

# COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN: ATTORNEY INSIGHTS AND IDENTIFIED TRAINING NEEDS

## First Star Institute

Noy Davis, JD and Kimberly Dennis, MPA

In collaboration with the:

Wilbanks Child Endangerment and Sexual  
Exploitation Clinic, University of Georgia Law  
School

Emma Hetherington, JD

April 2026

## Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: Attorney Insights and Training Needs

Noy Davis and Kimberly Dennis, First Star Institute in collaboration with Emma Hetherington, Wilbanks Child Endangerment and Sexual Exploitation Clinic, University of Georgia Law School

Copyright © First Star Institute 2026

### Acknowledgements

Many individuals and organizations helped make this project possible. First Star Institute (FSI) would like to thank its dedicated supporters for their generous financial support and continued commitment to confronting the difficult issue of the commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking of children and youth. This report would not have been possible without their assistance.

We are also deeply grateful to our project advisor, Kathi L. Grasso, J.D., our report collaborator, Emma Hetherington, J.D., Clinical Associate Professor and Director, Wilbanks Child Endangerment and Sexual Exploitation Clinic, University of Georgia School of Law, and to Cathy Krebs, J.D., Director, ABA Litigation Section Children's Rights Litigation Committee, American Bar Association. The project benefited greatly from their astute feedback and assistance with the overall project research design and implementation. We applaud their dedication to improve the safety, health and well-being of our most vulnerable children and youth.

We would also like to extend our thanks to the attorneys for children and youth who pilot tested the survey and to the many organizations that helped test or disseminate the survey, including: the ABA Litigation Section Children's Rights Litigation Committee, the ABA Criminal Justice Section Juvenile Justice Committee, The Gault Center (formerly National Juvenile Defender Center), the National Association of Counsel for Children (NACC), the Children's Law Center of California, the Colorado Office of the Child Representative, the DC Children's Law Center and Maryland Legal Aid. Their assistance was invaluable in helping us refine our survey and in enabling us to obtain a broad range of attorney voices and perspectives.

Lastly, and importantly, we deeply appreciate the attorneys who took the time to complete the survey and provided valuable insights on what more is needed to help all advocates more effectively serve their clients.

### About First Star Institute

First Star Institute envisions a world where abused and neglected children have the support and tools they need to lead happy, healthy and productive lives. First Star Institute was founded on December 15, 2015, to promote best practices in serving abused and neglected children through education, research and the law, and to continue the policy initiatives of First Star, a 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to improving life for child victims of abuse and neglect. Our work addresses issues of chronic undereducation, unemployment and homelessness. Our programs promote best practices for foster youth in college; support an abused child's right to be heard in legal proceedings through a lawyer advocate; the education of courts and legislators on how specific decisions and laws can impact children; and we attempt to leverage change by working with others. For more information about our work, please see our website at <https://www.firststarinstitute.org>.

# Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: Attorney Insights and Identified Training Needs -- Abstract

Noy Davis and Kimberly Dennis, First Star Institute, in collaboration with Emma Hetherington, Wilbanks Child Endangerment and Sexual Exploitation Clinic, University of Georgia Law School.  
[www.firststarinstitute.org](http://www.firststarinstitute.org) [noy@firststarinstitute.org](mailto:noy@firststarinstitute.org) or <https://cease.law.uga.edu/>

Child sex trafficking is not rare. It is not isolated. And it is not confined to the headlines.

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC), including child sex trafficking, is one of the most severe and under-recognized forms of child abuse in the United States. While high-profile cases periodically draw media attention, we cannot wait for headlines to revamp the systems that currently do not work well for the many children already known to our systems as being at risk for exploitation – youth in foster care, youth in the juvenile justice system and youth with histories of trauma, instability and unmet needs.

This report elevates the voices of 94 attorneys representing children and youth across 21 states to better understand how frequently CSEC appears in legal caseloads, what risk factors attorneys are observing and whether current systems are equipped to respond.

While more work needs to be done, the findings are jarring: exploitation is not limited to an occasional foster child. It is embedded within the everyday work of child welfare and juvenile justice systems across the country.

## CSEC Is Present in Everyday Practice

Nearly 88% of attorney respondents report serving children who have experienced or are at risk of CSEC. More than 30% indicate they often or always represent trafficked youth. Over 40% believe the prevalence of CSEC has increased during their careers. Not a single respondent described CSEC as “not at all” an issue at the county, state or national level. Attorneys overwhelmingly view CSEC as a serious national problem — even when local identification challenges may obscure its full scope.

## The Risk Profile: Trauma and System Involvement

The survey confirms what research has long indicated: children involved in child welfare and juvenile justice systems face heightened vulnerability to exploitation.

The majority of attorneys report that 50% or more of the children and youth they serve experience trauma exposure, mental health and developmental challenges, significant school instability and prior child welfare involvement. Trauma, in particular, is nearly universal. More than three-quarters of respondents report that at least 75% of their clients have experienced trauma.

These are not isolated risk factors. They are systemic warning signs. Yet consistent screening and coordinated response remain uneven.

## A Systemic Barrier: Criminalization of Victims

Nearly 80% of respondents identify continued criminalization or punishment of trafficked children as a significant challenge.

Children who are coerced, controlled and exploited are too often treated as offenders rather than victims. This response deepens trauma, discourages disclosure and undermines recovery.

No effective anti-trafficking strategy can succeed if systems continue to punish the very youth they are meant to protect.

## Gaps in Screening, Coordination and Response

Although some jurisdictions have established protocols for screening and responding to CSEC, many attorneys report uncertainty about whether such standard processes exist — particularly within juvenile justice settings.

This reflects broader structural and systemic issues including but not limited to inconsistent screening practices, lack of appropriate placements, treatment and services, limited cross-systems collaboration, fragmented communication between child welfare and juvenile justice systems and uneven trauma-informed approaches.

## Training and Knowledge Gaps

Even among attorneys who have received moderate or substantial CSEC training, most describe their knowledge in key subject areas as only somewhat adequate.

The most significant gap identified is understanding available services and specialized resources for CSEC victims within their own counties — knowledge that is essential for effective advocacy, treatment and case planning.

Attorneys are asking for more comprehensive, trauma-informed and cross-systems training.

## The Data Challenge

Reliable data on child sex trafficking remains elusive. Barriers to disclosure, inconsistent identification practices, fragmented reporting systems and the hidden nature of exploitation obscure the true scope of the problem.

The absence of comprehensive data does not indicate the problem is small but does obfuscate and marginalize it. Without improved data collection and transparency, prevention and policy reform will remain reactive rather than strategic.

## Moving Forward

This report identifies urgent priorities: standardized screening protocols, strengthened cross-systems collaboration, an increase in appropriate placements, treatment and services, expanded trauma-informed training, policies that prevent criminalization of exploited youth and improved data collection mechanisms.

Child sex trafficking is affecting children already interacting with child-serving systems nationwide. Protecting vulnerable children requires more than awareness. It requires structural change that is sustained, coordinated and intentional.

# Executive Summary

## Introduction and Background

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC)<sup>1</sup> is a significant form of child abuse, a fact that is often overlooked and deeply misunderstood. Sporadic legislative changes and other advancements at the national, state and local levels have occurred from time to time, but significant gaps in understanding, identifying and responding to CSEC persist. As prior studies have shown, children and youth who are in or have been in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems are at high risk for CSEC.

In late 2022, the First Star Institute (FSI) undertook an initial research project to learn more about effective collaborative cross-systems approaches to respond to CSEC. More specifically, FSI sought to define and leverage the important role that attorneys for children and youth, including those acting as guardians ad litem (GALs) as well as non-attorney GALs (such as court appointed special advocates (CASAs) play in such collaborative efforts. FSI conducted key stakeholder interviews with attorneys for children, GALs, CASAs, judges and child welfare professionals in selected jurisdictions that had well-established collaborative CSEC initiatives and considerable experience in dealing with CSEC cases. FSI also surveyed a larger group of attorneys for children and GAL/CASA stakeholders. This survey demonstrated that most jurisdictions and professionals did not have extensive experience or involvement with CSEC.

In late 2024, FSI embarked on a follow-up research project to incorporate more voices and experiences from attorneys for children and youth to better understand the current landscape of CSEC around the country. FSI surveyed attorneys working in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. This included attorneys with and without significant experience with CSEC cases. We asked attorneys what risk factors or possible indicators of CSEC they were seeing and the prevalence of CSEC among the children and youth they serve.<sup>2</sup> FSI also inquired about any CSEC training the attorneys had received and their knowledge and skill levels in key CSEC subject areas. **The overall purpose was to help gauge who might be affected by CSEC and what training, tools and resources might help attorneys effectively respond to vulnerable children and youth.**

FSI received a total of 94 responses representing attorneys in 21 states. More than half of the respondents were from California and approximately two thirds represented children and youth in the child welfare system. A smaller number of respondents represented other states and those working in the juvenile justice system. As a result, there is limited geographical diversity and a wide variation of systems represented among respondents. This limits our ability to extrapolate our findings to the larger population of attorneys for children and youth nationwide; the survey findings thus should be considered descriptive in nature. In many survey areas, for example, California responses differed from other states, and attorneys representing clients in the child welfare system had different views and experiences than those representing children and youth in the juvenile justice system.

---

<sup>1</sup> The term Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) refers to a range of crime 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. This includes child sex trafficking.

<sup>2</sup> FSI developed and conducted the survey in collaboration with Emma Hetherington of the Wilbanks Child Endangerment and Sexual Exploitation Clinic at the University of Georgia Law School.

## Highlights/Key Takeaways

The survey results revealed several critical insights in the following areas.

### Prevalence of CSEC and Risk Factors

- Nearly all respondents have served children and youth with CSEC (current or prior cases). A significant number indicated that they frequently encounter CSEC cases in their practice, with many noting an increase in prevalence over time. **Approximately 57.1% of attorneys reported that their caseloads sometimes included CSEC victims, while 30.8% indicated they often or always serve such clients.** Most respondents feel that CSEC is a serious issue, even more so nationally than at their county or state level. (None replied that CSEC was “not at all” an issue, at any level).
- Attorneys identified a number of predominant risk factors among the majority of children and youth they serve, including trauma exposure, mental health and developmental issues and significant difficulties in school. **Notably, 78.2% of respondents indicated that 75% or more of their clients experienced trauma. Prior involvement in the child welfare system was also a common theme.**
- **Risk factors** that respondents reported as being less prevalent included gang association, notable physical health issues, inappropriate relationships, being controlled or coerced by another person, homelessness, incidents of running away and intimate partner violence (many of which may not be overtly observable and more difficult to screen for).
- Differences between certain groups of respondents were evident. For example, attorneys who represent clients in the juvenile justice system reported particularly high prevalence rates, compared to those representing clients in the child welfare system, for certain risk factors for their clients (e.g., prior involvement with juvenile justice or law enforcement, substance use, significant school problems, incidents of running away or being kicked out of placements). Though the sample size here is not large enough to say these specific differences are systemic, **these results suggest there is more we need to know about the experiences of children and youth involved in the juvenile justice system and how to better support these youth.**

### CSEC Training and Education

- **The survey results underscore the urgent need for enhanced CSEC training and education among attorneys for children and youth.** All respondents – regardless of the amount of training on CSEC they have received to date – expressed a desire or need for more comprehensive training and education. The need appears to be greatest among those attorneys who provide representation in the juvenile justice system. Respondents who frequently have CSEC in their caseloads also indicated a need to increase their CSEC knowledge and skills.
- Overall, respondents rated their **greatest strength area as identifying risk factors or possible indicators of CSEC.** A substantial number of attorneys (42.6%) said their knowledge and skills was very or extremely adequate in this area. The majority of those respondents who had a moderate or great deal of training to date also felt highly proficient in basic CSEC knowledge and understanding the roles and responsibilities of attorneys in CSEC cases.

- However, across the majority of a dozen CSEC subject areas, most respondents felt their knowledge was only somewhat adequate. **The most significant gap identified was in understanding available services and resources in their counties** for CSEC victims. This knowledge is essential to providing informed recommendations about specialized treatment and services for those who have experienced CSEC.
- **Trauma-informed care practices** also surfaced as a key training need for many respondents. Understanding the impact that trauma may have on a child’s life, and how to recognize and respond to trauma is particularly important to ensure child welfare and juvenile justice professionals’ interactions with CSEC children and youth are supportive and not counter-productive, re-traumatizing or simply punitive.
- **The roles and responsibilities of other system partners in CSEC cases** figured as another training and education gap. In addition, a large number of respondents were not sure if their county child welfare and juvenile justice systems (particularly juvenile justice) had established procedures, processes or protocols to screen, assess and respond to CSEC. Collectively, these results point to **a need for increased cross-systems training and education.**

#### Selected CSEC Training and Education Highlights

- More than half (52.1%) of respondents had received either a moderate or great deal of training on CSEC
- Just over one fourth (26.6%) of all respondents felt their level of training received was very much adequate
- No more than 42.6% felt their knowledge was very/extremely adequate in any given CSEC subject area; in most cases, it was less than one third
- Nearly half (46.8%) said their knowledge and skills regarding existing CSEC services and resources in their county were not at all/slightly adequate
- Among respondents that often or always have CSEC in their caseloads, less than half felt their knowledge and skills were very/extremely adequate in 11 of the 12 selected CSEC subject areas (with the exception being identifying CSEC risk factors)
- More than three fourths (79.7%) of respondents said continued criminalization/punishment of children and youth experiencing CSEC is either somewhat or very much a challenge

- The survey results also highlighted continued criminalization and punishment of children and youth who are victims of CSEC as a systemic barrier requiring further training and education. **More than three fourths of respondents said continued criminalization is either somewhat or very much a challenge**, as it exacerbates CSEC victims’ trauma and hinders effective recovery and response efforts.

