based mental health professionals strengthens a school's capacity to protect and support its students against CSEC. These professionals are trained to spot and address risk factors linked to CSEC and can offer support and resources to students and families. They build trust with students, providing a confidential environment for them to report concerns or exploitation. Additionally, these professionals play a key role in educating the school community about CSEC awareness and prevention. Their ability to coordinate with other agencies ensures a comprehensive response to any cases of exploitation, enhancing student safety and well-being. Essentially, investing in school social work positions strengthens a school's capacity to protect and support its students against CSEC.

Recognize urgent care and emergency rooms as points of entry for service delivery

- **Mandate that all emergency rooms contact sexual assault advocates to offer specialized support to children identified as experiencing CSEC or those at risk of exploitation.** These advocates can be present during the child's time in the ER to provide emotional support, facilitate communication, and connect the child and their family with necessary resources.
- **Explore avenues to enhance communication and information-sharing between medical professionals and child welfare.** Effective communication ensures a coordinated approach that addresses the complex needs of youth experiencing CSEC, who often require specialized medical care, psychological support, and safety planning. It facilitates early identification and intervention, which is crucial for mitigating the long-term impact of exploitation. By sharing information and insights, professionals can make informed decisions and ensure that interventions

are timely, comprehensive, and in the best interest of the youth. This collaborative approach not only aids in the recovery and protection of the youth but also strengthens the overall response to CSEC, ensuring that all actions are informed, targeted, and compliant with legal and ethical standards.[138]

Reduce Systemic Harms

Understanding the interconnectedness of systems such as child welfare, juvenile justice, criminal justice, and immigration with CSEC is crucial for fostering an environment that minimizes risk and promotes positive outcomes. These systems play a significant role in shaping community dynamics and can be leveraged to support individuals and communities effectively. By focusing on designing and implementing these systems to meet the diverse needs of all community members, we can address challenges such as bias and discrimination, improve accessibility, enhance transparency, mitigate economic impact, respect privacy and cultural practices, and optimize resource allocation.

To enhance the community response, it is important to recognize the potential of these systems to contribute positively and work diligently toward minimizing any inadvertent harm. Progress in this area is essential, and continuous efforts to refine and improve these systems are key. By incorporating diverse perspectives and prioritizing equity, transparency, and accountability principles, we can build more resilient and supportive structures that better serve individuals and communities, ultimately leading to more just and equitable outcomes for everyone involved.

The following recommendations offer tangible solutions for promoting prosocial youth development, public safety, and meaningful accountability.

Child welfare

Enhance review of child welfare policy and practice

- **Establish an advisory committee consisting of OCFS staff and other key partners to periodically or annually review progress on CSEC initiatives and provide updates on legislative recommendations related to CSEC.** This would ensure ongoing review and evaluation of the initiatives, facilitating continuous improvement and adaptation to emerging challenges or findings. This committee can leverage diverse expertise to assess the effectiveness of current strategies and suggest necessary adjustments or new approaches. Additionally, by including a range of partners, the committee fosters collaboration and coordination among people with different perspectives, enhancing the comprehensiveness and impact of efforts to combat CSEC. Finally, regular updates on legislative recommendations help in aligning initiatives with current laws and advocating for policy changes that support the protection and recovery of affected children, thereby ensuring that

legislative frameworks are responsive to the evolving nature of CSEC and the needs of survivors.

- **Implement standardized documentation of suspected CSEC cases in the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and Maine's child welfare database, Katahdin, including referrals to the District Attorney's Office, Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs), and specialized services.** Standardized documentation of cases is crucial for ensuring consistent tracking, facilitating effective referrals to appropriate legal and support services, and improving overall response and support for survivors. A CSEC Advisory Committee (mentioned in the previous recommendation) could periodically review these data analytics to monitor trends, effectiveness of interventions, and compliance with federal reporting requirements, ultimately leading to better-informed policies and practices to protect and aid affected children.

