



Child Sexual Abuse: What Utahns Need To Know

Setting the Stage

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a significant social, criminal justice, and public health issue that impacts families, neighborhoods, and communities of all racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds. CSA is underreported, underfunded, and often accompanied by lifelong negative impacts on survivors' physical, mental, and emotional health. Importantly, we acknowledge that not all who have experienced child sexual abuse feel that the term *survivor* (instead of *victim*) adequately conveys their feelings and experiences. However, for the sake of simplicity and to align with the terminology used in most research, we use the term in this report. Unfortunately, most survivors do not disclose the abuse until they are adults—and that is *if* they disclose at all—resulting in many child victims who do not receive help, services, or support, and may even operate under the mistaken idea that they were responsible for what happened to them. In fact, it is widely accepted among researchers and child advocates that the actual incidence of sexual abuse is higher than current data suggest, and self-blame, embarrassment, threats, fear of not being believed, and apprehension about consequences to the perpetrator may contribute to underreporting.

Child sexual abuse is a critical issue to address, and, since Utah girls experience disproportionate rates of CSA, bringing attention to the issue aligns with the Utah Women & Leadership Project's (UWLP) mission to strengthen the impact of Utah girls and women. Our hope is that this snapshot will serve as a call to action for every Utahn to unite under a comprehensive strategy to address CSA and protect *all* Utah children.

This research snapshot focuses on four key areas:

- 1) Defines CSA and provides statistics regarding prevalence data at state and national levels, and among various demographics,
- 2) Presents survey results of Utahns' awareness, understanding, and perceptions of the issue of CSA,
- 3) Describes potential social, physical, mental, and emotional long-term impacts of CSA, and,
- 4) Makes recommendations for addressing and preventing CSA.

Overview of Child Sexual Abuse

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines CSA as “the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend and is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared, or else violate the laws or social taboos of society.”¹ CSA may or may not involve physical contact. While CSA disproportionately impacts girls and women, anyone can be victimized. In addition, though most offenders are male, all genders can perpetrate sexual abuse. Furthermore, victimization may be the result of the actions of an adult but may also be caused by another minor/older child. The circumstances of a child's experience with sexual abuse will vary from case to case, and some children may not even realize what they experienced was abuse until adulthood, but whatever the circumstances, CSA is a form of maltreatment that no child should endure.

Research over several decades has attempted to determine the scope of the problem. The most common types of data collection involve surveying children and adolescents regarding recent experiences, and surveying adults about their experiences as children. Results of this research are nuanced, but, while valuable, they also reveal limitations of data collection, including recall bias, social desirability bias, and inconsistencies in how individuals define sexual abuse. Hence, it is common to encounter different statistics regarding national and local rates of CSA (see Table 1 for significant organizations and corresponding rates).

Table 1. National CSA Statistics by Organization

Organization: CDC

Statistics: 1 in 4 girls, 1 in 20 boys

Sources: Study conducted nationwide telephone surveys with adolescents in 2003, 2008, and 2011.² Study conducted telephone interviews of a 13k+ nationwide representative sample of children and adolescents in 2008, 2011, and 2014.³ Study facilitated through an online questionnaire of a nationwide representative sample of individuals ages 18–28.⁴

Organization: Crimes Against Children Research Center

Statistics: 13.5–21.7% children, 19.8–31.6% girls, 6.2–10.8% boys

Source: Study facilitated through an online questionnaire of a nationwide representative sample of individuals ages 18–28.⁵

Organization: Darkness to Light

Statistics: 1 in 10 children

Sources: Report from the Children’s Bureau in the US Department of Health & Human Services.⁶ Study published in 2021 of Texas data analyzed from the Behavior Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS).⁷

Organization: RAINN

Statistics: 1 in 9 girls; 1 in 20 boys

Source: Study involving nationwide telephone surveys conducted with adolescents in 2003, 2008, and 2011.⁸

To quantify the prevalence of CSA in the state, Utah uses two surveys to collect retrospective data that report on two age groups. The Utah Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) gathers adults’ responses regarding childhood experiences, and the Utah Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBSS) gathers responses from high school students and asks them to report on the previous 12 months.⁹ Both instruments are utilized by the Utah Department of Health and Human Services.

According to BRFSS data, 13.9% of Utahns indicated they had experienced physical sexual abuse during childhood, a rate of one in seven Utah children.¹⁰ When looking specifically at women, nearly one in five (19.2%) reported having been abused.¹¹ To put the percentages in context, 2019 data detailing population by age multiplied by those percentage rates indicate that 131,183 Utah children have been or will be victimized before they reach adulthood, with 88,456 of victims being girls and young women.¹²

Survey data for adolescents tell a similar story: 14.8% of surveyed high school youth reported being forced to do “sexual things” that they did not want to do during the “last 12 months,” and that number increases to more than 1 in 5 (21.4%), based on responses from female students.¹³ It is worth noting that rates in Utah are higher than national averages for both data sets (see Table 2).