## Conclusions and Recommendations for Improvement

- **Cross-Systems Collaboration:** The findings underscore the importance of a coordinated and informed response to combat CSEC and adequately support affected children and youth. The challenge in responding to and meeting the complex needs of children and youth who are trafficked is that none of the systems designed to serve them are effective in identifying trafficking or providing appropriate placements and services. The approaches of each of these systems – juvenile justice focused on criminal behavior and dependency centered on familial intervention and child welfare – often result in trafficking being overlooked. FSI’s current and prior research highlights initiatives that provide some structure for bridging child welfare and juvenile justice systems and bringing together professionals with varied backgrounds, knowledge and expertise as effective or promising practices to identify and respond to CSEC. Such initiatives include specialty trafficking courts (housing both dependency and juvenile justice cases) and multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) that engage systems partners spanning the courts, child welfare, law enforcement, legal advocacy, physical and mental health providers, schools and other community-based service providers to regularly (e.g., weekly, bi-weekly) review and discuss cases. Notably, MDTs can be convened even in the absence of specialty courts.
- **Screening and Identification:** More systematic and comprehensive screening, assessment and response protocols are needed – particularly in the juvenile justice system – to better identify and serve children and youth experiencing or at risk of CSEC. Given the information gained from this survey and the high rates of prior child welfare system involvement among known CSEC victims, both juvenile justice and child welfare systems are useful starting points for the development of approaches that identify and support youth at risk of trafficking. Both systems see youth who are significantly at risk for trafficking and thus provide an opportunity to more effectively support CSEC children in their care.<sup>3</sup>
- **Data Collection:** Adequate data on child sex trafficking has been elusive to date. Further research to pinpoint the prevalence of CSEC and risk and protective factors among children in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems are critical to more effectively prevent and address CSEC. Existing studies have examined different populations and used varying parameters to define and determine the scope of the problem. Further research is essential on this important subject, including the development of methodologies that will produce more comprehensive, reliable, and accessible data on this hard-to-reach population.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Panlilio, C.C., Miyamoto, S., Font, S.A. & Schreier, H.M.C (2019). Assessing risk of commercial sexual exploitation among children involved in the child welfare system. *Child Abuse Negl.* 87: 88-99.

<sup>4</sup> Franchino-Olsen, H., Chesworth, B.R., Boyle, C., Rizo, C.F., Martin, S.L., Jordan, B., Macy, R.J. & Stevens, L. (2022). The prevalence of sex trafficking of children and adolescents in the United States: A scoping review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse.* 23(1): 182-195.

# Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: Attorney Insights and Identified Training Needs

## Table of Contents

- I. Introduction ..... 1
- II. Basic Demographics of Attorney Respondents and Children and Youth Served ..... 6
- III. Prevalence of CSEC..... 10
- IV. Risk Factors and Possible Indicators for CSEC ..... 16
- V. CSEC Training and Education ..... 24
- VI. Concluding Thoughts and Suggested Next Steps..... 36

# Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children – Attorney Insights and Identified Training Needs

## I. Introduction

Commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of children and youth are often overlooked, misunderstood and unaddressed, yet are a significant and complex form of child abuse.<sup>6,7</sup> Efforts at the national, state and local levels to better identify, prevent and respond to the complex problem of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC)<sup>8</sup> among child welfare populations continue to improve nearly a decade after the implementation of two key pieces of CSEC-related federal legislation.<sup>9</sup> All states (including Washington, D.C.) now have child sex trafficking laws and the United States as a whole has made progress on providing victim protections and access to specialized services.<sup>10</sup>

*At its core, commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of children in the United States represent the organized sexual abuse of young children and adolescents, who ... often were previously victims of abuse and neglect in their home settings and escaped from that unsafe environment to an external environment on streets and in neighborhoods where they have been exploited.*

Institute of Medicine and  
National Research Council<sup>5</sup>

Despite some legislative progress, the problem remains, and children and youth with prior or current involvement with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems are particularly vulnerable to trafficking. Prior studies have shown that children and youth involved in the child welfare system are a high-risk

---

<sup>5</sup> Institute of Medicine and National Research Council (2013). *Confronting commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors in the United States*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

<sup>6</sup> Institute of Medicine and National Research Council (2013).

<sup>7</sup> National Advisory Committee on the Sex Trafficking of Children and Youth in the United States (September 2020). *Best Practices and Recommendations for States*. Washington, DC: Administration for Children and Families (hereinafter *Best Practices*). Sidenote: The statutorily authorized National Advisory Committee on the Sex Trafficking of Children and Youth sunset in January 2022. It was re-established under the revised name, the National Advisory Committee on the Trafficking of Children and Youth in the United States, as a discretionary committee under authorization of the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>8</sup> The term Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) refers to a range of crime 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. This includes child sex trafficking. FSI recognizes that some professionals prefer using terms such as child sexual abuse or child sex trafficking (rather than CSEC) to emphasize the victim's experience and the criminal nature of the act. For ease of reading, however, this report uses CSEC.

<sup>9</sup> The 2014 Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act required states to develop procedures to identify and determine appropriate services for children and youth within the child welfare system who are or at risk of being sex trafficking victims. The 2015 Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act (JVTA) required states to identify reports involving children known or suspected to be victims of sex trafficking, and train workers in identifying, assessing, and providing comprehensive services for sex trafficking victims, including coordination with other partners. The JVTA also required states to include sex trafficking victims in the definition of child abuse and neglect and report data on sex trafficking victims, beginning with their federal fiscal year 2018 data submissions to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS).

<sup>10</sup> Shared Hope International (2024). *Report Cards on Child and Youth Sex Trafficking – 2023 Toolkit*. Washington, DC: author.

population for CSEC, as they are or were exposed to a wider and more severe range of adversities and traumas than children and youth in the general population.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, research indicates that 50 to 90 percent of CSEC victims have been involved in child welfare systems at some point.<sup>12</sup> Further, CSEC victims are disproportionately more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system for offenses related to their trafficking victimization or for offenses committed as a result of other life circumstances. Studies have shown that 20 to 77 percent of youth experiencing CSEC had been involved with juvenile justice system.<sup>13</sup> The systems themselves can also be a vehicle for additional trauma, and revamping these systems to provide trauma-informed care so as to minimize added trauma has been a goal.<sup>14</sup>

### First Star Institute’s Prior Research Initiative – Brief Recap

In late 2022, with support from The Steve Nash Foundation, the First Star Institute (FSI) sought to build from the existing knowledge base about the effectiveness of a collaborative cross-systems and multidisciplinary approach to respond to CSEC.<sup>15</sup> FSI focused on defining and leveraging the important – and likely largely untapped – role that attorneys for children and youth, including those acting as guardians ad litem (GALs) and non-attorney GALs play in such collaborative efforts. Initial project areas of inquiry centered on:

- **The priority unmet needs and gaps in the system** (policy, practice, service and systems improvements) to better serve and support children and youth with involvement in the child welfare system who have experienced or are at risk of child sex trafficking.
- **The progress and challenges** associated with implementing a multidisciplinary collaborative approach to address child sex trafficking within the child welfare population.
- **What unique role(s)** children’s attorneys, GALs and CASAs can play in responding to child sex trafficking.
- **Strategies and promising practices** for how children’s attorneys, GALs and CASAs can effectively collaborate with other system partners to respond to child sex trafficking.

---

<sup>11</sup> Panlilio, C.C., Miyamoto, S., Font, S.A. & Schreier, H.M.C (2019). Assessing risk of commercial sexual exploitation among children involved in the child welfare system. *Child Abuse Negl.* 87: 88-99.

<sup>12</sup> Human Trafficking Search, <https://humantraffickingsearch.org/human-trafficking-statistics-2017/>. See also Polaris, US National Hotline Statistics, <https://polarisproject.org/resources/us-national-human-trafficking-hotline-statistics/>

<sup>13</sup> Nichols, A.J., Gerassi, L.B., Gilbert, K. & Taylor, E. (2022) (data from multiple referenced studies). Provider challenges in responding to re-trafficking of juvenile-justice involved domestic minor sex trafficking survivors. *Child Abuse Negl.* 126, 105521.

<sup>14</sup> Confronting Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Minors in the United States: A Guide for Providers of Victim and Support Services, National Academy of Sciences: National Research Council Institute of Medicine (2014); Confronting Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Minors in the United States: A Guide for the Legal Sector, National Academy of Sciences: National Research Council Institute of Medicine (2014); Confronting Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Minors in the United States: A Guide for the Health Care Sector, National Academy of Sciences: National Research Council Institute of Medicine (2014); Confronting Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Minors in the United States, National Academy of Sciences: National Research Council Institute of Medicine (2013).

<sup>15</sup> For example, the National Advisory Committee’s 2020 *Best Practices* report identified collaboration as one of 11 key principles that supports a comprehensive response and indicated it should be incorporated into all identification, prevention and treatment efforts.

- **Key lessons** from experienced jurisdictions on advancing the role of children’s attorneys, GALs and CASAs in addressing child sex trafficking.
- **Key training needs** for children’s attorneys, GALs and CASAs to better serve children and youth who are trafficking victims and identify, prevent and mitigate child sex trafficking and its effects.

To elicit information and insights in these areas, FSI conducted key stakeholder interviews with attorneys for children, GALs, CASAs, judges and child welfare professionals in selected jurisdictions across seven states and Washington, D.C. that had established collaborative child sex trafficking initiatives.<sup>16</sup> We supplemented the key stakeholder interviews by surveying a wider group of GAL/CASA stakeholders. Much like the interviews, the brief survey focused on the primary role of GAL/CASA volunteers in responding to child sex trafficking among the child welfare population, the major challenges they face in carrying out those roles, and priority training needs for this group. The survey also included contextual questions to gauge the prevalence of child sex trafficking in their jurisdictions and among their caseloads. A total of 41 GALs/CASAs representing 21 states responded in the brief two-week timeframe.<sup>17</sup>

### **Overarching Themes from FSI’s Prior CSEC Research Initiative**

The following 11 overarching themes, which fall into three domains, emerged from the earlier (2022) key stakeholder interviews:

#### *Domain 1: Developing a Cross-Systems Collaborative Infrastructure*

- Cross-systems collaboration is indeed essential to effectively respond to child sex trafficking
- Specialty trafficking courts provide an effective collaborative response to handling trafficking cases
- Multidisciplinary teams are key to an effective collaborative response to trafficking cases
- Dedicated units or specialized staff provide consistent, experienced professionals to handle trafficking cases
- Consistent staff are vital in promoting cross-systems collaboration and trusting relationships with children

#### *Domain 2: Meeting the Needs of Children and Youth*

- Survivor-led services and mentors are critical for engaging with child victims of sex trafficking
- The lack of appropriate/safe placements for trafficking victims is “a crisis all across the country”
- To effectively serve children requires trafficking-specific services and an individualized approach
- Building a meaningful relationship with children/youth needs to be underscored

#### *Domain 3: Addressing Larger Systems Issues*

- Increased focus is needed on prevention, early intervention and outreach to the at-risk group
- Widespread community and partner awareness about trafficking and a shift away from criminalization and punishment is an ongoing need

<sup>16</sup> The states included Arizona, California, Connecticut, Florida, Massachusetts, South Carolina and Washington (in addition to Washington, D.C.). We focused primarily on selected sites from the Children’s Bureau Grants to Address Trafficking Within the Child Welfare Population, representatives from select specialized child sex trafficking collaborative courts, and selected CASA associations focusing on child sex trafficking.

<sup>17</sup> Since this survey was a brief exploratory add-on to supplement the initial scope of work, FSI did not conduct any follow ups to prompt additional responses.

In addition to the GAL/CASA survey, we developed a similar survey for children’s attorneys, which the ABA Litigation Section Children’s Rights Litigation Committee and the National Association of Counsel for Children (NACC) disseminated in late November 2022. Given the very short turnaround time on the attorney survey, we did not receive a large enough sample size to include in the 2022 report’s findings.

As FSI’s initial research project was focused on effective cross-system collaborative efforts, the targeted key stakeholder interviews involved those with well-established CSEC initiatives and considerable experience in dealing with CSEC cases. The supplemental GAL/CASA survey then helped provide a more expansive picture. This broader picture suggested most jurisdictions and professionals did not have extensive experience or involvement with CSEC. Indeed, when we asked GALs/CASAs how involved they or their state or local GAL/CASA association was in any initiatives at the local, state or national level to address child sex trafficking, nearly half (48.2%) said *not at all* or *slightly*, while just over one third (36.6%) said *moderately* involved and 14.1% said *very/extremely* involved.

FSI determined it was necessary to take a step back and do a broader scan incorporating more voices from attorneys for children and youth to better understand the current landscape of CSEC around the country. This awareness, in large part, shaped the direction of this current research project, which is discussed below.

### First Star Institute’s Current Research Project – In Brief

In developing this current research project, FSI decided to refine its focus to delve into more fundamental questions regarding what attorneys for children and youth are experiencing with their clients related to CSEC. We wanted to obtain the perspectives not only of attorneys who currently have or previously had CSEC cases, but also, importantly, those who may not. Though the primary focus was to obtain feedback from attorneys representing children and youth in the child welfare system, we also sought to gather insights from attorneys who represent children and youth in the juvenile justice system. Insights and feedback from a broader group of attorneys for children and youth would be valuable in helping gauge who might be affected by CSEC and what training, tools and resources might help attorneys effectively respond to vulnerable children and youth. The box below highlights the survey’s key question areas.

#### Survey Question Areas for Attorneys for Children and Youth

- **General demographics** about attorney respondents and the children and youth they serve.
- The prevalence of children and youth attorneys serve who experience selected behavioral and physical issues that have been identified as **risk factors or possible indicators of CSEC**.
- The **prevalence of CSEC** among the population of children and youth attorneys serve.
- The amount of **training** attorneys for children and youth have received on CSEC and how adequate their **knowledge and skills** are in selected CSEC subject areas.
- Whether respondents’ county child welfare and juvenile justice systems have established **policies, procedures or protocols to screen, assess and respond** to children and youth experiencing or at risk of CSEC.
- **Examples of CSEC initiatives** in their county or state as well as any effective or **promising practices** for attorneys to identify and respond to CSEC.

## Approach and Limitations

FSI developed, pilot tested and administered the final brief survey in collaboration with Emma Hetherington, JD., of the Wilbanks Child Endangerment and Sexual Exploitation Clinic at the University of Georgia School of Law. To facilitate completion, the online survey was intentionally brief (10-15 minutes), contained largely close-ended questions and check-off boxes, and ensured respondents their results would remain anonymous.

From the end of October 2024 through early December 2024, FSI (with its collaborators) conducted the initial survey distribution and two follow-up reminders to members of the following groups: the ABA Litigation Section Children’s Rights Litigation Committee’s Children’s Lawyers Connect, the ABA Criminal Justice Section’s Juvenile Justice Committee, The Gault Center (formerly National Juvenile Defender Center) listserv, the National Association of Counsel for Children (NACC) listserv and the Maryland Legal Aid Bureau. We received a total of 94 responses representing attorneys in 21 states.