Increase training on CSEC identification and response at all levels

- **Mandate that child welfare staff undergo advanced CSEC training every two years.** This training should incorporate the experiences of survivors to enhance understanding and empathy, particularly those who had intersecting experiences of exploitation and child welfare involvement. Additionally, CSEC should be included as a standing agenda item in all OCFS training events. It is imperative that child welfare staff are consistently updated on best practices, strategies, and insights into CSEC, thereby enhancing their effectiveness in supporting youth on their caseloads.
- **Ensure that guardians ad litem assigned to family court cases are trained to identify and respond to CSEC.** Guardians ad litem (GALs) are court-appointed advocates tasked with representing the best interests of children involved in legal proceedings, often in cases of abuse or neglect. GALs are expected to ensure that the youth's needs are prioritized within the child welfare system, and they work closely with caseworkers, families of origin, and foster caregivers. GALs' role as advocates places them in a unique position to identify youth at risk of or experiencing CSEC and influence critical decisions regarding their safety and well-being. Comprehensive training ensures that GALs are equipped with the latest knowledge about the indicators of CSEC, related trauma, and helpful response practices. Moreover, ongoing training can promote collaboration among GALs and child protective caseworkers by providing shared understanding and language around CSEC. This collaboration is vital for developing cohesive approaches to prevention and intervention, ultimately fostering stronger protective networks for youth in foster care.
- **Support CACs to host annual CSEC training or conferences with local multidisciplinary team partners, prioritizing locations with designated CSEC Coordinator positions.** This strategy ensures that professionals across different sectors are equipped with the latest knowledge and skills to identify, support, and advocate for youth experiencing CSEC effectively and in a coordinated manner. By prioritizing areas with CSEC Coordinators, it reinforces the infrastructure already in

place for a focused and specialized, collaborative response to CSEC, enhancing the overall effectiveness of interventions.

Boost screening practices among caseworkers

- **Develop and integrate a CSEC screening tool for child welfare staff, to be utilized at the inception of cases and periodically thereafter (e.g., quarterly during monthly contacts or semi-annually to align with AFCARS reporting), aiming to improve the identification of youth experiencing CSEC.** This tool would augment initial screenings by intake staff and those for missing or runaway youth. It would help ensure that any disclosures lead to CAC referrals (per current policy[139]) and provide guidance on handling CSEC reports involving caregivers in terms of investigation and case management.
- **Ensure that caseworkers are trained on bias and disproportionate impacts in screening practices.** The training should aim to enhance awareness and understanding of the potential for bias in CSEC screenings and its impact on outcomes. It is crucial for caseworkers to grasp the historical context of the child welfare system's disproportionately high intervention rates with families of color and the criminalization of familial poverty.[140] This understanding should be coupled with developing skills for engaging diverse populations with heightened sensitivity and cultural awareness. The focus should be on fostering empathy, respect, and an awareness of one's own biases. Incorporating case studies and scenarios can effectively highlight the challenges and strategies for minimizing bias during screenings, thus promoting reflective and informed decision-making. It is also vital to emphasize the importance of continuous education and peer support. These elements are key to adapting to evolving challenges and refining methods over time.[141]

Boost wraparound care infrastructure

- **Enhance multidisciplinary team (MDT) effectiveness by incorporating a range of perspectives.** Beyond the disciplines typically represented on trafficking and exploitation MDTs, invite a broad spectrum of people and organizations to participate, such as schools, social workers, housing services, utility companies, financial service providers, organizations focused on food accessibility, and at least one trusted adult that the young person has named (e.g. parents/guardians, family members, fictive kin, mentors). It is crucial to ensure the team is not only diverse in terms of professional disciplines, but also in the identities and lived experiences of its members. This diversity should encompass a wide range of cultural, socioeconomic, and demographic backgrounds. Additionally, it is essential to actively include youth who are directly impacted by the issues the MDT addresses, ensuring their perspectives and experiences contribute to shaping effective strategies and solutions. This inclusive approach will enrich the MDT's understanding and effectiveness in tackling the challenges at hand.[142]

