Child Sexual Abuse

INTRODUCTION

During the fall of 2023, Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) researchers conducted a statewide study to establish a baseline for public perceptions related to the awareness, understanding, and attitudes about challenges that Utah women and girls face (see Background & Methods for details). The goal of the study was to support the work of 18 areas of focus (spokes) within the movement called A Bolder Way Forward, which is dedicated to helping more Utah girls and women thrive. One of the 18 areas of focus is child sexual abuse, and this summary shares findings that illuminate present circumstances and establishes a baseline to track progress in a few key areas.

BACKGROUND

According to the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) data, the "prevalence of sexual child abuse in Utah is higher than nationally (13.9% or ~1 in 7 vs 11.6% or ~1 in 9)." Several other sources also allude to findings that child sexual abuse is indeed a serious and troubling concern in Utah. However, it has been difficult to track the status and progress in Utah with the available data. The four child sexual abuse questions (survey items) asked in this new study provide additional insight that can guide families, communities, and leaders to act in ways that will increase safety for more Utah children. Although the items focus on Utahns' understanding and perceptions, these insights are critical to create societal change.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Participants responded to each survey item using a 7-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=some-what disagree, 4=neither disagree nor agree, 5=somewhat agree, 6=agree, 7=strongly agree). For Sample 1 (non-probability), 2,530 Utahns responded to the four questions, and Sample 2 (representative) had 650 participants (Total=3,180).

1. Problem: The first survey item was "In your immediate community (e.g., neighborhood, family, faith, club, business), child sexual abuse is a problem." The statistical mean was 4.45 (SD 1.73) for the non-probability sample and 3.80 (SD 1.37) for the representative sample. The large standard deviations tell us that the values in the data set range further from the mean. In the representative sample specifically, 24.6% were neutral, while 40.8% disagreed that child sexual abuse is a problem in Utah. See combined demographic findings below.

DEMOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

Gender: Women's agreement levels were significantly higher than men's (4.41 and 3.92, resp.).

Age: Participants 30–34 and 40+ were more likely to agree, but the means were still only 4.20 to 4.65.

Education: The more education, the stronger the agreement.

Marital Status: Married but separated and divorced individuals had the highest agreement levels.

Income: There were no significant differences among income levels.

Children: Parents who reported more than one teen at home had higher agreement levels.

Race & Ethnicity: Asian participants had the lowest agreement (some-what disagree), with others around neutral.

Religion: There were no significant differences among religious affiliations or religious activity.

Employment: There were no significant differences, although full-time students had the lowest agreement mean.

Residency: Those living in Utah 6–10 years and more than 21 years had higher agreement.

Counties: Counties with the highest agreement included Emery, Carbon, Wasatch, Uintah, Cache, Weber, Millard, and Davis (~4.30–5.00).

2. Preventable: The second survey item was "Child sexual abuse is preventable." The statistical mean was 6.01 (SD 1.07) for the non-probability sample; and 5.60 (SD 1.37) for the representative sample. It appears that, with both samples combined, 46.8% agreed at some level with the statement, while 24.5% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 28.7% disagreed. The non-probability study participants were more hopeful in terms of agreeing that child sexual abuse is preventable. The combined demographics for this question are summarized below.

DEMOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

Gender: Women's agreement levels were similar to men's (5.86 and 5.84 resp.).

Age: Individuals in the 25–55-year-old ranges were the most agreeable, while those 70+ had the lowest, although still "somewhat agree."

Education: The most agreeable participants were those with bachelor's and graduate degrees.

Marital Status: Agreement levels were similar in all categories except "other."

Income: Higher income levels generally had higher agreement.

Children: There were no significant differences between those who had children or not; parents having children of varying ages reported no significant differences.

Race & Ethnicity: Those who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native were likely to agree less.

Religion: There were no significant differences among religious affiliations or religious activity.

Employment: Highest agreement levels were from full-time students and the lowest from retirees.

*Denotes statistically significant differences within the demographic categories.