**Important Caveat:** *As discussed further in Section II, the majority of attorney survey respondents were from California and provided representation to children and youth in the child welfare system. A smaller number of respondents represented other states and those working in the juvenile justice system. Given this disproportional geographical and system representation, findings should be considered descriptive in nature and not generalizable to the larger population of attorneys for children and youth. Where appropriate, we report findings overall and highlight differences between certain groups of respondents for additional context.*

## Structure of Report

This report highlights the overall survey findings for all respondents and then delves into more detailed analyses by certain groups of respondents. Where applicable, we weave in findings from the prior GAL/CASA survey for supplemental or contextual information. The next section begins with a brief demographic overview of attorney respondents and the children and youth they serve. Section III then discusses what respondents had to say about the prevalence of CSEC among the children and youth they serve, and how much of a problem they think CSEC is at the local, state and national level. Section IV focuses on a number of predominant behavioral and physical issues that are known risk factors for or possible indicators of CSEC, and the extent to which respondents see these issues among the children and youth they serve. Section V shifts gears to focus on respondents’ training and education regarding CSEC. The final section provides concluding thoughts and potential next steps for building on the project’s findings.

## II. Basic Demographics of Attorney Respondents and Children and Youth Served

To provide general context for the survey findings, we first asked respondents basic demographic questions about themselves, as attorneys for children and youth, and the client population they serve.

### Geographic Representation

As noted in the introduction, we received a total of 94 responses representing attorneys in 21 states. Well over half of respondents (56.4%) were from California (predominantly Los Angeles County). The next highest proportion of respondents were from Maryland (7.4%), New York (6.4%) and Georgia (4.3%). The remaining 17 states had one to three respondents.<sup>18</sup> In looking at the geographic breakdown by the four main census regions, nearly two thirds of respondents (64.9%) were in the West, while close to one fourth (23.4%) were in the South. A minority of respondents represented the Northeast (8.5%) and Midwest (3.2%).

### Attorney Respondent Characteristics

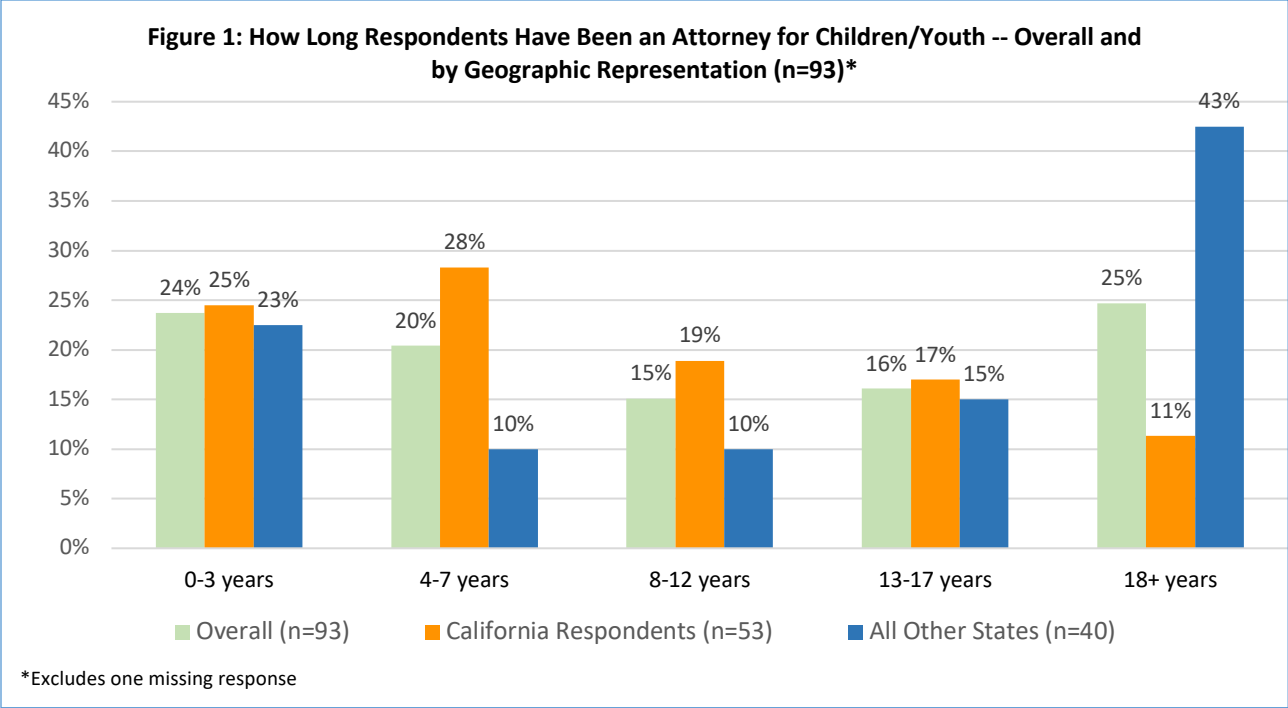
#### *How Long the Attorney has Represented Children/Youth*

Respondents represented a mix of seasoned attorneys for children and youth and those who had been in their profession for a short time. Nearly one fourth (23.7%) said they had been an attorney for children and youth for 3 years or less, while at the other end of the spectrum, approximately one fourth (24.7%) had been practicing for 18 years or more. One fifth or less had been an attorney for children and youth for 4 to 7 years, 8 to 12 years or 13 to 17 years. (see Figure 1).

There was some variation by geographical group. A greater proportion of respondents from California compared to all other states had been an attorney for 4 to 7 years (28.3% versus 10.0%), while 42.5% of respondents from all other states had been an attorney for 18 years or more (compared to 11.3% of California respondents). Proportions were similar among all respondents for those who have been an attorney 3 years or less (see also Figure 2).

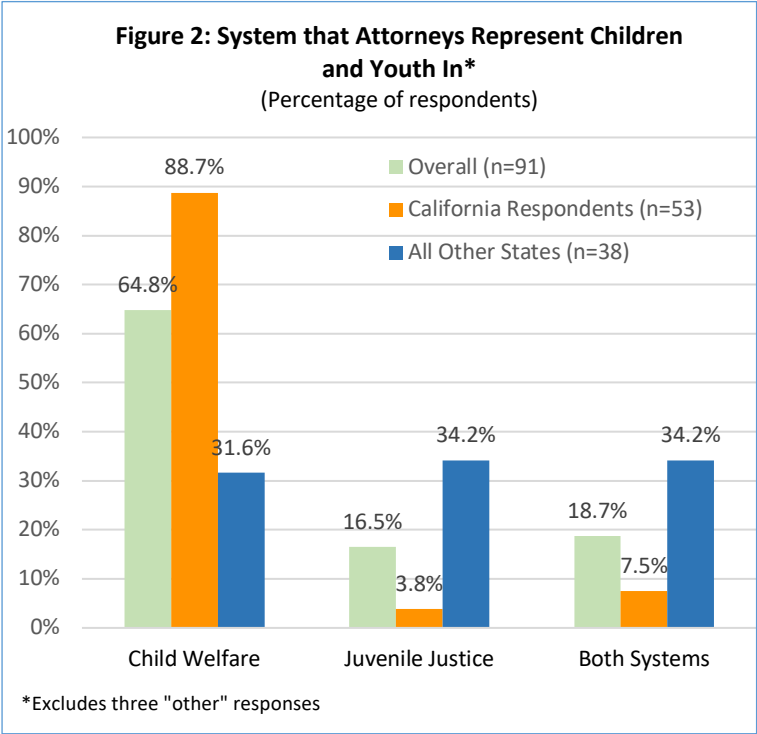
---

<sup>18</sup> These states included Kentucky (3 respondents); Florida, Louisiana, North Carolina, Utah and Washington (2 respondents each); and Colorado, Idaho, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Texas (one respondent each).



*Children and Youth Systems Representation*

Nearly two thirds (64.8%) of all respondents said they represent children in dependency proceedings/civil child protection cases (i.e., child welfare system). The remaining one third were split relatively equally among representation of children and youth in juvenile justice cases and providing representation in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. As Figure 2 also shows, the vast majority (88.7%) of California respondents represent children and youth in the child welfare system, while representation by respondents from the other states was more evenly distributed among the child welfare system (31.6%), juvenile justice system (34.2%) or both systems (34.2%). As noted in the introduction of this report, given the disproportional system representation among respondents, findings should be considered descriptive in nature and not generalizable to the larger population of attorneys for children and youth.



### *Primary Type of Work and Acting in Clients' Best Interests or Wishes*

More than three fourths (76.9%) of all respondents' primary work is providing direct representation or carrying a caseload. A few respondents (3.3%) oversee legal representation in an office or agency, while approximately one fifth (19.8%) do both. There were some geographic differences, however. The vast majority (80.8%) of California respondents focus on direct representation or carrying a caseload, as do 71.8% of other respondents. Yet more than one fourth (28.6%) of respondents from other states provide both direct representation and oversee legal representation in an office or agency, compared to 13.5% of California respondents.

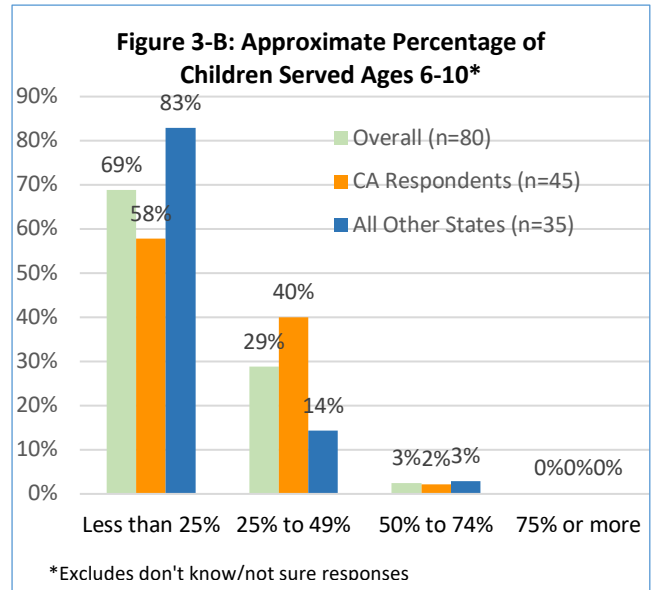
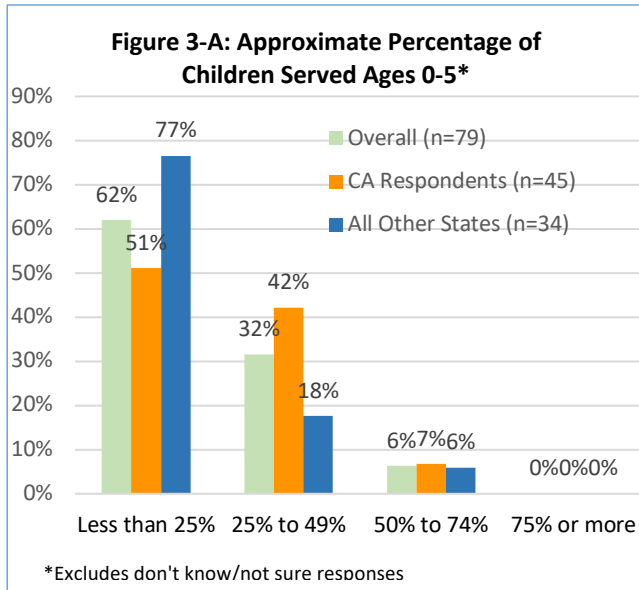
In their representation of children and youth, just over half (51.6%) of all respondents said they act in both their client's best interests and/or support their wishes, while 38.5% support their clients' wishes and 9.9% act in their clients' best interests. This varied greatly by state grouping, however. Nearly three-fourths (73.1%) of California respondents said they act in both their client's best interests and/or their wishes. Conversely, nearly three-fourths (71.8%) of respondents from other states act primarily in their client's wishes. states vary in their authorizations of counsel for children in dependency cases and in their provision of effective counsel in juvenile justice matters.<sup>19</sup>

### **Age Groups of Children and Youth Served**

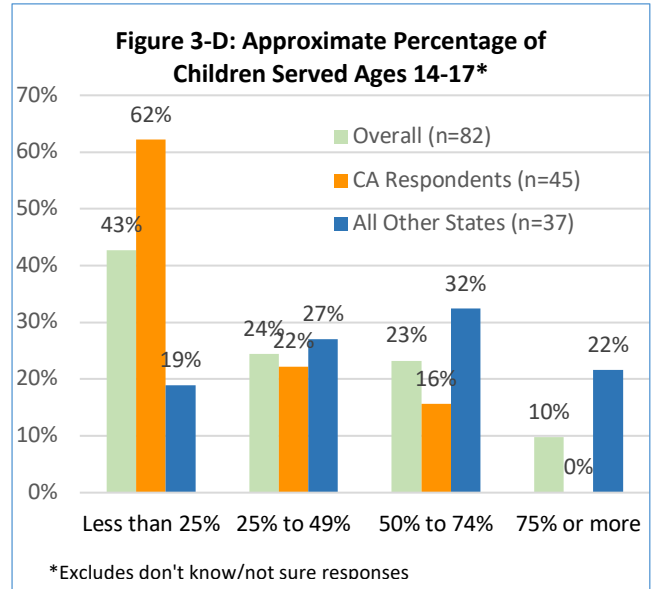
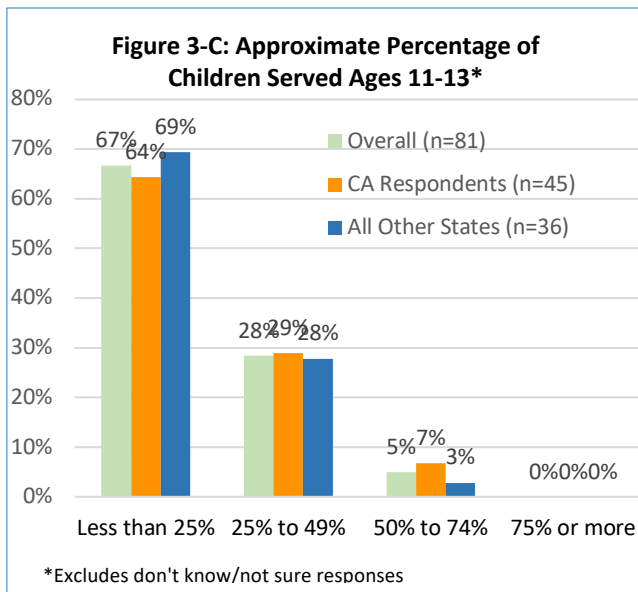
Overall, the majority of respondents indicated that among the children and youth they serve, less than 25% of them are very young children (0 to 5 years) and early school age children (6 to 10 years). This was even more predominant among respondents from other states compared to those in California, as shown in Figures 3-A and 3-B.