- **Increase the number of CSEC Coordinator positions from one to four statewide, and secure ongoing funding for these positions to manage the increased caseload effectively.** Housed at the Cumberland County Children's Advocacy Center (CAC), Maine's only CSEC Coordinator plays a truly critical role in fostering collaboration among various systems partners involved in the identification, response, and support of youth and families affected by CSEC. These partners include law enforcement, child welfare, healthcare providers, and attorneys. This position strengthens the multidisciplinary response, ensuring that all aspects of the youth's safety and recovery are accounted for. However, one position cannot respond to the needs of an entire state. With three additional CSEC Coordinators housed at CACs in Lewiston, Bangor, and Augusta, there could be a more systematic and widespread effort to identify youth in need of services and implement safety plans, thereby supporting their wellness and avoiding continued exploitation. Further, caseloads could be managed more effectively. Each CSEC Coordinator would be responsible for a smaller number of cases, thereby allowing for more personalized, detailed, and focused attention to each youth's needs. This is crucial in ensuring that clients' complex and diverse needs are met comprehensively.
- **Create a specialized program within CACs to support unaccompanied minors.** The absence of records or contact with parents makes the situation of unaccompanied minors particularly challenging for child welfare. Thus, a coordinated response is crucial.[143] A CAC program for unaccompanied minors should include a tailored, specialized approach that encompasses child welfare, legal aid, and interpretation services, ensuring a culturally responsive framework. Embedding such a system in CACs leverages existing structures to provide comprehensive support, facilitating better outcomes for these youth by bringing together essential, targeted services under one umbrella.
- **Design, implement, and fund a Runaway Intervention Program (RIP) modeled after the Minnesota approach, targeting youth who have run away and/or are at risk of sexual assault or exploitation.** The program should provide intensive services and empowerment groups. It should involve caregivers and offer a comprehensive range of support including case management, mental health services, medical care, and home visits. Referrals to the program should be open to all sources without requiring involvement in the child welfare system or the justice system. Involving caregivers is crucial because they play a significant role in the lives of those receiving services. Their involvement can lead to better outcomes by ensuring that the support provided at the program is reinforced at home, creating a stable and supportive environment.[144]

Engage in better supports for out of home youth

- **Provide an enhanced board rate for foster care placements of youth known to be or at high risk of experiencing exploitation, reflecting the need for a higher level of resource parent training.** An enhanced rate incentivizes and enables foster

parents to undertake the higher level of resource parent training necessary to meet these youth's unique needs effectively.[145] It acknowledges the additional challenges and complexities involved in caring for these youth, who may require more intensive support and specialized interventions due to their experiences or risks of exploitation. This investment in training ensures that foster parents are better equipped with the skills and knowledge to provide the specialized care and support these youth require, thereby promoting their healing, fostering placement stability, and reducing the risk of further exploitation.

- **Provide additional clinical support to foster parents.** A lack of support for foster parents directly impacts the stability and well-being of foster children. Many young people in foster care go through multiple placements, primarily because foster parents may feel unable to meet their complex needs. This instability can lead to increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems.[146] Furthermore, the lack of a stable living situation can drive some youth to run away.[147] Traffickers target youth who do not have stable housing or adult connections, and youth in foster care are targeted at disproportionate rates.[148] The cycle of frequent placements and its consequences underscore the importance of providing foster parents with adequate resources and support to care for these young people effectively, aiming to foster stability and reduce the risks associated with displacement.

