



**National  
Children's  
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*The Force Behind  
Children's Advocacy Centers*

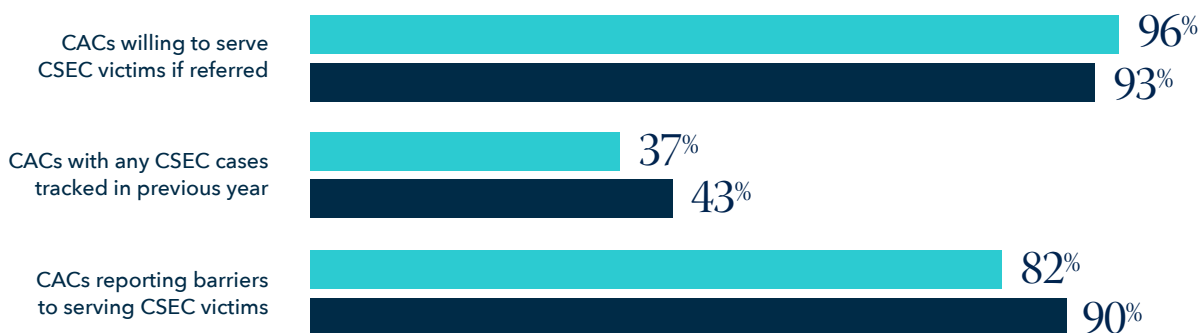
# A light on the unseen

CACs stand ready to help even  
when communities don't see  
exploited kids and youth in their midst



When it comes to delivering services to victims of the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) or child sex trafficking, willingness and capacity among Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) is nearly universal, barriers to service have declined, and the number of victims being served at CACs is up compared to several years ago. But although CACs are well-suited to serving child victims of exploitation or trafficking, the percentage of CACs that report having served and tracked at least one such case in 2019 went down since we last asked the field about cases served in 2015. Education—how to identify these cases, how to ensure these cases are being tracked, and most of all how to effectively meet the unique needs of this population—is a top priority.

## CACs' Experiences Serving CSEC Victims



■ 2020 CAC CENSUS

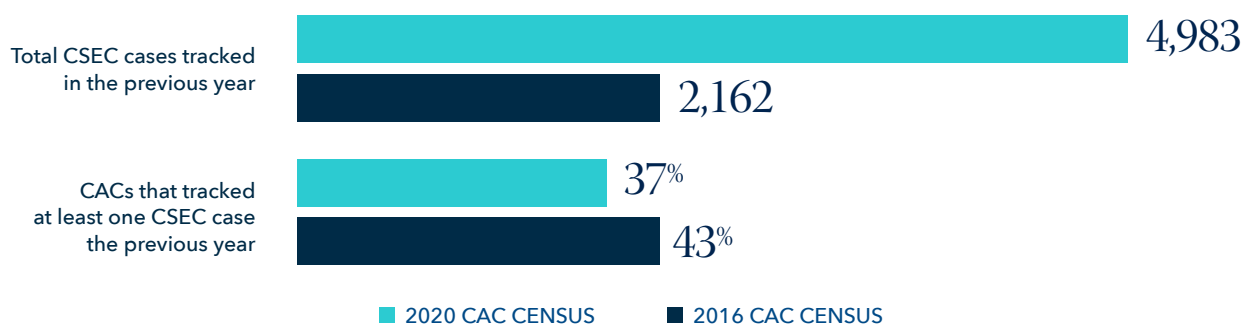
■ 2016 CAC CENSUS

# A matter of identification

To solve this problem, we have to know how to identify its victims

National Children's Alliance (NCA) surveys our CAC members every two years. Comparing our 2016 Census and 2020 Census results, we've seen an increase in the total number of CSEC cases—from more than 2,100 reported in 2016 to nearly 5,000 in 2020. (Census results are based on data from the prior full year, so these numbers are from 2015 and 2019, respectively.) At the same time, we saw a decrease in the percentage of CACs that had tracked at least one CSEC case the previous year.