Table 2. Prevalence of Self-Reported Child Sexual Abuse among Adults and Youth by Gender

Age Group	Utah Females	Utah Males	U.S. Females	U.S. Males
Adults	19.2%	8.6%	17.7% ¹⁴	7.0% ¹⁵
Youth	21.4%	8.2%	17.9%	4.6%

While girls and young women are more likely to experience CSA, other factors may also increase an individual’s vulnerability to abuse. Sexual minorities experience disproportionately high rates of sexual abuse, as LGBTQ+ youth are nearly four times more likely to be victimized,¹⁶ and are particularly vulnerable to experiencing unwanted sexual advances online.¹⁷ Furthermore, children who have mental

and/or physical disabilities are also more vulnerable to being victimized.¹⁸

In addition, both nationally and locally, individuals who belong to racial/ethnic minority groups are more likely to experience sexual abuse.¹⁹ Compared to the overall national average for both men and women (12.6%), 18.8% of American Indian/Alaska Natives, 7.5% of Asians, 14.6% of Black or African American, 13.3% of Hispanic or Latinos, 21.6% of multiracial (non-Hispanic) people, 21.2% of Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders, and 12.0% of White (non-Hispanic) adults report a history of being sexually abused as children. The trend is similar in Utah (see Table 3).²⁰ While specific and comparable data sets are not available by gender and race/ethnicity, given the significant difference between rates of sexual abuse of girls and women, it is reasonable to infer that the higher rates of abuse among racial/ethnic minority groups also represent a female majority.

Table 3. Child Sexual Abuse by Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	Utah	US
American Indian/Alaska Native	21.0%	18.8%
Asian	9.2%	7.5%
Black/African American	26.0%	14.6%
Hispanic/Latin	15.9%	13.3%
Multiracial (non-Hispanic)	9.3%	21.6%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	15.3%	21.2%
White (non-Hispanic)	16.5%	12.0%
Overall Average	13.9%	12.6%

It is worth reiterating that because most often children delay disclosing sexual abuse until adulthood—and that is if they disclose at all—data likely do not represent the full reality of the incidence and prevalence of child sexual abuse. In fact, one source stated that an estimated 60.0% to 70.0% of adults do not disclose their abuse as children.²¹ Another report published by CHILD USA²² focused on analyzed data from a sample consisting of only boys and men. They found the age of first disclosure of child sex abuse was 14.0% as children, 5.0% between the ages of 18 and 29, 17.0% for men ages 30 to 49, 51.0% between the ages of 50 and 69, and 14.0% while the men were ages 70 to 90. Yet, on top of that, the researchers estimate that 30.0% never came forward at all.

Online child sexual exploitation and other forms of online exploitation have also been shown to have “a devastating, severe and long-lasting consequence on victims and their families.”²³ It is also important to note that with the increase in the distribution of online child sexual abuse materials and other forms of online exploitation, instruments used to measure the prevalence of child sexual abuse will need to be updated and expanded to account for these forms of maltreatment. Current Utah data do not account for sexual abuse that is facilitated by or distributed through online channels.

Another relevant data set comes from the justice and corrections arena. According to the United States Sentencing Commission, for fiscal years 2019–2023, Utah is, unfortunately, tied for 5th place in the nation for the number of individuals sentenced for sexual abuse. However, sexual offense cases have high attrition and notoriously low rates of prosecution.²⁴ So while it is positive that Utah is holding offenders accountable, the reality is that cases that reach the sentencing stage represent only a fraction of sexual crimes. In fact, in August 2024 the state’s sex offender registry included 9,022 individual offenders.²⁵ While not all registered offenders are responsible for crimes against children, research suggests that approximately 80.0% of sex crimes are committed against child victims.²⁶ These realities offer a hint of understanding the scope of the problem in Utah, especially as not all sexual abuse perpetrators have been identified as such.

Furthermore, studies have confirmed that those on the list of registered sex offenders are not the individuals whom parents and guardians should be most concerned about. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports that in 90.0% of cases of child sexual abuse, the child (or someone in the child’s family) knows the perpetrator.²⁷ “Stranger danger” in terms of child sexual abuse is largely a myth, meaning that the people in the child’s immediate circle of family, extended family, neighbors, coaches, church leaders, teachers, and even older kids present the most risk, and for those children who have experienced sexual abuse, they knew the abuser—perhaps even trusted or relied on them—before any abuse ever occurred.