Juvenile justice

Assess upon intake and report on findings

- **Mandate CSEC screening, assessment, and reporting of findings during intake into the juvenile justice system.** This process should entail a thorough assessment of the level of risk or exploitation a youth might currently be facing, with all findings documented and reported annually.[149] Such an approach reflects the rigorous screening protocols already established during intake at OCFS, guaranteeing a standardized and effective method for identifying CSEC cases. By incorporating this screening process into the juvenile justice system, we can shift our focus from penalizing to understanding and supporting, because behaviors often perceived as delinquent or criminal in youth may be manifestations of their exploitation. Early identification of CSEC enables the provision of specialized care and support, specifically designed to address the trauma and complexities arising from exploitation. This could encompass access to counseling, healthcare, education, and other essential services aimed at facilitating the youth's recovery and reintegration.[150]

Increase the use of diversion in community-based programs

- **Broaden availability and use of community-based alternative justice methods.** Expanding the use of community-based alternative justice methods shifts the focus from punishment to rehabilitation and reconciliation for young people. This

approach recognizes the limitations of traditional punitive measures and seeks to address the root causes of juvenile delinquency through constructive means. Key strategies include restorative justice, which facilitates dialogue between people who have caused harm, survivors, and community members to collectively address and amend harm; mediation, which promotes understanding and personalized resolutions; community service, allowing youth to contribute positively to their communities; and educational programs that focus on social and emotional learning to prevent future offenses. These methods aim to foster responsibility, empathy, and community integration among youth, supporting their successful reintegration into society and reducing repeat offenses. By prioritizing healing and growth over punishment, communities can create a more supportive environment for the positive development of their youth, ensuring a safer and more cohesive community for all.[151]

- **Prohibit incarceration of youth based on safety concerns.** Pursuant to 15 MRS §3203 (4)(c), youth can be detained to protect them from an immediate threat of bodily harm. Prohibiting the incarceration of youth based solely on safety concerns is crucial, as this approach can have counterproductive consequences. Incarcerating young people often leads to a range of negative outcomes, including increased recidivism rates. The trauma associated with incarceration may also exacerbate underlying mental health issues, thus creating a cycle of violence and instability. When placed in detention facilities, youth may encounter influences and pressures that reinforce criminal behavior. Furthermore, incarceration disrupts vital aspects of their lives, such as education, family ties, and community connections, all of which are essential for healthy development. Finally, it is imperative to understand that many incarcerated youth have likely experienced significant trauma themselves, and their behaviors may be symptomatic of that victimization. Punishing them for actions symptomatic of their past experiences fails to be trauma-informed and does not address the root causes of their behavior.[152]

Seal juvenile prostitution adjudications

- **Pardon or seal juvenile prostitution adjudications.** When Maine decriminalized the act of engaging in prostitution for adults in 2023, a pathway was created for those criminal records to be sealed. However, this pathway was not replicated for juveniles due to an oversight. There is widespread support for making this change because Maine has not adjudicated juveniles for prostitution since 2019, recognizing that minors cannot consent to commercial sex. Instead, commercial sex with a minor is always illegal under Maine and federal law, and youth do not deserve to be criminalized for the illegal behavior of adults. Additionally, under current law, class D, E and civil offenses for juveniles are automatically sealed. Allowing the pardoning or sealing of these adjudications would prevent such convictions from hindering their future opportunities for employment, education, and housing, and making that process automatic reduces barriers to ensure that no

one slips through the cracks. It is a step towards acknowledging the complex, often traumatic circumstances that lead to such convictions.

Explore ways to minimize convictions for proxy offenses related to exploitation

- **Find alternative approaches to addressing the underlying issues that lead to proxy offense charges**. Proxy offenses refer to the charges that exploitation survivors often face for activities they were compelled to engage in as a result of their exploitation experiences. These can include charges for theft, truancy, assault, or drug offenses. We must recognize that proxy offenses unjustly penalize survivors, and policy reforms should aim to prevent the criminalization of survivors for such offenses and facilitate the expungement of their records, acknowledging their status as victims of crime. Moreover, understanding that behaviors leading to proxy offenses often signal unmet needs, it imperative to shift focus towards community-based interventions, support services, and preventive measures. These should address the root causes behind such behaviors, including exploitation, conflict, abuse, or neglect, moving away from judicial interventions that can have long-term negative impacts on a young person's life. By implementing these recommendations, not only can the legal system better support and rehabilitate CSEC survivors, but it can also contribute to breaking the cycle of exploitation and harm, ensuring a more just and supportive framework for their recovery and integration into society.[153]