---

<sup>19</sup> For dependency cases, the National Association of Counsel for Children and the National Coalition for a Civil Right to Counsel maintain information on the right to counsel for children (see <https://counselforkids.org/right-to-counsel-map> and <https://civilrighttocounsel.org/map/?onload=ra>). The Gault Center conducts in-depth state assessments on children's access to counsel in juvenile court cases; its 29 state assessments to date are available at <https://www.defendyouthrights.org/initiatives/state-assessments/#:~:text=The%20Gault%20Center's%20state%20assessments,youth%20defense%20in%20each%20state.> The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention maintains a map of the establishment of state juvenile courts (<https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/research-statistics/about-crime-data-juvenile-justice-facts/reforms>).

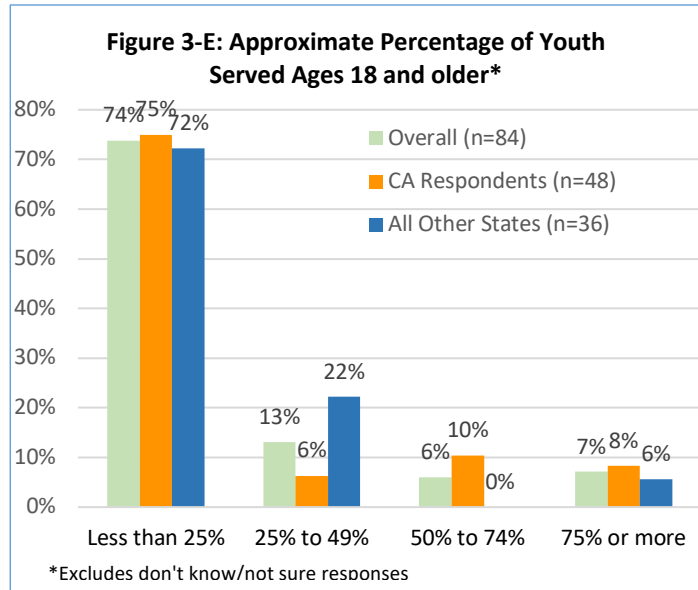


Similarly, the majority of all respondents also indicated that children and youth ages 11 to 13 years tend to comprise only a small percentage of the larger population they served. There were no major differences among California residents and those from other states (Figure 3-C). When it comes to teenagers 14 to 17 years old, we begin to see a bit of a shift, namely from respondents representing states other than California. For example, 54.1% of other state respondents said that half or more of their clients are in this age group, compared to 15.6% of California respondents (Figure 3-D).



Finally, while not many respondents overall said they serve a large percentage of clients 18 years and older, California attorneys were more apt to have these young adults in their caseloads. Nearly one fifth (18.7%) of California respondents said 50% or more of their client population includes youth in this age group, compared to 5.6% of other states (Figure 3-E). Young people over 18 years old may continue to be at risk of CSEC victimization and suffer from its long-term adverse consequences (e.g., trauma). The

Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 provides states with the option of identifying and providing services to any young person up to age 26 who is a sex trafficking victim or at risk of victimization, regardless of whether that individual is or was in foster care. The Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act of 2015 (JVTA) also allows states to define the term “child” to include persons under the age of 24, which enables states to receive funding for child abuse prevention and treatment programs for older youth.



### III. Prevalence of CSEC

The 2015 JVTA required states to include sex trafficking victims in the definition of child abuse and neglect and report data on sex trafficking victims, beginning with their federal fiscal year 2018 data submissions to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS). Though a step in the right direction, many states and counties are still working on ways to accurately collect these data. The lack of complete and reliable data on the number of children and youth who experience CSEC makes precise prevalence estimates impossible. Further (and easily accessible) research is essential that includes methodologies that will produce more accurate and representative data on the scope of CSEC.

#### Challenges in Obtaining Accurate CSEC Prevalence Data

There is a pressing need for more accurate and easily accessible data on CSEC, yet many barriers exist to identifying victims of CSEC and estimating the prevalence of CSEC. These challenges include but are not limited to:<sup>20</sup>

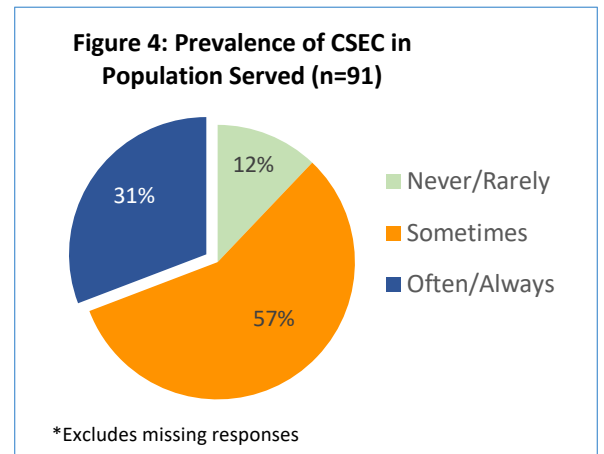
- Often hidden and concealed nature of CSEC and the fact that many CSEC victims are hard to reach (e.g., homeless, runaways from foster care system)
- Inability or refusal of children and youth to see themselves as CSEC victims
- Reluctance of CSEC victims to disclose victimization and seek services because they fear retribution from traffickers, punishment by law enforcement, shame and stigma, and distrust the systems designed to help them, among other barriers
- Lack of training, education, awareness and identification by various agencies, organizations and service providers who come into contact with CSEC victims
- Lack of a uniform, centralized and integrated system for tracking CSEC

<sup>20</sup> Franchino-Olsen, H., Chesworth, B.R., Boyle, C., Rizo, C.F., Martin, S.L., Jordan, B., Macy, R.J. & Stevens, L. (2022). The prevalence of sex trafficking of children and adolescents in the United States: A scoping review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*. 23(1): 182-195.

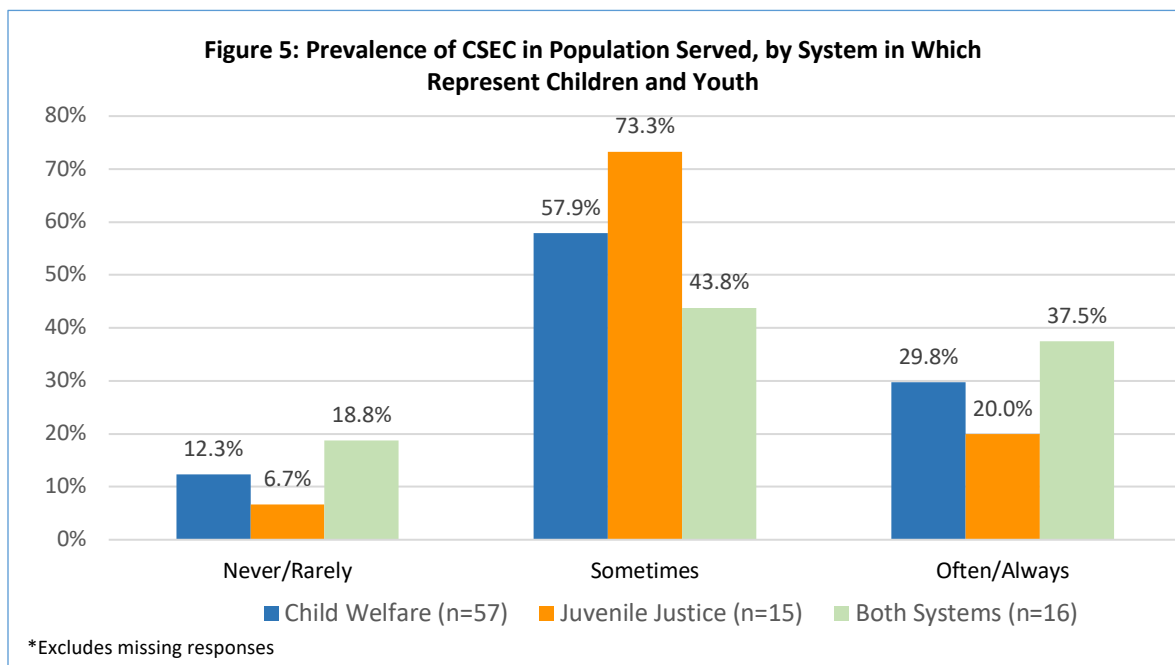
## Prevalence of CSEC in Survey Respondents' Caseloads

We asked respondents about the extent to which the population of children and youth they serve includes individuals who have experienced or are at risk of CSEC. The overall results as well as some differences for certain groups are highlighted below:

- Overall, the largest proportion of respondents said their population served *sometimes* includes children and youth who have experienced or are at risk of CSEC (57.1%). Less than one third (30.8%) said they *often/always* have CSEC among their caseload, and the remaining 12.1% said they *never/rarely* serve CSEC children and youth (Figure 4).<sup>21</sup>



- By state grouping and system representation.** There were no notable differences in prevalence of CSEC between respondents from California and those from other states. However, there was variation based on which system respondents represented children in. A greater proportion of those who provide representation in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems said they *often/always* have CSEC in their caseload (37.5%), while those working in the juvenile justice system were more apt to say their caseload *sometimes* included CSEC (73.3%; Figure 5). As a reminder, given the disproportionality in systems representation among respondents, findings should be considered descriptive in nature and are not generalizable to the larger population of attorneys for children and youth.



<sup>21</sup> In FSI's 2022 survey of GALs/CASAs, nearly half (46.1%) said they often or always serve CSEC children and youth, while more than one third (35.9%) said they sometimes have CSEC cases and 17.9% said they never or rarely serve CSEC children and youth.

- **Among older children and youth.** Among the 32 respondents who said they serve 50% or more of children ages 14 and older, the largest proportion (58.1%) said their population served *sometimes* includes CSEC (similar to overall results). However, a somewhat higher percentage (38.7%) said their population *often/always* CSEC; only one respondent said their caseload *never/rarely* includes CSEC (data not shown).

## How Prevalence Has Changed

- Overall, more than half (52.9%) of all respondents said the prevalence of CSEC in their population served has stayed *about the same* during their time as an attorney for children and youth. A sizable number, 42.9%, indicated that prevalence has *increased*, while only a few (4.3%) said it had *decreased*.

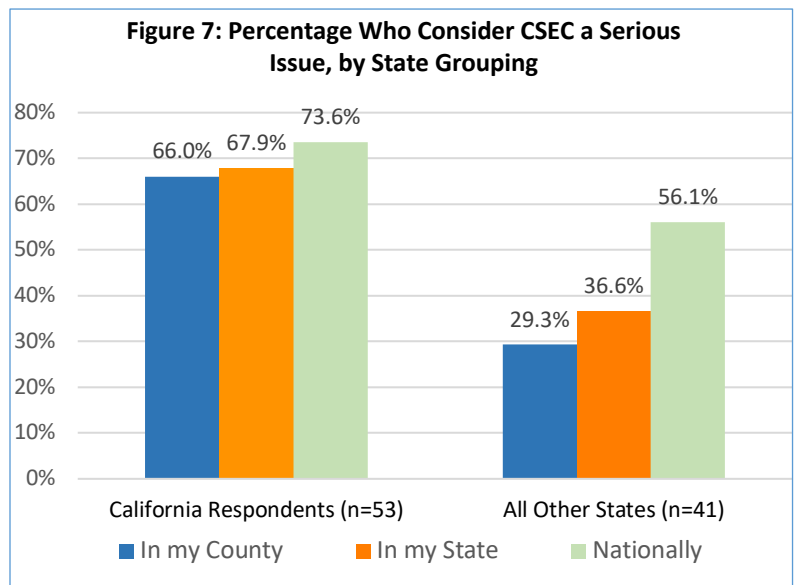
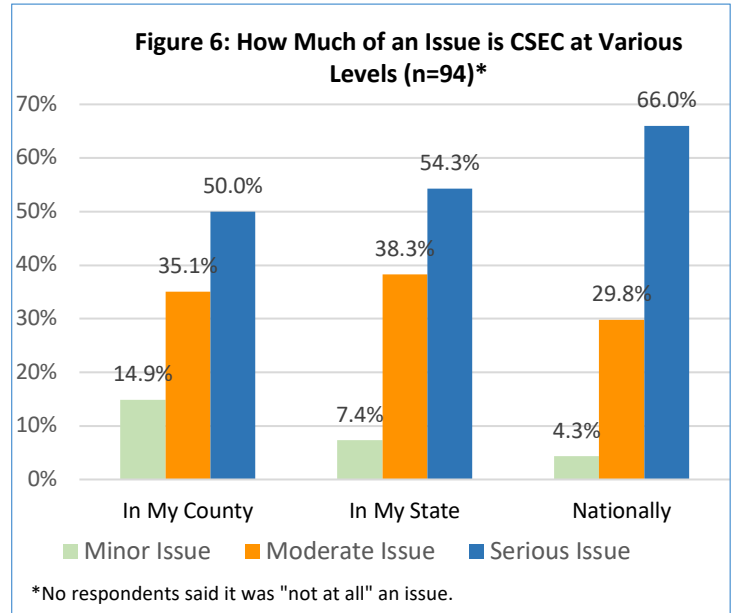
*“The problem is probably bigger than we even know because youth deny it or don’t identify as victims.”*  
Attorney survey respondent

- **By state grouping.** There was slight variation by state grouping. Respondents from other states were more likely than those from California to say CSEC prevalence has *increased*: 50.0% versus 37.5%, respectively. Conversely, a greater percentage of California respondents, compared to those from other states, said that CSEC prevalence has stayed *about the same* during their time as an attorney (57.5% versus 46.7%, respectively). Only one or two respondents from each group said prevalence had *decreased*.
- **By system representation.** Differences were a bit more evident among attorneys providing representation in different systems. For example, half or nearly half of those representing children and youth in the juvenile justice system (50%) or both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems (46.2%) said prevalence had *increased*, compared to 38.6% of those working in the child welfare system. The latter group was more likely to say prevalence had stayed *about the same* (59.1% compared to 30% of those working in the juvenile justice system).
- **Among older children and youth.** Among the respondents who said they serve 50% or more of children ages 14 and older, nearly one-third (32.0%) said prevalence has *increased*, while 60.0% said it has stayed *about the same* and 8.0% (2 respondents) said it had *decreased*.
- **By number of years as an attorney.** In addition, respondents who had been an attorney for children and youth for 8 years or more were much more likely to say that prevalence had *increased* during their time as an attorney, while those working for 7 years or less tended to say prevalence had stayed *about the same*. This variance may be due to the passage of key CSEC-related legislation approximately 10 years ago, prompting increased attention to CSEC and improved screening and identification during the tenure of more veteran attorneys. In addition, attorneys who have been practicing longer may be better able to identify long-term trends.