Residency: There were no significant differences regarding how long people had lived in Utah and their levels of agreement.

Counties: Although there were no statistically significant differences among counties, rural counties had both some of the highest and lowest levels of agreement.

3. Prevalence: The third survey item was "Child sexual abuse is more prevalent in Utah than the national average." The statistical mean was 4.96 (SD 1.36) for Sample 1 and 4.29 (SD 1.34) for Sample 2. For this question, 42.4% (1,346) of participants in a combined analysis selected "neither agree nor disagree," which reflects a lack of knowledge or understanding of national data. While only 9.4% responded with any level of disagreement, 48.1% agreed that Utah's prevalence may be higher than national levels. See the demographics below.

DEMOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

Gender: Women's agreement levels were significantly higher than men's (4.91 and 4.40, resp.).

Age: The highest agreement came from respondents in the 25–59 age ranges. Over 70 was the lowest.

Education: The participants with the highest agreement levels were those with bachelor's and graduate degrees.

Marital Status: Married but separated and divorced respondents had the highest agreement levels.

Income: Higher income levels had higher agreement.

Children: There were no significant differences among categories.

Race & Ethnicity: White and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander had the highest agreement.

Religion: Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had significantly less agreement (4.54), followed by Catholics (4.78); all others had statistical means between 5.01 and 5.24.

Employment: Retirees and full-time homemakers had the lowest levels of agreement.

Residency: There were no significant differences in agreement means and length of time living in Utah.

Counties: The counties with the highest agreement (awareness) included Garfield, Grand, Piute, Wasatch, Cache, Duchesne, Salt Lake, and Utah. Emery and Millard counties were the lowest, but they had very small sample sizes.

4. Involvement of Minors: The final survey item was "The majority (more than 50%) of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by another minor or peer." The statistical mean was 4.28 (SD 1.27) for Sample 1 and 4.33 (SD 1.29) for Sample 2 (closer than the others). Of those who responded, 44.5% neither agreed nor disagreed, which shows a lack of understanding of the actual data; 19.7% disagreed, and 35.8% agreed at some level. There was not a statistical difference between Samples 1 and 2. See the summary of demographics for all participants below.

DEMOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

Gender: Women's and men's agreement levels were the same (4.28).

Age: Participants in the 18–24 age range were significantly more likely to have agreed with this statement, but the mean was still not high (4.48, SD 1.36).

Education: The categories with the highest statistical means were "some high school" (4.67, SD 1.13) or "high school graduate or equivalent" (4.48, SD 1.34), but these were still lower than somewhat agree.

Marital Status: There were no significant differences among marital status categories.

Income: There was not a significant difference among categories.

Children: There were no significant differences between parents and nonparents, but there were differences among those who had two or more children in the 0–5 age category (higher agreement) than other categories.

Race & Ethnicity: There were no significant agreement differences among race/ethnicity categories.

Religion: There were no significant differences among various religious categories or religious activity levels.

Employment: Full-time homemakers (4.88) had significantly lower levels of agreement than did all others.

Residency: There were no significant differences among categories.

Counties: There were no significant differences by county. Most survey participants around the state neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.

CONCLUSION

This summary highlights key findings regarding four questions about Utahns' perceptions of child sexual abuse. Respondents from across the state participated in the study. Sample 1 was a non-probability or convenience sample, and Sample 2 was a representative sample. Although the second aligns more closely with the awareness, understanding, and attitudes of the general Utah population, Sample 1 provides insight into the views of a distinct set of Utahns (see Background & Methods for the demographic details on both samples). Each is useful in understanding Utahns' perceptions of child sexual abuse.

Through the years, child sexual abuse has seldom been discussed openly, but Utahns' perspectives are finally shifting, due in large part to the work of Saprea, Prevent Child Abuse Utah, the Malouf Foundation, and The Policy Project. Utah's challenges with child sexual abuse must be addressed immediately. We must raise awareness and take action to protect Utah's children!

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