Reduce the Use of Detention

- **Utilize juvenile detention as a last resort.** Juvenile detention should be a last resort due to its potential for long-term harm to young people's mental, physical, and emotional well-being. Incarcerating youth can exacerbate existing issues without addressing the underlying causes of their behavior, such as poverty, abuse, or exposure to violence.[154] Studies show high recidivism rates among incarcerated youth, indicating that detention does not deter future criminal behavior.[155] Alternatives like mediation, restorative justice, family support, gender-affirming and culturally responsive programming, and mentorship offer more effective rehabilitation by providing education, mental health care, and support. Prioritizing these approaches over detention can lead to better outcomes for individuals, families, and communities, breaking cycles of incarceration and promoting public health.[156]

Criminal justice

Center perspectives of those most affected

- **Focus on raising awareness, conducting outreach, and providing education and training to criminal justice personnel about the system's historical and current**

disproportionate harmful impacts. Certain groups of people have historically been silenced and disenfranchised by the criminal justice system, and they should have a voice in discussions of criminal justice reform. This disparity can be attributed to systemic biases, unequal access to resources, and socio-economic factors that often lead to higher rates of surveillance, arrest, and sentencing. These groups include, but are not limited to, Black and Hispanic people,[157] LGBTQ+ individuals,[158] members of tribal communities,[159] people experiencing housing insecurity, and people with mental illnesses.[160] By equipping system personnel with a deeper understanding of these challenges, ideally by hearing directly from those most impacted, we can ensure a more empathetic and informed response to a range of experiences, including CSEC. Such education enhances the effectiveness of interventions and is pivotal in minimizing inadvertent harm. This nuanced approach acknowledges the diverse backgrounds and experiences of survivors, ensuring that the criminal justice system's actions do not exacerbate their trauma. Ultimately, the criminal justice system must be both just and compassionate, and capable of addressing CSEC with the sensitivity and specificity it demands.

- **Integrate survivor-led mentorship programs within the criminal justice system.** This approach, modeled after successful implementations in Massachusetts, should be incorporated into victim services during the prosecution of CSEC cases and within case management and services offered by the Juvenile Community Corrections Officers and the Maine DOC. This approach is grounded in the knowledge that survivors of sexual exploitation possess unique insights and resilience that can significantly contribute to the healing and recovery process of people who are currently being exploited. As such, by integrating survivor-led programming, we can provide opportunities for meaningful engagement for survivors while providing survivors with relatable mentors who understand their experiences. This approach has been shown to enhance the effectiveness of victim services, promoting a more compassionate and understanding criminal justice system that recognizes the importance of survivor voices in facilitating recovery and justice.[161]

Expand protections and resources through Victim Services

- **Incorporate federal crime victim notification rights into state law.** This integration would enhance the support and protection of crime victims in Maine, including CSEC survivors. Aligning state and federal laws ensures all survivor, regardless of jurisdiction, receive consistent notifications and support, reducing confusion and enhancing their understanding of the criminal justice process.
- **Expand the list of reimbursable expenses for youth and families affected by CSEC.** The nature of CSEC means that survivors and their families often face unique challenges and expenses not typically accounted for in current compensation schemes. This expansion could include costs related to specialized therapeutic services, educational support, and other rehabilitation measures tailored to the specific needs of CSEC survivors. By broadening the scope of reimbursable

expenses, we can provide a more holistic support system that acknowledges and addresses the complex repercussions of exploitation. Implementing these changes would not only offer more comprehensive support to survivors and their families but also underline a societal commitment to addressing and mitigating the impacts of crime, particularly on vulnerable populations such as children and youth entangled in commercial sexual exploitation.