## How Much CSEC is an Issue at the Local, State and National Levels

We also asked respondents to tell us how much of an issue or problem they think CSEC is in their county, State and more broadly, nationally. In general, whether looking at all attorneys together or by different groups, respondents were more likely to consider CSEC to be a serious issue nationally than in their own county or State.

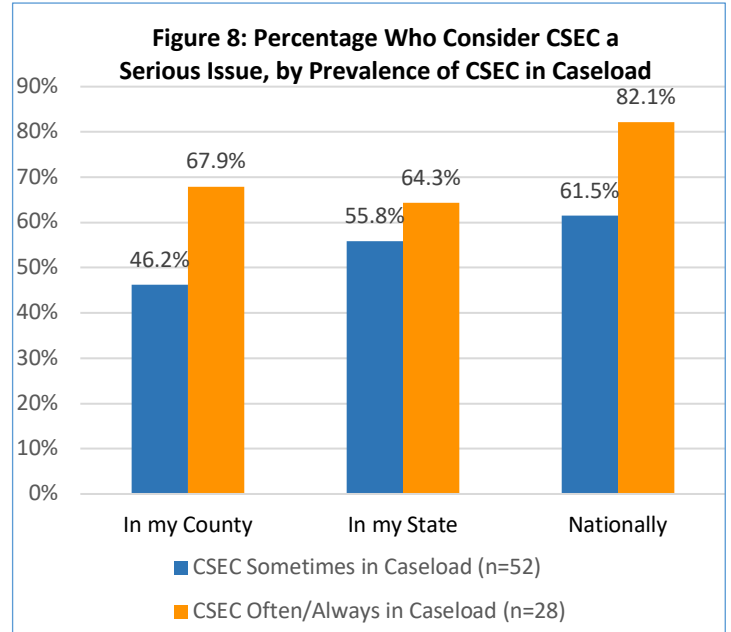
- Overall, half or more of respondents felt CSEC was a *serious* issue in their county (50.0%) and State (54.3%). This increased to two thirds (66.0%) when thinking about CSEC nationally. Across all levels, no one responded that CSEC was *not at all* a problem, and those indicating it was a *minor* problem ranged from just 4.3% (nationally) to 14.9% (locally). The remainder of respondents felt it was a *moderate* issue (Figure 6).<sup>22</sup>
- By state grouping:** Locally to nationally, a greater number of respondents from California, compared to other states, said CSEC is a *serious* issue (Figure 7).<sup>23</sup> Respondents from other states were more likely to consider CSEC a *moderate* problem in their county and state. Further, more than one fourth (29.3%) considered CSEC a *minor* issue in their county. However, more than half (56.1%) of respondents from other states said CSEC was a *serious* issue nationally.



<sup>22</sup> In FSI's prior GAL/CASA survey, 46.3% of respondents said CSEC was a *serious* issue in their county or state (we did not ask about them separately), while 34.1% felt it was a *moderate* issue and 19.5% said it was a *minor* issue. Similar to the attorneys, no GAL/CASA respondents said CSEC was *not at all* a problem. We did not ask about CSEC nationally.

<sup>23</sup> This survey result may be due to the fact that California is purported to have one of the highest rates of trafficking in the U.S. For example, according to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, in 2023, California accounted for the largest percentage of reported human trafficking cases (11.7%), followed by Texas (9.4%), Florida (7.1%) and New York (4.3%). The vast majority (80.9%) of all reported cases involved sex trafficking, either alone or in combination with labor trafficking (<https://humantraffickinghotline.org/en/statistics>). Three of the nation's 13 High Intensity Child Prostitution areas as identified by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) are in California: San Francisco, Los Angeles and San Diego metropolitan areas (Walker, K., n.d. Prevalence of Commercially Sexually Exploited Children Fact Sheet. California Child Welfare Council. CSEC Work Group). In addition, from 2010 to 2015, California had the highest number of arrests for sex trafficking of minors (Roe-Sepowitz, D., Gallagher, J., Hogan, K., Ward, T., Denecour, N. & Bracy, K., 2021. A Six-Year Analysis of Sex Traffickers of Children. Arizona State University School of Social Work. Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research).

- By prevalence of CSEC in population served:** Among respondents who sometimes have CSEC in their caseload, just under half (46.2%) felt it was a *serious issue* in their county (Figure 8). This increased to 55.8% and further to 61.5% when talking about CSEC in their state and nationally, respectively. The percentages across all levels was higher among those who often/always have individuals experiencing or at risk of CSEC in their caseload. Approximately two thirds or more considered CSEC a *serious problem* in their county (67.9%), State (64.3%) and nationally (82.1%).
- Among those serving older children and youth.** Compared to all respondents, those who serve 50% or more of children ages 14 and older were more apt to say CSEC was a *serious issue* in their county and State (40.6% and 53.1%, respectively). Similar to all respondents overall, 62.5% said it was a *serious problem* nationally.



### Screening, Assessment and Response to CSEC

Identification of CSEC is essential not only to accurately determine the prevalence and scope of the problem, but also to develop effective data-driven prevention, early intervention, treatment and reduction efforts. Service providers report that for more than three fourths of the sexually exploited children and youth they serve, exploitation has been recurrent or ongoing for two to three years before there was a referral to services.<sup>24</sup>

FSI thus sought to learn more about whether respondents' county child welfare and juvenile justice systems had any policies, protocols or procedures in place to help identify, assess and respond to CSEC. In general, respondents indicated their child welfare system was more likely than their juvenile justice system to have such established practices. This is not surprising given the 2014 Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act required states to develop procedures to identify and determine appropriate services for children and youth in the child welfare system who are or at risk of CSEC and the 2015 JVTA required states to identify reports involving children known or suspected to be victims of sex trafficking, and train workers in identifying, assessing, and providing comprehensive services for victims.

*"The city and State may have policies and procedures for screening and referrals but I don't believe that they are widely, uniformly or regularly used. Our local DSS recently had a series of learning opportunities available for their staff and others working in the system, but I don't believe they were mandatory for anyone."*

Attorney survey respondent

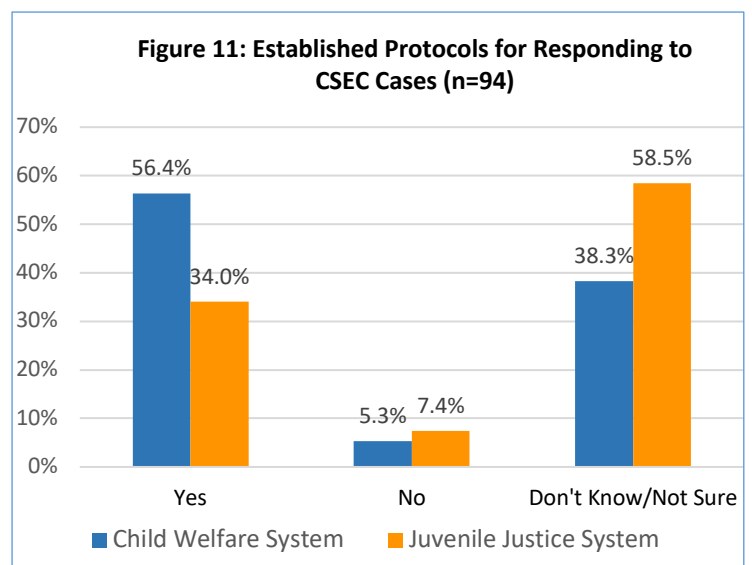
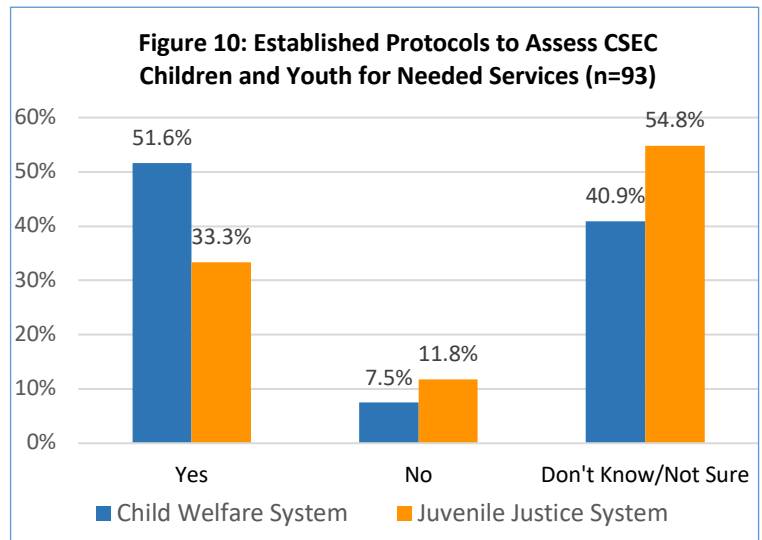
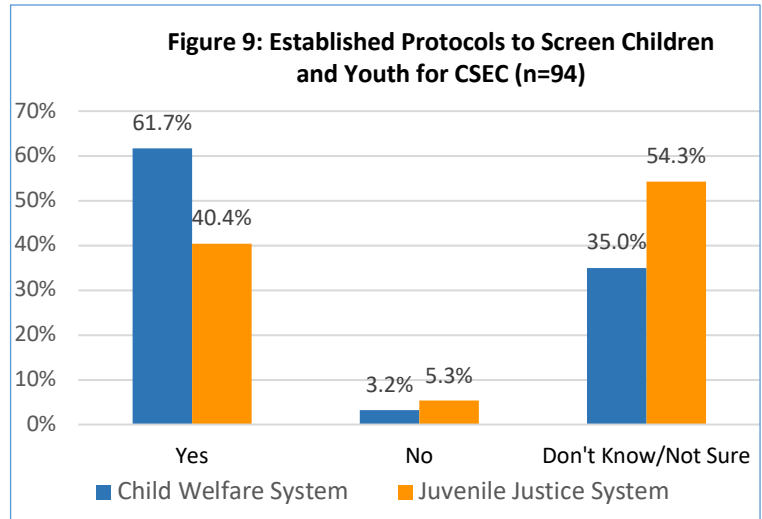
<sup>24</sup> Basson, D., Fernando, A.D., Geltman, E., Haley, H., Langs, J., Ritter, L. & Rosenblatt, E. (August 2016). Identifying Commercially Sexually Exploited Children: Guidelines for Administering the Commercial Sexual Exploitation Identification Tool (CSE-IT) Version 2.0. Oakland, CA: Westcoast Children's Clinic.

As Figure 9 shows, respondents said their county child welfare system was more likely than the juvenile justice system to have established policies, procedures or protocols to *screen* children and youth for CSEC (61.7% and 40.4%, respectively). Yet it is important to note that between 35.0% and 54.3% of respondents did not know or were not sure if such screening policies were in place.

Similarly, respondents said their county child welfare system was more likely than their juvenile justice system to have established policies, procedures or protocols to *assess the needed services* of CSEC children and youth (51.6% and 33.0%, respectively). However, again, a large percentage of respondents did not know or were not sure about their county’s needs assessment policies (Figure 10).

This general trend continued when it came to established policies, procedures or protocols for *responding* to CSEC cases, with an even higher percentage of respondents indicating they did not know or were not sure about such practices for responding to CSEC cases in their county juvenile justice system (58.5%), in particular (Figure 11).

Across all three practice areas, large percentages of those providing representation in a given system were unsure if the other system had such practices and protocols in place. In other words, the majority of those representing clients in the juvenile justice system did not know whether the child welfare system had established protocols to screen, assess and respond to CSEC. Conversely, those working in the child welfare system were unsure about what the juvenile justice system was doing to screen, assess and respond to CSEC. The **key takeaway** is that respondents seem to know more about what their own system is doing but have very limited knowledge about what is happening in the other system, thus necessitating a need for increased cross systems training and education.



## IV. Risk Factors and Possible Indicators for CSEC

This section focuses more specifically on what attorneys for children and youth said they are seeing when it comes to known risk factors or possible indicators of CSEC. A better understanding and robust information on risk and protective factors for CSEC is essential to develop tailored intervention efforts to those most at risk of exploitation and trafficking.<sup>25</sup>

We asked respondents to indicate approximately what percentage of their client population have or experience a list 15 different behavioral and physical issues that children and youth involved in the child welfare or juvenile justice system might face. Selection of these key issues was informed largely by the Commercial Sexual Exploitation Identification Tool (CSE-IT) as well as other prior research.<sup>26</sup> Similar to other sections in this report, we provide the results overall and then some descriptive comparisons by various groups.

