WESTCOAST CHILDREN'S CLINIC

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Alameda County: Estimating the scope of the problem

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To adequately address the needs of children and youth who experience commercial sexual exploitation (also called sex trafficking), we must understand the scope of the problem. Unfortunately, the number of young people who experience this abuse is not known nationally, nor at the state or community levels. To develop a more accurate understanding of this issue, we must first make exploitation visible. This means both recognizing what is occurring for an exploited child so we can intervene in helpful ways, and understanding the full scope of the problem to meet the needs of all exploited youth. To make exploitation visible and identify when it is happening in a child's life, providers need to adopt universal screening for commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) using a valid and reliable screening tool. Universal screening for CSE in children means that all youth meeting predetermined criteria are screened, not just those who are suspected of being trafficked.

This Report Brief presents what we know about the number of minors in Alameda County who are likely being commercially sexually exploited. The following are data from screenings of youth using the Commercial Sexual Exploitation Identification Tool (CSE-IT[1]), developed and validated by WestCoast Children's Clinic (WestCoast). These data are compiled from community-based organizations in the county.

Based on the CSE-IT data, we can say with confidence that **in the last 5 years, 348 children under 18 years old have shown clear signs of CSE in Alameda County and that this number represents a minimum**. There are likely more exploited youth and children in the county whom we fail to identify, in part because providers are not looking for the signs.

Screening for CSE in Alameda County reveals hundreds of children with clear signs of exploitation. Between 2016 and 2020, child-serving providers in the county screened 2,204 vulnerable youth under the age of 18 using the CSE-IT (see Table 1)[2]. Among those screened, 348 children (15.8%) showed clear signs of exploitation. An additional 565 youth (25.6%) showed

> **1 IN 7**
> *OR NEARLY*
> **350**
> *CHILDREN IN ALAMEDA COUNTY*
> *SHOW CLEAR SIGNS OF CSE*

possible signs of exploitation. In total, 913 children under 18 years old—over 40% of the youth screened in Alameda County—exhibited at least some indicators of exploitation during the 5-year period. Since screening is not conducted universally across all child-serving agencies in the county, these numbers likely represent an undercount of youth vulnerable to trafficking.

Child welfare data undercount exploited children. Though the numbers above likely underestimate the scope of exploitation in the county, they are higher than the count of exploited youth that comes from child welfare data. We can compare the above CSE-IT data to data compiled by the California Child Welfare Indicators Project (CCWIP). These data originate from the state's child welfare case management system, which is where county agencies report information on the youth in their care[3]. According to CCWIP, there were 103 allegations of exploitation in the 5-year period between 2014 and 2018 of children under 18 in Alameda County[4]. These allegations represent less than a third of the youth identified using the CSE-IT with clear indicators of exploitation.

Even if we narrow our own counts to only those CSE-IT screenings conducted in the child welfare setting, the county's CSE allegation data remain insufficient. In Alameda County, when a child or youth is removed from their home due to allegations of abuse or when they are changing their foster care placement, they are first placed at the county's Assessment Center (AC), where WestCoast staff provide 24/7 first response mental health services. These services include universally screening every youth age 10 and older using the CSE-IT, as well as younger children who are suspected of being exploited.

Of the 1,222 children under age 18 at the AC who were screened using the CSE-IT between 2016 and 2020, 185 (15.1%) showed clear signs of exploitation. An additional 343 children (29.1%) showed possible signs of exploitation. Compared to the 103 allegations of exploitation in Alameda's child

welfare data, the CSE-IT identified between 82 and 425 more youth whose signs of exploitation warrant further investigation.

Child welfare data sources may undercount the prevalence of youth experiencing exploitation for several reasons. The first is that allegations of exploitation may be hidden behind other concurrent allegations. In the CCWIP data, only the most severe allegation is reported, and exploitation is fifth in the hierarchy of abuse, behind sexual abuse, physical abuse, and neglect[5]. A more substantive reason, however, is that Alameda County has not implemented universal CSE screening. This means that exploited kids may not be screened nor identified until the signs of their abuse are unmistakable. This type of trauma may take years to surface and even then, there is no guarantee it will be reported to child welfare.

Rates of exploitation in Alameda County appear to be higher than statewide, but the data are incomplete. Between 2016 and 2020, child-serving providers screened 56,752 children under age 18 across California using the CSE-IT. Of those youth, 4,380, or 7.7%, showed clear signs of exploitation (see Table 1). In Alameda County, that rate is 15.8% – more than double the state rate. The percent of vulnerable youth experiencing trafficking in the county may truly be higher than the statewide average, as the Bay Area is commonly thought to be a "hotspot" of child trafficking[6]. However, this comparison should be interpreted cautiously. Agencies and organizations in Alameda tend to more actively look

Table 1. Number and percent of children and youth age 10-18 years old screened using the CSE-IT between 2016 and 2020.