Sex trafficking children, online exploitation or solicitation, and child sexual abuse materials (known colloquially as “child pornography”), all of which are forms of child sexual abuse, are receiving increased attention. The increase in public awareness is positive, as the proliferation of online child sexual abuse materials has resulted in one of the fastest-growing illicit online industries, leaving countless victims paying the price.²⁸ However, it is critical that attention to these issues does not detract from the reality that children are often trafficked by someone close to them (frequently a parent), and that online perpetrators are often also known by their victims offline.²⁹

Utahns’ Perceptions

In the fall of 2023, the UWLP conducted its inaugural statewide study to measure the awareness, understanding, and perceptions of Utahns regarding challenges that women and girls face. Of the 80-question survey, four focused specifically on child sexual abuse. Respondents were prompted to select their level of agreement (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=somewhat disagree, 4=neither disagree nor agree, 5=somewhat agree, 6=agree, 7=strongly agree) to the statements in Table 4. See also the statistical

means for both the *representative* and *convenience* samples in this study.³⁰

The results are troubling: regarding the first question, 24.6% of representative sample respondents selected neither disagree nor agree, and 40.8% disagreed. Moreover, 28.7% of the combined samples disagreed on some level that CSA is preventable.³¹ These are important perceptions to measure—and ultimately shift—as Utahns will not engage in solving a problem that they do not believe exists or can be prevented.

Table 4. Utahns’ Awareness, Understanding, and Perceptions – 2023 Findings

Survey Statement	Rep. Sample Mean (N=650)	Conv. Sample Mean (N=2,530)
1. In your immediate community (e.g., neighborhood, family, faith, club, business), child sexual abuse is a problem.	3.80	4.45
2. Child sexual abuse is preventable.	5.60	6.01
3. Child sexual abuse is more prevalent in Utah than the national average.	4.29	4.96
4. The majority (more than 50%) of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by another minor or peer.	4.33	4.28

In the fall of 2024, UWLP launched a similar study.³² While one of the four questions regarding CSA was changed, the results of the two studies indicate the work that remains to be done to shift Utahns’ awareness, understanding, and perceptions regarding the prevalence, impact, and preventability of CSA (see Table 5).

Table 5. Utahns’ Awareness, Understanding, and Perceptions – 2024 Findings

Survey Statement	Rep. Sample Mean (N=1,920)	Conv. Sample Mean (N=2,516)
1. In your immediate community (e.g., neighborhood, family, faith, club, business), child sexual abuse is a problem.	4.01	4.49
2. Child sexual abuse is preventable.	5.56	5.98
3. Child sexual abuse is more prevalent in Utah than the national average.	4.33	4.95
4. I know where to find resources to help prevent child sexual abuse.	4.94	4.78

The new survey item, “I know where to find resources to help prevent child sexual abuse,” sets a baseline for future years’ studies. While the statistical means for both samples

were close to “somewhat agree,” 20.6% of respondents disagreed, and 15.9% selected neither agree nor disagree.

Long-Term Impacts of CSA

An extensive body of research has established the connection between CSA and a variety of mental, emotional, physical, and social impacts. The most common symptoms among survivors include depression, anxiety, sleep issues (e.g., nightmares, insomnia), post-traumatic stress disorder, and sexual dysfunction. In addition, chronic physical pain, substance use disorders, dissociation, flashbacks, triggers, relational challenges, shame, suicidality and self-harm, disordered eating, and other psychological symptoms are also frequently reported.³³ For example, one study reported a disproportionate rate of insomnia among adult women with a history of child sexual abuse, with more than 70.0% experiencing intermediate to high symptoms.³⁴ Another study found that sexual abuse was the type of child maltreatment most strongly and consistently associated with suicidal behavior.³⁵ As a consequence of the physical, mental, and emotional impacts, CSA survivors are more likely to leave college without a degree, report 14 or more poor mental or physical health days per month, and are up to five times more likely to be hospitalized for a mental or physical health issue.³⁶ Furthermore, CSA victimization is strongly tied to revictimization, as 87.0% of trafficking victims report a history of CSA, and nearly half of survivors will be revictimized in adulthood.³⁷

While it is true that some victims will go on to sexually harm others, there is mixed evidence regarding the “cycle of sexual abuse” in research. Some studies have shown a correlation between a history of CSA and future sexual offending.³⁸ Several studies correlate *other* types of childhood maltreatment (e.g., physical abuse and neglect) to subsequent sexual offending, specifically among men.³⁹ The rate of CSA victimization is overwhelmingly and disproportionately high for girls who have been detained in the juvenile justice system, and this is especially true among girls of color, earning the descriptor “the sexual abuse to prison pipeline.”⁴⁰ However, research examining protective factors that disrupt the “cycle” indicate that being victimized in childhood need not suggest that future perpetration is an inevitability.⁴¹ Moreover, research shows that providing resources for mothers who are survivors of CSA is critical, as outcomes for children are improved as their mothers are able to experience healing.⁴²