## More Kids Served, by Fewer CACs?



And yet, as the number of CACs grows nationally, the CSEC response is not automatically baked into the model. In open-ended responses to a 2020 question about barriers to service, we saw multiple comments such as: "Lack of community awareness and reporting," "Partner agencies don't think CSEC exists in our county," "Inconsistencies in defining what qualifies as CSEC." It is unclear exactly what caused the total number of cases our members served to go up even as the percentage of CACs sure they've dealt with at least one such case go down. One possible explanation: As CACs develop tools to investigate CSEC cases and serve victims, CACs with dedicated programs both serve more of these victims and better track which victims are CSEC-involved.

The truth is, the commercial sexual exploitation or sexual trafficking of children exists in all types of communities: rural/remote, suburban, and urban. But, if we're not tracking a problem, how can we know it's a problem?

## What is commercial sexual exploitation?

The commercial sexual exploitation of children refers to a range of crimes and activities involving the sexual abuse or exploitation of a child for the financial benefit of any person or in exchange for anything of value (including monetary and non-monetary benefits) given or received by any person. Examples of crimes and acts that constitute CSEC:

- Child sex trafficking
- Child sex tourism involving commercial sexual activity
- Child sexual abuse materials (such as photos or videos of abuse)
- Online transmission of live video of a child engaged in sexual activity

CSEC also includes situations where a child engages in sexual activity in exchange for anything of value, including non-monetary items such as food, shelter, drugs, or protection. CSEC may also occur in the context of internet-based marriage brokering, early marriage, and children performing in sexual venues.



If you're interested in learning more about this issue, listen to "[The Child-Trafficking-to-Adult-Prostitution Pipeline](#)" episode of our podcast, *One in Ten*.

## The biggest barriers: Identification and screening

In both 2016 and 2020, we asked CACs whether a particular issue was a barrier to them providing a service to CSEC victims. The results are both an improvement and a cause for concern:

Top Barriers to Providing Services to CSEC Victims	2016	2020
Identification/screening	60%	54%
Low caseload of identified victims of this crime	60%	46%
Lack of specified training and technical assistance	43%	30%
Lack of support from partner agencies	27%	19%
Funding	43%	15%
Protocol issues with case acceptance criteria	22%	14%
Other	18%	9%
Legislative	7%	4%
No barriers to serving this population	10%	18%

Barriers are dropping

Every barrier we asked about in 2020 showed an improvement, but the fact that 54% of CACs reported identification and screening of cases as a problem is concerning. Some respondents in 2020 reported that CSEC cases are handled by agencies or units that aren't used to working with CACs. If children are labeled as delinquents, runaways, or "troubled youth," they might not be seen as candidates for CAC services.

As one respondent told us:

*"There are a lot of misconceptions among partner agencies over what constitutes CSEC and when cases should be referred for services, and this results in a lot of cases being missed or not referred to the center."*

Another said:

*"We have had conversations and even developed a task force. There seems to be denial about whether it is a problem in our area. However, logistically we are in a prime area for CSEC and other trafficking concerns. I would say identification is the first step."*

Lack of victim cooperation and lack of family engagement were also cited as factors. Youth may not see themselves as victims, or they may be afraid of identifying the perpetrator. Some CACs reported a lack of resources for transgender victims and male victims. In a variety of ways, the need for more education and awareness about who is a CSEC victim came up repeatedly in 2020 CAC Census answers.







# Service gaps hamper CACs' ability to help

**Complex service needs in CSEC cases require a public policy solution**

In open-ended responses to the 2020 CAC Census question of what other barriers to service exist, one answer appeared in multiple forms: a lack of local resources. Commercially exploited or trafficked kids and youth are more likely to need a safe place to stay. They might be homeless. Their families may not be a safe haven. They might have substance abuse issues that need treatment. If they don't see themselves as victims—perhaps because their abuser provided them with food, shelter, or protection—they may be vulnerable to revictimization. They might be seen as delinquent youth rather than victims and end up caught up in the justice system. There may be less support and therefore a lack of community resources for LGBTQ youth.