### Results Overall

- According to all respondents, the most predominant CSEC risk factors that 50% or more of children and youth experience include trauma exposure, mental health and/or developmental challenges, significant problems with school and past child welfare involvement (see Figure 12). Moreover, 78.2% of respondents said that 75% or more of their children and youth served experience trauma.
- Though the prevalence of other issues is lower than that of the above risk factors, it is worth noting that a majority of respondents said one fourth or more of their clients experience multiple placements (73.3%), substance use (65.1%) and sexual abuse (55.3%). The percentages reported by respondents for sexual abuse – one of the top risk factors for CSEC – is substantially

*“More than 50% experience difficult parental relationships (no parents, being raised by elderly relative or parents with their own severe mental health issues [that are] often undiagnosed or untreated – i.e., intergenerational trauma).”*

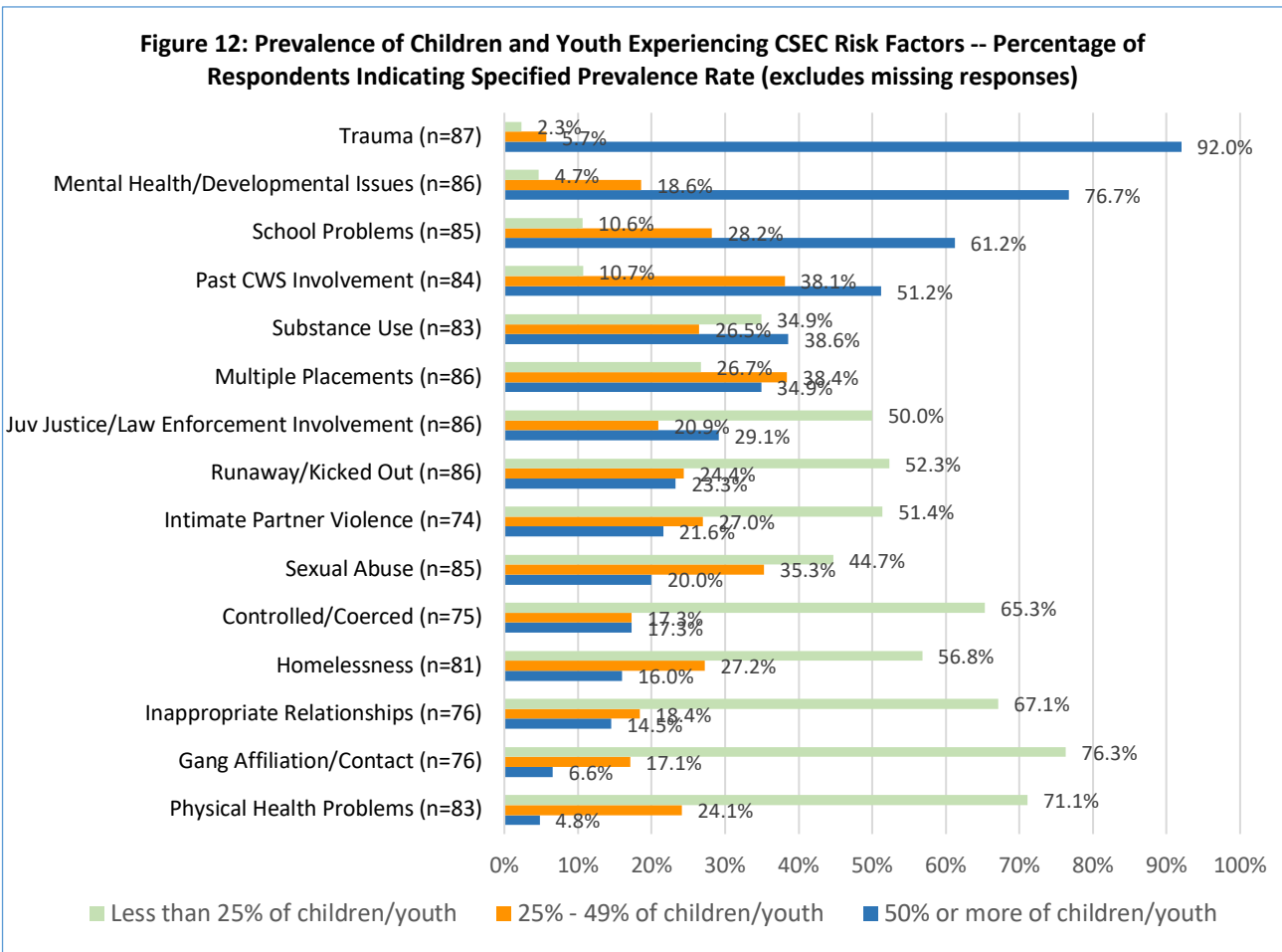
Attorney survey respondent

<sup>25</sup> Panlilio, C.C., Miyamoto, S., Font, S.A. & Schreier, H.M.C (2019). Assessing risk of commercial sexual exploitation among children involved in the child welfare system. *Child Abuse Negl.* 87: 88-99.

<sup>26</sup> The CSE-IT was developed “based on an extensive literature review of existing tools designed to provide guidance on interviewing or investigating sexual exploitation of youth, literature on the risk factors for and the indicators of exploitation, and through direct feedback from survivors and professionals who work with CSEC and other vulnerable populations.” Basson, D., Fernando, A.D., Geltman, E., Haley, H., Langa, J., Ritter, L. & Rosenblatt, E. (August 2016). *Identifying Commercially Sexually Exploited Children: Guidelines for Administering the Commercial Sexual Exploitation Identification Tool (CSE-IT) Version 2.0.* Oakland, CA: Westcoast Children’s Clinic. For other research on identified risk factors, see for example: Franchino-Olsen, H. & Martin, S.L. (2022). The associations between gang membership and domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST): Findings from a nationally representative study. *Violence Vict.* 37(4): 479-96; National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (2021). *By the Numbers.* <https://www.missingkids.org/theissues/trafficking#bythenumbers>; Latzman, N. E., & Gibbs, D. (2020). *Examining the link: Foster care runaway episodes and human trafficking.* OPRE Report No. 2020-143. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; Pullmann, M.D., Roberts, N., Parker, E.M., Mangiaracina, K.J., Briner, L., Silverman, M., & Becker, J.R. (2020). Residential instability, running away, and juvenile detention characterizes commercially sexually exploited youth involved in Washington State’s child welfare system. *Child Abuse Negl.* 102:104423; and Panlilio, C.C., Miyamoto, S., Font, S.A. & Schreier, H.M.C (2019). Assessing risk of commercial sexual exploitation among children involved in the child welfare system. *Child Abuse Negl.* 87: 88-99.

higher than that of the general child welfare population. In 2022, 10.6% of substantiated child maltreatment victims had experienced sexual abuse.<sup>27</sup>

- Overall, less common risk factors – in which the majority of respondents said less than 25% of children and youth served experience these issues – included gang affiliation or contact, notable physical health problems, relationships or belongings (e.g., credit cards, multiple cell phones) that are not appropriate with client’s age or circumstances (referred to as inappropriate relationships, for short), being controlled or coerced by another person, periods of homelessness, incidents of running away or being kicked out of placements<sup>28</sup> and intimate partner violence. (See also Figure 12).



<sup>27</sup> U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau. (2024). *Child Maltreatment 2022*. Available from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/child-maltreatment>.

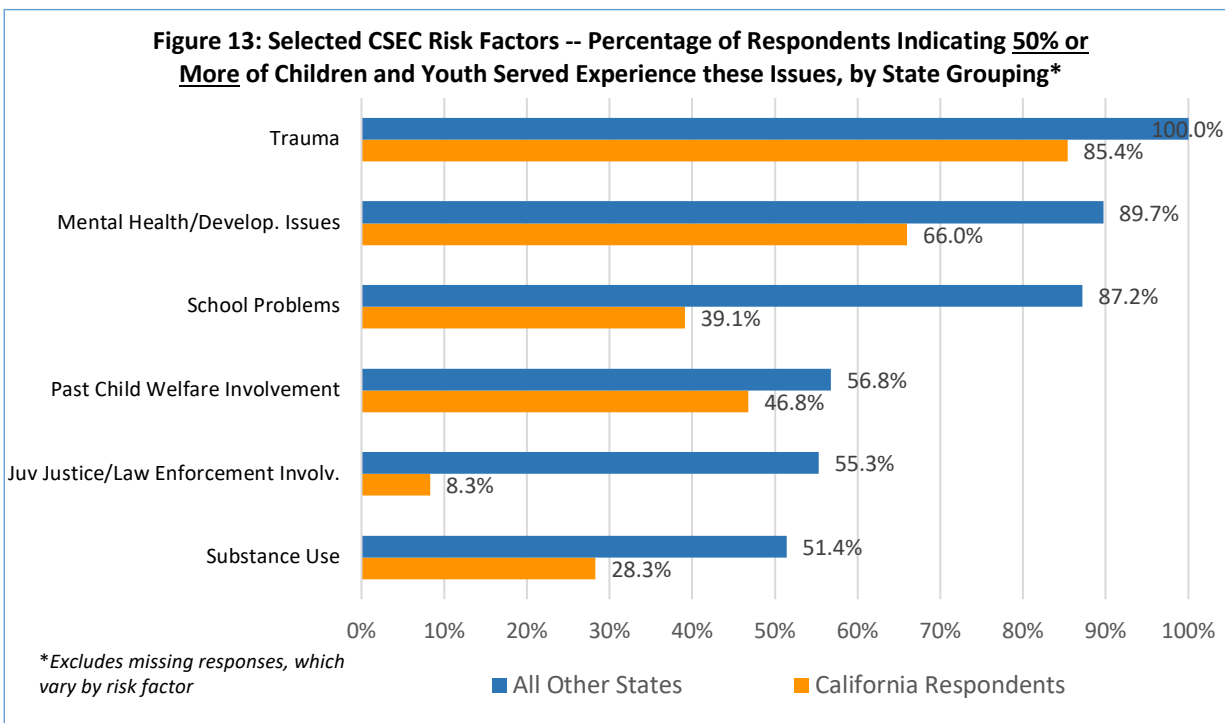
<sup>28</sup> The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) reports that one in six runaways are likely sex trafficking victims. (NCMEC, 2021. By the Numbers. <https://www.missingkids.org/theissues/trafficking#bythenumbers>). Various studies indicate the percentage of children and youth in foster care who run ranges from 19 to 46 percent (Latzman, N. E., & Gibbs, D., 2020. *Examining the link: Foster care runaway episodes and human trafficking*. OPRE Report No. 2020-143. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.)

- The largest numbers of don't know/not sure responses (approximately one fifth of respondents) were for some of the issues most likely to affect older children and youth and which may be more difficult to screen for, such as gang affiliation or contact, being controlled or coerced by another person and inappropriate relationships (data not shown).

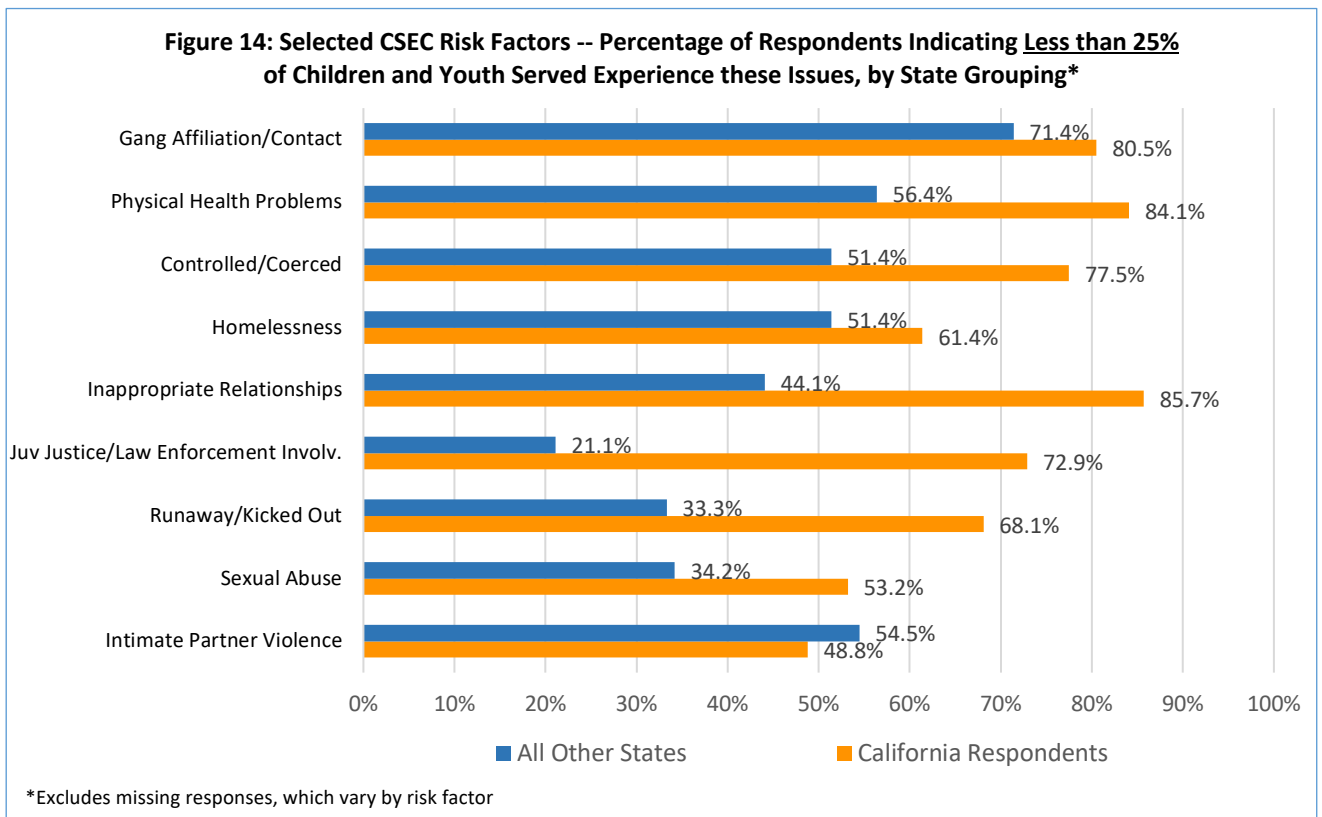
### By State Grouping

In comparing respondents from California to those from all other states, some substantial differences in risk factor prevalence emerged, as discussed below and shown in Figures 13 and 14. Some of this variance may be due to the fact that a greater proportion of California respondents represent children and youth in the child welfare system, compared to those from other states (see Section I).

- As expected, trauma exposure was high overall, with all respondents (100%) from other states and 85.4% of those from California saying half or more of their children and youth served experience trauma. Moreover, the vast majority (87%) of the respondents from other states said that 75% or more of their clients experience trauma, as did 71% of California respondents who indicated as much.
- While past child welfare involvement was a major risk factor for both geographical groupings, nearly one third of California respondents said 75% or more of their clients served had past child welfare involvement, compared to slightly more than one fifth of those from other states.
- The majority of respondents from other states (55.3%) said half or more of their clients experience juvenile justice or law enforcement involvement (55.3%) and substance use issues (51.4%), compared to 8.3% and 28.3% of California respondents, respectively.



- While mental health and/or developmental issues and significant school problems were both major risk factors overall, they were especially prevalent among respondents from other states. For example, the vast majority of these respondents (89.7% and 87.2%, respectively) said half or more of their clients experienced mental health/developmental issues and school problems.
- Again, while prevalence is somewhat lower than that of above risk factors, it is worth noting that 79.5% of respondents from other states and 68.1% of those from California said that one fourth or more of their children and youth served have multiple out-of-home care placements. Approximately two thirds (65.8%) of respondents from other states and nearly one half (46.8%) of California respondents also indicated that one fourth or more of their population served have experienced sexual abuse. Two thirds of respondents (66.7%) from other states also said one fourth or more their clients have incidents of running away or being kicked out of placements.
- As shown in Figure 14, less prevalent risk factors – in which the majority of respondents from both California and all other states indicated that less than 25% of children and youth served experienced these issues – included gang affiliation or contact, notable physical health problems, being controlled or coerced by another person and homelessness. The majority of *California* respondents also indicated that less than 25% of their population experienced inappropriate relationships, juvenile justice or law enforcement involvement, incidents of running away or being kicked out of placements and sexual abuse. Among respondents from other states, intimate partner violence was also less prevalent.