In addition to the high price paid by survivors, the resulting economic impact is high. In 2015, the annual cost of CSA in the US was estimated to be more than \$9.3 billion (the equivalent of \$12.52 billion in 2025), an amount reflecting survivors’ healthcare costs, loss of productivity, child welfare costs, violence/crime costs, special education costs, and suicide death costs.⁴³

More recently, a study examined the high costs of incarcerating sex offenders. Based on 2021 calculations of cost per inmate and estimates of sex crimes committed against children, the US spends \$4.4 billion annually to incarcerate sex offenders in state prisons, another \$508 million in federal prisons, and yet another \$538 million for sex offenders sentenced to secure civil commitment facilities.⁴⁴ Certainly holding accountable those who commit crimes against children is appropriate, and yet the high cost of incarcerating a fraction of those who have already sexually abused a child necessitates finding a solution where monies can be spent *before* any child is harmed.

What Utahns Can Do

As indicated by the UWLP research studies cited previously, one critical component of creating change in Utah is for residents to become educated about CSA. Statistically, one in five⁴⁵ adult Utah women is a survivor of CSA, demonstrating the likelihood that Utahns know and interact with survivors, or may be one themselves, daily or at least weekly. Understanding how CSA may impact a survivor is also important, as is supporting them find resources to help them heal.

As Utahns gain a better understanding of the scope of CSA issues, they will realize the importance of believing when someone discloses that they were sexually abused as a child and responding supportively. To learn more about the process of disclosure and strategies for responding appropriately, engage with Utah’s “[Start by Believing](#)” awareness campaign and invite friends and family to join. Avoid questions or statements that may unintentionally convey responsibility for what happened to them (e.g., “Why did you not tell anyone?” or “You should have run away!”). A child is *never* responsible for preventing an adult or older person from harming them.

Utah has primarily focused on policy that punishes an offender after abuse has occurred. During the 2024 legislative session, funding was allocated to include CSA prevention in K–6 curriculum, which is an important step in the right direction.⁴⁶ Additional support and education programs for parents, children, and community members are provided through a variety of resources, including [Saprea](#), [Prevent Child Abuse Utah](#) (PCAU), [Utah Children’s Justice Center Program](#), the [Malouf Foundation](#), and [GenerationAll](#). We encourage all Utahns to refer to these important [resources](#) and to share them with others. In addition, because other minors are responsible for at least a portion of sexual abuse (and some sources suggest a significant portion),⁴⁷ teaching children the principles of respect, consent, and bystander intervention will contribute to positive change. We encourage Utahns to contact their local elementary school to ask about programming for CSA prevention; if none exists, contact the [CSA spoke leaders of A Bolder Way Forward](#) to collaborate on bringing curriculum into the school.

To teach children and parents or guardians about all aspects of CSA, expansion of a comprehensive, evidence-based set of CSA prevention programming is required to address this public health issue. Sexual crimes are among the only forms of victimization in which too few financial resources exist to prevent a potential offender from offending, and conversations about such interventions are generally absent in the public sphere. However, not addressing prevention at the level of a potential offender is much like trying to prevent drunk driving fatalities only by teaching the public to avoid drivers who are drunk. Programs such as [Help Wanted](#) and [Stop It Now!](#) provide important interventions for individuals who are at risk of sexually harming a child. Additional evidence-based resources, such as those provided by PCAU through home visiting programs, can provide additional support for Utah parents, increasing children's safety and wellbeing at home. Prevention programs require funding to operate and scale, and Utahns can donate to support programs. Utahns can also encourage policymakers and government leaders to invest in prevention solutions that will address CSA from every angle. Additional research—both to deepen understanding of the scope of CSA and to measure impact of interventions—is an ongoing need.

Finally, as Utah has a strong religious cultural component, community members are encouraged to examine messaging that may cause harm—albeit unintentionally—such as entangling sexual purity and individual worth, comparing someone's loss of virginity to their becoming a “licked cupcake that nobody wants” and the like.⁴⁸ Such messages may, for a survivor, suggest they are to blame for their abuse or that after abuse they have less value than others, perpetuating feelings of guilt and shame. Messages that promote healing are optimal. Suggestions for how we can support someone who has been abused can be found in this [religious resource](#).

Conclusion

Given the abundant evidence that child sexual abuse is a persistent problem in Utah that results in long-term and harmful impacts to individuals, families, communities, and overall public health, Utahns need to do more to understand the issue and engage in various types of prevention. We invite legislators, organizations, and individuals throughout Utah to contribute to meaningful policy and societal change. As the children of today prepare to become Utah's leaders of tomorrow, they need our protection and support. Child sexual abuse is preventable, and together we can make that a reality for all Utah children.

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