One respondent told us:

*"We need resources for CSEC victims such as inpatient treatment. We need CSEC cases to be fast-tracked through child welfare placement so those kids can be immediately placed in a secure treatment program. Because of the many steps for county approval, kids often [go] AWOL by then."*

Another said:

*"There is only one shelter for such victims in [our state]. Many of our children are identified to be at risk of becoming a CSEC, but the state and region lacks the resources necessary to identify, stabilize, and treat these children."*

By tracking CSEC victims served, CACs can be a voice for these children by demonstrating to partners and funders that CSEC is a real issue in these communities and resources are needed to address the complex needs of these victims.

## Training needs and the role of the State Chapter

In open-ended responses, CACs indicated they realized that their staff could in some cases use more training, such as in special considerations for forensic interviews, or more information about complex trauma and polyvictimization. Or some CACs may not see these cases often and feel that their staff could benefit from refresher courses. Training for partner agencies is a priority for many. And, of course, the pandemic had an effect here. Many CACs that were awarded federal grants through NCA in late 2019 to specifically improve their response for CSEC victims had to cancel or redesign 2020 training plans to accommodate new public health and safety restrictions.

The good news is, that not only do NCA and others in our field offer resources for responding to CSEC cases and supporting kids and youth who have been exploited or trafficking (see the Resources list at the end of this document for more information), NCA Chapters across the country have boosted efforts to respond collaboratively to CSEC cases in their state.

### Pennsylvania Chapter's plan boosts in-state response



In 2017, the Pennsylvania State Chapter turned its attention to addressing the commercial sexual exploitation of children, developing a plan to get its member CACs trained in identifying and responding to kids and youth in such cases.

[Children's Advocacy Centers of Pennsylvania](#) (CACs of PA) was able to garner financial support from state agencies such as the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency and the Department of Human Services.

The Chapter received a three-year Children's Justice Act grant to fund development of a comprehensive two-day curriculum to train CACs and their teams to respond to trafficking cases. Executive Director Chris Kirchner, MSW, says "Our curriculum is survivor-led, and more than half of the CACs in Pennsylvania have attended the training with their teams thus far." This has led, she says, "to two new Children's Justice Act grants for CACs of PA, which will allow us to offer specialized training for victim advocates and therapists related to child victims of human trafficking, as well as discipline-specific training for law enforcement, child welfare, prosecution, medical professionals, and court personnel."

The Children's Justice Act grants that the Chapter received cannot be used for direct service, but Kirchner says that there is a pot of money in Pennsylvania that CACs can apply for competitive grants to support services for children. Philadelphia Children's Alliance, for example, received funding for a full-time therapist for child victims of human trafficking.

Chapters excel at boosting collaboration between CACs in their states. As individual CACs gain expertise in responding to exploitation and trafficking cases, they can become resources for other centers in the state that aren't used to seeing such cases.

# Conclusions

NCA's CAC members reported serving a higher number than ever of children who had experienced exploitation or sexual trafficking, and nearly all CACs are willing to serve these children. But we know that there is more work to be done in identifying victims. And a lack of local resources may impede response.

All CACs should track whether they serve CSEC victims. Beyond that, education is essential—especially teaching ourselves, our partners, and our communities how to identify and respond to kids and youth in need. State Chapters stand ready to help CACs address exploitation and trafficking cases, and NCA and our own partner organizations have a wide range of resources available. Working collaboratively—which CACs excel at—we can help these children heal.

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## Resources

NCA has multiple resources available to our members on supporting children who have been the victims of commercial sexual exploitation or trafficking, as have other partner organizations. Included among these resources are those to help identify, screen, and investigate cases. We also have resources that can be shared with partner agencies and caregivers. We've collected these resources on a page in our community learning system, NCA Engage:

### [Child Sexual Exploitation Resource Toolkit](#)

Many of these resources were created through NCA's Commercially Sexually Exploited Children Collaborative Work Group (CWG), which brings together CACs, State Chapters, Regional CACs, and subject matter experts in the broader field. More information is [available on NCA's website](#).

Finally, we recommend that NCA members and others interested in child protection subscribe to [One in Ten](#) podcast for conversations about CSEC and other topics.



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