	Alameda County Children		California Children	
Signs of exploitation	**#**	**%**	**#**	**%**
No signs or not enough information to determine*	1,291	58.6%	43,425	76.5%
Possible signs of exploitation	565	25.6%	8,947	15.8%
Clear signs of exploitation	348	15.8%	4,380	7.7%
Total	**2,204**	**100.0%**	**56,752**	**100.0%**

*This category indicates that the information available does not suggest the youth is being sexually exploited or that there is not enough information to determine a rating at the time of screening. This rating does not mean that sexual exploitation categorically is not occurring.

for signs of CSE than those in other counties. County-wide initiatives to address trafficking, including Alameda County United Against Trafficking, provider-led service coordination teams, and frequent trainings from survivor-led and service organizations, heighten awareness of exploitation among service providers. The county also has more services that target vulnerable youth, including CSE-specific services, which increase the likelihood that exploited youth will be identified. This level of attention to the problem may account for the higher proportion of youth identified in Alameda, while lack of attention and resources aimed at CSE lead to more severe under-identification in other parts of the state.

Overall, however, the data are still incomplete. Neither the state of California nor Alameda County mandate universal screening for CSE among all child-serving providers. Therefore, the rates measured with CSE-IT data represent only an estimate of the true rates of exploitation. Better data on the scope of CSE of children require universal screening across the board.

Until vulnerable youth are screened universally, true rates of exploitation will remain unknown. The actual number and percentage of exploited children in Alameda, as well as in the state, remain elusive. Given the hidden nature of the abuse and the fact that most exploited youth do not disclose their victimization[7], recognizing exploitation among children requires proactive identification. Rather than relying on children to self-disclose their own abuse, professionals who work with youth, especially vulnerable youth, must consistently screen for signs of exploitation. So long as child-serving providers fail to universally screen vulnerable youth for exploitation, especially in systems such as child welfare and juvenile probation, their ability to identify early signs of exploitation is limited. Moreover, incomplete screening data will hinder our ability to fully understand the scope of CSE among children, incapacitating a systemic response and leaving many exploited kids invisible.

About the CSE-IT Screening Tool

The CSE-IT is a validated[8], trauma-informed screening tool that enables child-serving providers in any setting to identify exploited kids. The tool integrates information from any source and does not require a young person to self-disclose their exploitation. Within the United States, the CSE-IT is used in nearly 300 agencies, ranging from child welfare to juvenile justice to community-based organizations. Between 2015 and 2020, providers across the country conducted over 130,000 CSE-IT screenings.

Endnotes

1 For more information about the CSE-IT, go to: https://www.westcoastcc.org/cse-it/

2 The data in this Report Brief do not represent the general population of Alameda County youth, but come from more vulnerable populations of young people, including youth involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, or youth experiencing

homelessness.

3 From the CCWIP "Notes on Source Data" document: "The main sources of data for this site are the University of California, Berkeley quarterly extracts from the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS)." Webster, D., Lee, S., Dawson, W., Magruder, J., Exel, M., Cuccaro-Alamin, S., Putnam-Hornstein, E., Wiegmann, W., Saika, G., Chambers, J., Hammond, I., Ayat, N., Misirli, E., Hoerl, C., Yee, H., Flamson, T., & Gonzalez, A. (2019) California Child Welfare Indicators Project Reports. UC Berkeley Center for Social Services Research. Retrieved February 17, 2021 from University of California at Berkeley California Child Welfare Indicators Project website. URL:
https://ccwip.berkeley.edu/cwscmsreports/notesOnSD.html

4 Webster, D., et. al. (2019). California Child Welfare Indicators Project Reports. UC Berkeley Center for Social Services Research. Retrieved February 17, 2021 from Kidsdata website. URL:
https://www.kidsdata.org/region/127/alameda-county/results#cat=1

5 From the CCWIP Methodology section: "Children receiving multiple allegations are categorized according to the severity hierarchy established by CWS/CMS. For example, when allegations of Physical Abuse, General Neglect and Emotional Abuse are entered for a specific child in a single report, only one allegation will be counted and it will fall under Physical Abuse since this type of abuse is the highest in the hierarchy." Webster, D., et. al. (2019). California Child Welfare Indicators Project Reports. UC Berkeley Center for Social Services Research. Retrieved February 17, 2021 from University of California at Berkeley California Child Welfare Indicators Project website. URL: https://cssr.berkeley.edu/cwscmsreports/methodologies/default.aspx?definition=allegationType&backReport=Referrals&report=

6 Jones, N., Gamson, J., Fisher, S., Fucella, P., Lee, V., & Zolala-Tovar, V. (2016). Experiences of youth in the sex trade in the Bay Area. Center for Court Innovation.

7 According to WestCoast's 2012 CSEC study, on average it took at least 2 years before a youth's exploitation was revealed and 75% of exploited youth did not see themselves as being exploited. Basson, D., Rosenblatt, E., & Haley, H. (2012). Research to action: Sexually exploited minors (SEM) needs and strengths. Oakland, CA: West Coast Children's Clinic. Retrieved February 17, 2021 from WestCoast Children's Clinic website. URL:
 https://www.westcoastcc.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/WCC_SEM_Needs-and-Strengths_FINAL1.pdf

8 Basson, D. (2017). Validation of the commercial sexual exploitation-identification tool (CSE-IT): Technical report. Oakland, CA: WestCoast Children's Clinic. To access the CSE-IT Validation Report, go to: https://www.westcoastcc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/WCC-CSE-IT-PilotReport-FINAL.pdf