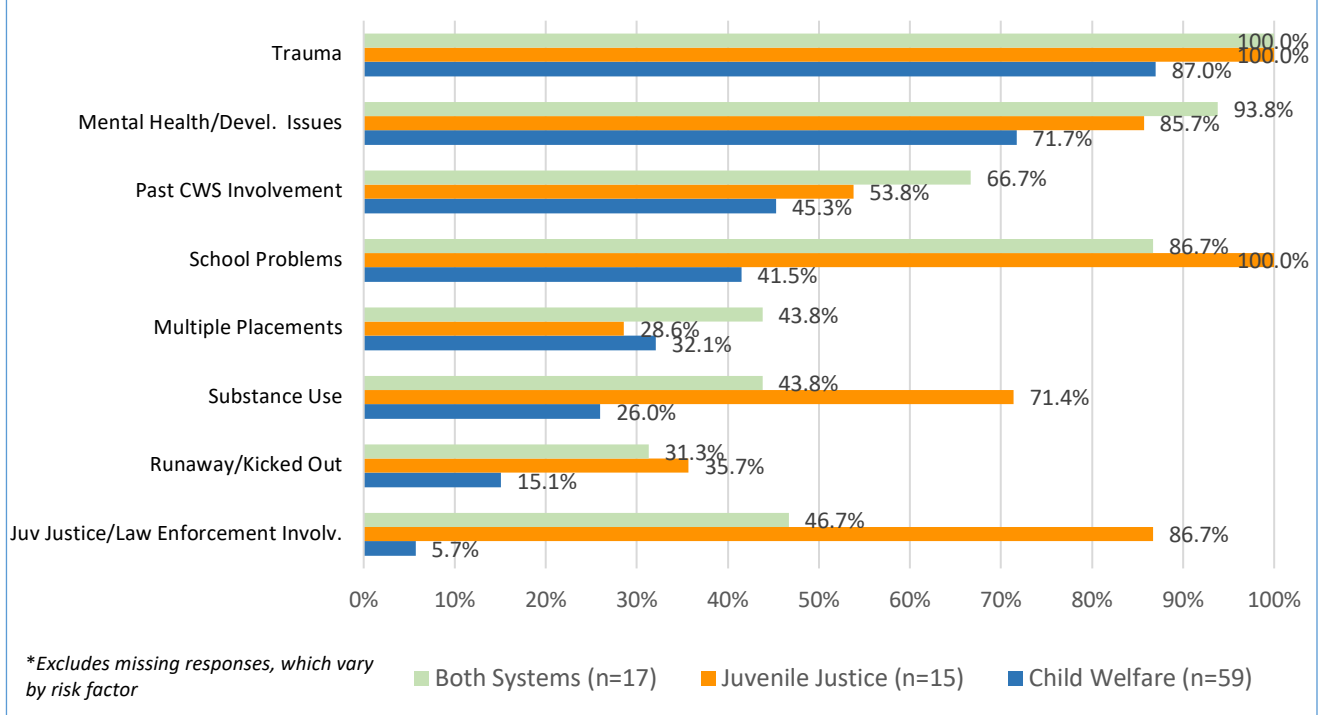


## By System Representation

Similarly, when we compared the prevalence of CSEC risk factors by the system in which respondents provide representation for children and youth, some substantial differences emerged, as shown in Figure 15. As a reminder, these data should be considered descriptive and exploratory in nature given the disproportionate number of respondents representing the child welfare system compared to the juvenile justice system or both systems.

- All (100%) of respondents representing children and youth in the **juvenile justice** system or **both** the child welfare and juvenile justice system and 87.0% of those providing representation in the **child welfare** system only indicated half or more of their children and youth served experience trauma. In fact, nearly all respondents representing clients in the juvenile justice system (92.9%) or both systems (93.8%), as well as 68.5% of those working in child welfare said that *three fourths or more* of their children and youth experience trauma.
- Significant school problems were noted as particularly prevalent among respondents representing children and youth in the **juvenile justice** system or **both** systems (100% and 85.7%, respectively). A substantially lower percentage of respondents (41.5%) providing representation in the **child welfare** system said half or more of their clients were experiencing this issue.
- Mental health and/or developmental issues were also a predominant risk factor, with 93.8% of those working in **both** systems and 86.7% of those providing representation in the **juvenile justice** system saying half or more of their clients had this issue. Though still a predominant risk factor cited by those representing children and youth in the **child welfare** system, the percentage was a bit lower comparatively (71.7%).
- Not surprisingly, the vast majority (86.7%) of those representing children and youth in the **juvenile justice** system said the majority of their clients experienced juvenile justice or law enforcement involvement, compared to slightly less than half (46.7%) of those working in **both** systems and just 5.7% of those representing children in the **child welfare** system.
- In addition, those working in the **juvenile justice** system were more likely than either one or both of the other groups to say their clients experience substance use issues and incidents of running away or being kicked out of placements.
- Variation also existed concerning children and youth experiencing multiple out-of-home care placements. Among those providing representation in **both** systems, 43.8% said half or more of their clients had multiple placements, compared to approximately one third or less of those working in the **child welfare** system (32.1%) and **juvenile justice** system (28.6%).
- The majority of respondents working in the juvenile justice system or both systems noted sexual abuse was still a major factor for one fourth or more of children and youth (78.6% and 75.0%, respectively), as did 44.2% of child welfare system respondents (data not shown).

**Figure 15: Selected CSEC Risk Factors -- Percentage of Respondents Indicating 50% or More of Children and Youth Experience these Issues, by System in Which Represent Clients\***



- Among those providing representation in the child welfare system, the least prevalent risk factors – in which three fourths or more of respondents indicated that less than 25 percent of their clients experience these issues – included inappropriate relationships, gang affiliation or contact, notable physical health problems, juvenile justice or law enforcement involvement, and being controlled or coerced by another person (data not shown).

*“We have young teens coming into court with adult boyfriends or friends. The idea is that this is probably just a [statutory] rape situation. No one delves deeper and asks about gifts, showing up late at night, being lured away. My guess is that people are blind to what’s happening.”*

Attorney survey respondent

### By CSEC Caseload Prevalence

We also looked at the presence of the various behavioral and physical issues by the extent to which respondents said their population of children and youth served includes those who have experienced or are at risk of CSEC. The discussion below is limited to those respondents who said they **sometimes** or **often/always** have individuals with CSEC in their caseload. (Too few respondents said they never/rarely have CSEC in their caseload to include in the analysis.) As one might expect, some substantial differences emerged with those who often/always have CSEC in their caseload reporting higher rates of most risk factors among the children and youth they serve (see Figure 16). Key points include:

- Trauma exposure was once again high overall for both groups. All (100%) of respondents who often/always and 91.7% of those who sometimes have CSEC in their caseload reported that half or more of their population served have trauma exposure. Moreover, nearly all (96.2%) of those

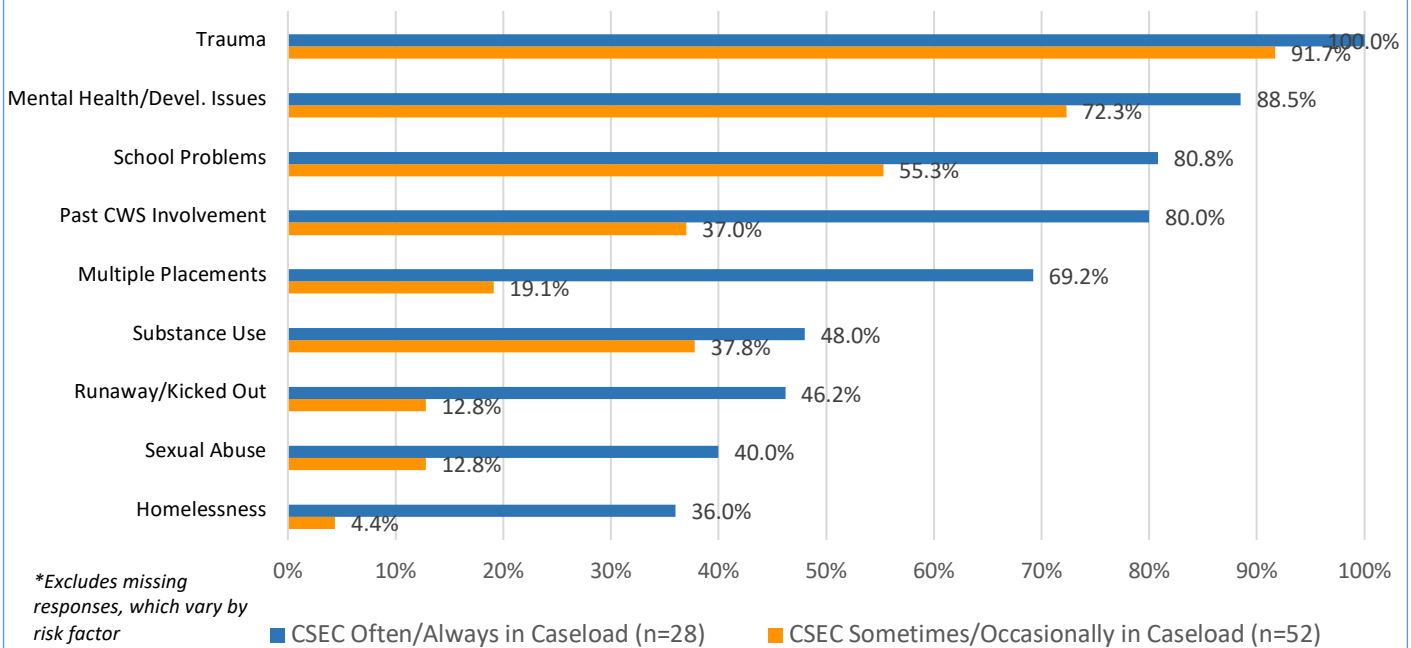
who often/always and 70.8% of those who sometimes have CSEC cases said 75% or more of those they serve experience trauma.

- Mental health and/or developmental issues was also a major risk factor overall, but especially among respondents who often/always have children and youth with CSEC in their caseload: 88.5% compared to 72.3% of those who sometimes have clients with or at risk of CSEC.

The differences between the two respondent groups were more pronounced for several other risk factors, as the following points highlight. These data reinforce the importance and need for improved cross-systems service, training and other programming.

- The vast majority (80.8%) of respondents who often/always have children and youth with CSEC said half or more of their population served has significant school problems (80.8%) and past child welfare involvement (80.0%), compared to 55.3% and 37.8%, respectively, of those whose caseload sometimes includes CSEC cases.
- The multiple out-of-home placements category was the other key risk factor cited by more than two thirds (69.2%) of those who often/always have children and youth with CSEC in their caseload. In contrast, less than one fifth (19.1%) of those who sometimes have CSEC in their caseload said half or more of their clients experienced multiple placements.
- In addition, substantially higher percentages of those whose caseload often/always includes CSEC said that half or more of their population served experience substance use (48.0%), incidents of running away or being kicked out of placements (46.2%), sexual abuse (40.0%) and homelessness (36.0%).

**Figure 16: Selected CSEC Risk Factors -- Percentage of Respondents Indicating 50% or More of Children and Youth Served Experience these Issues, by CSEC Prevalence in Caseload\***



- The two least prevalent risk factors – in which the majority of both groups said that less than 25% of their children and youth experience these issues – included notable physical health problems and gang affiliation or contact. Among those who sometimes have CSEC in their caseloads, less prevalent factors also included juvenile justice or law enforcement involvement, incidents of running away or being kicked out of placements, sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, homelessness, being controlled or coerced by another person and inappropriate relationships (data not shown).

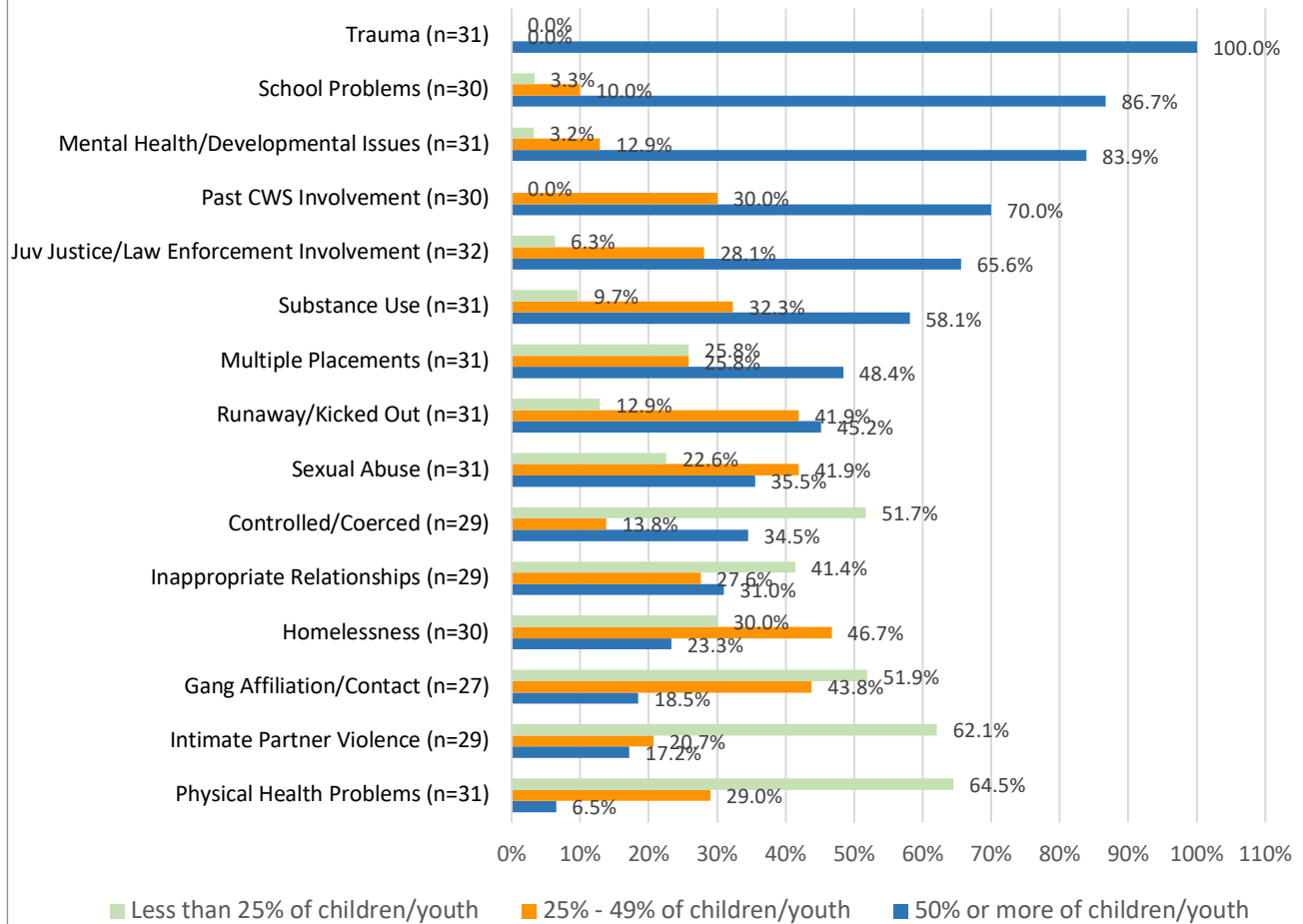
### Among Older Children and Youth

We looked at the prevalence of risk factors among the 32 respondents who said they serve 50% or more of children ages 14 and older. Since children and youth ages 11 to 13 comprised only a small percentage of the general population that respondents served, we were not able to do any more in-depth comparisons by additional age groups that we recognize are also at higher risk for CSEC.