- **Raise the caps on Victims' Compensation payouts.** Currently, the financial assistance provided to victims for expenses related to their victimization is capped at a certain limit, which often falls short of covering the full extent of their needs. By increasing these limits, we can ensure that victims have access to more substantial financial support. This would help cover a range of expenses, from medical and counseling services to relocation costs, thereby facilitating a smoother recovery and reintegration process.

Consider alternative forms of justice

- **Invest in restorative, community-based healing and accountability models.** The Penobscot Nation has a Healing to Wellness program housed in the juvenile court that offers a model that significantly benefits local communities by promoting healing, accountability, and sustainable change. The program is comprehensive, integrating case management, support services (including housing, transportation, and mental health), a cultural advisor, legal representation, and a judge, alongside a local Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) program. Its foundation is built on promoting healthy coping mechanisms through healing circles, with the flexibility to escalate to formal court proceedings if needed. Notably, this approach is applicable to both juveniles and adults, offering a versatile and holistic solution to conflict resolution and rehabilitation. The effectiveness of this model lies in its holistic approach to addressing both the symptoms and root causes of behavioral and legal issues, emphasizing rehabilitation and community reintegration over punishment. By incorporating cultural sensitivity and community support, it fosters an environment conducive to personal growth and long-term wellness.[162]

Engage attorneys to defend against proxy charges and support record relief

- **Create an additional specialized defense panel, focused on common proxy juvenile crimes.** The Maine Criminal Defense Bar features specialized panels designed to provide expert defense across various types of criminal cases. Panel focus areas include, but are not limited to, homicides, sex offenses, operating under the influence, child protective, and domestic violence. These panels ensure that individuals facing criminal charges in Maine have access to defense attorneys with targeted expertise, enhancing the quality of representation and contributing to the fairness of the criminal justice system. Currently, there is only one panel focused on juvenile crimes.[163] Given that proxy crimes are so commonly linked with CSEC,[164] it may be beneficial to consider a specialized panel to address the most common

charges and ensure that those defense attorneys are well trained in both the dynamics of CSEC and legal defenses for forced criminality.

- **Expand criminal record sealing for survivors of CSEC and human trafficking.** Many survivors, including juveniles, find themselves burdened with criminal records incurred from proxy crime convictions. It is fundamentally unjust to penalize individuals for actions they were compelled or coerced into performing. As such, the scope of record sealing for these proxy crimes should be without limits, ensuring survivors can fully move past their ordeals. Currently, Maine only allows for the sealing of records associated with convictions for engaging in prostitution and certain misdemeanor drug offenses. This limited scope fails to acknowledge the wide range of offenses survivors might be coerced into committing beyond these categories. By expanding the eligibility for record sealing to include all types of crimes survivors were forced or coerced into, we would acknowledge the complex realities of their experiences, offering them a genuine second chance without the lasting consequences of a criminal record tied to circumstances beyond their control.[165]

Give time

- **Increase the statute of limitations for aggravated sex trafficking to 20 years.** Achieving justice and healing after experiencing violence is a deeply personal and complex journey. While most CSEC survivors do not interact with the criminal justice system as part of their healing process, it is essential that this system remains accessible for those who choose that path. Currently, Maine's statute of limitations (SOL) for aggravated sex trafficking is only six years, significantly shorter than the 20 years allowed for other sexual assault cases, such as gross sexual assault (rape). Survivors of sex trafficking often endure complex trauma that can hinder their willingness or ability to pursue justice through prosecution. This is especially true for minors who may not immediately recognize their situation as abusive, grappling instead with feelings of shame and fear. By extending the SOL, the legal system acknowledges these challenges, allowing survivors the necessary time to heal and reflect on their experiences before deciding whether to pursue criminal action. Moreover, a longer SOL can lead to better outcomes in terms of accountability and justice. Trafficking cases often involve intricate networks and require thorough investigations, which can demand more time. A prolonged window for prosecution enables law enforcement agencies to gather additional evidence, connect with other victims, and build a stronger case. Overall, extending the SOL presents an effective approach to trafficking prosecution, while creating a supportive environment for survivors to engage with the legal system on their own terms.

Immigration

Consider cultural dynamics in relationship-building and service delivery

- **Recognize and address mistrust.** Immigrants, refugees, and asylees often hesitate to engage with complex systems, including the immigration system and the criminal justice system. While groups of New Mainers are diverse and have a range of perspectives, many experience fear and mistrust at the thought of engaging with the current CSEC response and intervention systems. Many factors—including fear of deportation, language barriers, cultural differences leading to mistrust, fear of retaliation, lack of awareness about their rights, and negative experiences or stories within their communities—can discourage New Mainers, particularly those with uncertain legal status, from seeking help or reporting crimes. As such, we must pivot towards a more holistic and integrated approach that emphasizes community-based support, trauma-informed care, and proactive engagement. Incorporating insights from New Mainers with lived CSEC experience into the planning and implementation of these strategies can further enhance their effectiveness and relevance.[166]
- **Fund social service organizations run by and for immigrants, refugees, and asylees.** These organizations are uniquely equipped to offer culturally sensitive services tailored to the specific needs of immigrant communities, from legal aid to healthcare and education. Their insider perspective ensures that services are accessible, relevant, and respectful of diverse cultural backgrounds. Such organizations play a crucial role in empowering immigrant communities, fostering leadership from within, and building trust. Moreover, these organizations serve as vital links between immigrant communities and public services, enhancing overall public safety, health, and well-being. Their efforts contribute to stronger, more cohesive communities.[167]
- **Prioritize language access by employing interpreters who are not only trained in the complexities of sexual assault but also in cultural responsiveness.** Integrating cultural brokers into the support framework enhances communication by bridging cultural gaps and ensuring interventions are culturally appropriate. This approach fosters a supportive environment where youth feel understood, respected, and more open to receiving help, thereby improving the overall effectiveness of support services and contributing to a more holistic recovery process.[168]

Streamline legal integration

- **Fund legal services for unaccompanied minors.** Without proper legal representation, unaccompanied minors face complex immigration processes and legal systems that are difficult to navigate, particularly for youth. Legal services help ensure their rights are protected, their cases are fairly heard, and they have access to asylum or other forms of legal protection. Further, legal advocates can play a critical role in identifying and supporting youth who are at risk of or experiencing CSEC. They can ensure that the minors receive the care and support they need, such as safe housing, education, and medical care, while their immigration cases are processed. Youth who are granted asylum or other legal status are more likely to

enroll in school, learn the language, and integrate into society. This not only benefits the youth themselves but also contributes to a more diverse, vibrant, and robust community.[169]

- **Increase ease of access to state documents, including driver's licenses, birth certificates, and social security cards.** Exploiters often target people who do not have access to state-issued identification. Without official IDs, these individuals are less visible to and protected by the systems and authorities that could offer them help or protection. This lack of identification can also make it difficult for them to access critical services, find legal employment, or even secure housing, meaning their basic needs are left unmet. Understanding this dynamic is crucial in addressing and preventing exploitation, emphasizing the need for broader access to identification and support services.[170]

Conclusion

To understand CSEC is to recognize our collective responsibility to build stronger, healthier communities, and it is imperative that we recognize our capacity to do better. This report presents a range of holistic and tangible solutions to achieve that goal. These insights and recommendations stem from thoughtful, collaborative efforts and decades of both lived and professional experience.

Further, we must extend our gratitude to the survivors, service providers, systems partners, researchers, and policymakers who have laid the groundwork for our understanding of these issues. Their contributions have helped us identify viable solutions, and now, it is everyone's responsibility to transform knowledge into action. **We have the answers—and now we need to affect change.** Let us come together and commit to making a meaningful difference for our communities.

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