Overall, the trends regarding the most and least predominant risk factors among this subgroup of respondents align with the other results discussed thus far in this section. However, for many of the risk factors, a greater percentage of this demographic (compared to all children and youth) experience these issues, as shown in Figure 17 and discussed below.

- All (100%) of this subgroup of respondents that serve more older children and youth said half or more of their clients experience trauma exposure. In fact, 93.5% said *three fourths or more* of their children and youth experience trauma. Respondents said the vast majority of older children and youth also deal with significant school problems (86.7%) and mental health and/or developmental challenges (83.9%). Other predominant risk factors included past child welfare involvement, juvenile justice or law enforcement involvement and substance use issues.
- It is important to note that 77.4% of these respondents said that one fourth or more of their population served experienced sexual abuse, which is a much higher prevalence rate than reported overall by all respondents (55.3%).
- The least common risk factors reported by this subgroup included notable physical health problems, intimate partner violence, gang affiliation or contact and being controlled or coerced by another person. The majority of respondents said less than 25% of their population experience these issues.

**Figure 17: Prevalence of Risk Factors as Reported by Attorneys Predominantly Serving Children and Youth Ages 14 and Older -- Percentage of Respondents Indicating Specified Prevalence Rate\***



\*N=32 respondents serving 50% or more of children and youth ages 14 and older; excludes missing responses

## V. CSEC Training and Education

In FSI’s prior CSEC research project, the key stakeholders we interviewed, as well as GAL/CASA survey respondents, repeatedly expressed the importance of adequate training and education to strengthen the role of the children’s attorneys and GALs (who must be attorneys in some states or who may be non-lawyer volunteers such as CASAs in others). Indeed, 43.5% of GAL/CASA survey respondents cited training and education as one of the most important ways to strengthen their role in addressing CSEC. At a high level, key stakeholder interviewees also identified a need for cross-systems training and education.

Most child welfare, court, legal, law enforcement, advocacy and other professionals who work with victims of child abuse and neglect currently receive extensive training and education on how to work with the child welfare population in general. However, CSEC typically has not been a standard or required part of most professionals’ training. The landscape is changing, however, as more jurisdictions

are instituting initiatives to address CSEC among high-risk populations such as children and youth involved in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems.

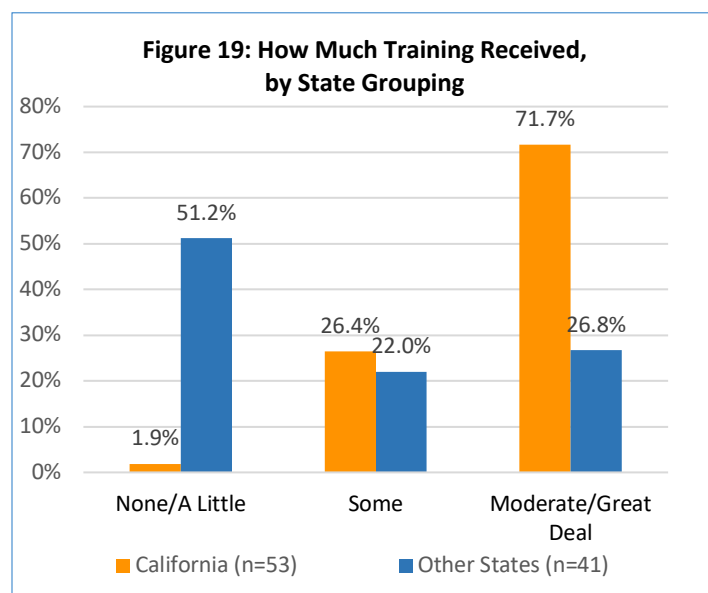
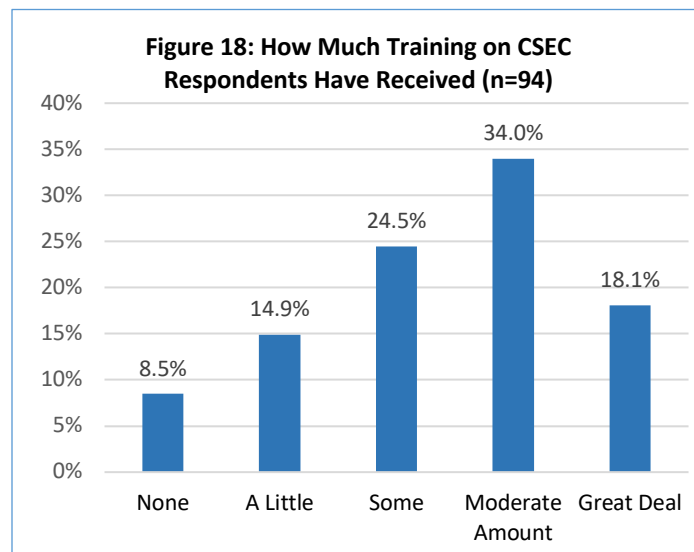
For this current project, FSI asked attorneys for children and youth how much training on CSEC they had and whether that level of training was adequate. We also sought to learn how adequate they feel their knowledge and skills are in important CSEC subject areas. Results are discussed below and then, where appropriate, by certain groups.

### How Much Training Received – Overall and by Certain Groups

Overall, more than half (52.1%) of children’s attorney respondents said they had received either a *moderate* amount or *great deal* of training on CSEC. Approximately one fourth each had received *some* training (24.5%) or *a little/no* training (23.4%). See Figure 18. These numbers are somewhat comparable to how GALs/CASAs responded in FSI’s prior survey. More than half (55%) of GAL/CASA respondents also said they had received a moderate or great deal of training on CSEC, yet approximately one third (34%) had received a little or no training, with the remaining 15% receiving some training.

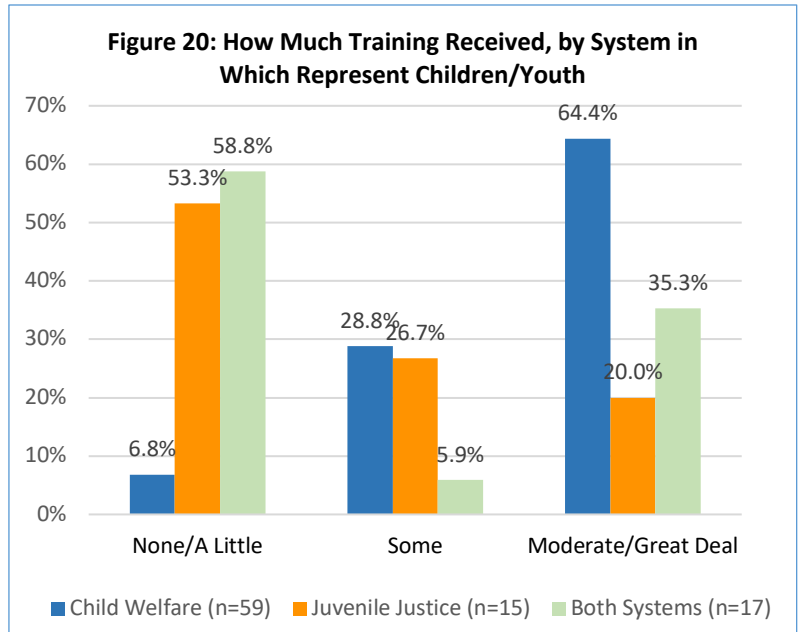
Among children’s attorney respondents in our recent survey, there was significant variation when delving into training by different groups.

- By state grouping.** Nearly three fourths (71.7%) of respondents from California indicated they had received a *moderate/great deal* of training on CSEC versus slightly more than one fourth (26.8%) of respondents from the other states. In contrast, more than half (51.2%) of respondents from other states said they had received *a little/no* training on CSEC (Figure 19).
- By system representation.** Nearly two thirds (64.4%) of respondents who represent children and youth in the child welfare system indicated they had received a *moderate/great deal* of training on CSEC, compared to one fifth (20.0%) of respondents representing clients in the juvenile justice system and more than one third (35.3%) and those who provide representation in both systems. More than half of respondents representing clients in both systems (58.8%) and those representing clients in the



juvenile justice system (53.3%) said they had received *no/a little* training on CSEC (Figure 20). As a reminder, given the disproportionality in system representation, these data should be interpreted with caution and are not generalizable to the larger population of attorneys for children and youth

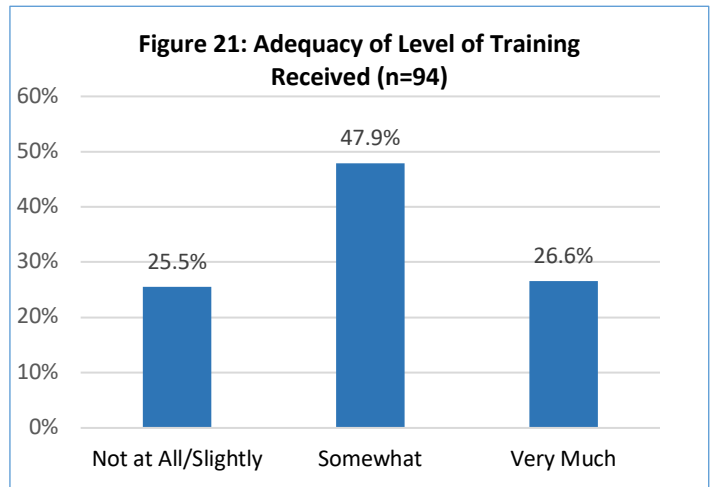
- By prevalence of CSEC in caseload:** Perhaps not surprisingly, those who said their caseload often/always includes CSEC were more likely than those who sometimes have CSEC cases to have received a *moderate/great deal* of training: 64.3% compared to 48.1% (data not shown).



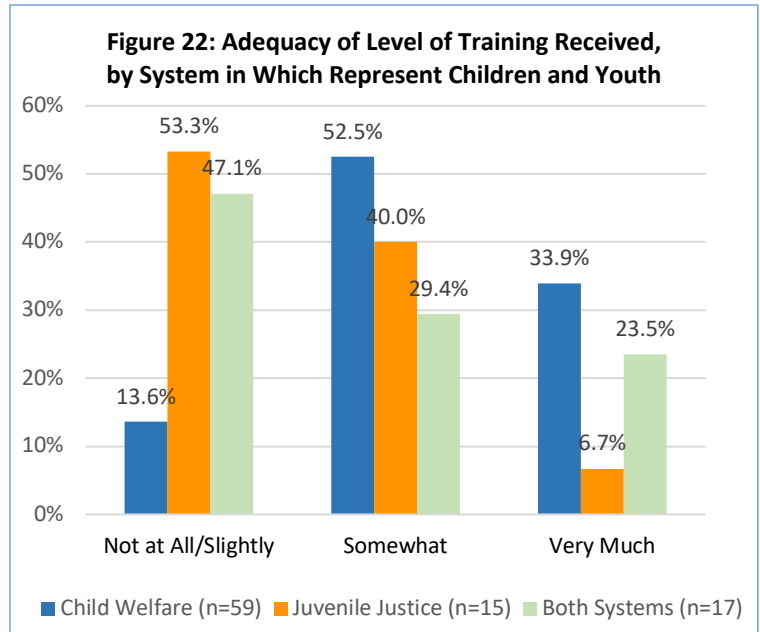
### Adequacy of Level of Training Received

Overall, as Figure 21 shows, the largest proportion of all respondents (47.9%) said they felt the level of training they received was *somewhat* adequate. Approximately one fourth each said it was *very much* or *not at all/slightly* adequate. However, similar to the amount of training received, there were some major differences by select groups.

- By how much training received:** Among those who had a moderate/great deal of training, nearly half (49.0%) felt they *very much* had an adequate level of training, while a comparable percentage felt their training level was *somewhat* adequate (46.9%); only 4.1% felt their level of training was *not at all/slightly* adequate. Those who had some degree of training were most likely feel their level of training was *somewhat* adequate (78.3%), while – as expected – the vast majority (81.8%) of those with no or little training said their level of *not at all/slightly* adequate.
- By state grouping:** Though a large majority of California respondents had received a moderate/great deal of training on CSEC, just over half (52.8%) said the level of training was *somewhat* adequate, while a sizable percentage (39.6%) said the training level was *very much* adequate. In contrast, nearly half (48.8%) of respondents from other states said their level of training was *not at all/slightly* adequate (data not shown).



- By system representation:**  
 Respondents representing children and youth in the child welfare system were most likely to say their level of training was *somewhat* adequate, while those providing representation in either the juvenile justice system or both systems were more likely to say their training level was *not at all/slightly* adequate (53.3% and 47.1%, respectively). On the other end of the spectrum, approximately one third (33.9%) of those working in child welfare said their training amount was *very much* adequate, compared to less than one fourth (23.5%) of those working in both systems and 6.7% of those working in the juvenile justice system (Figure 22).



- By prevalence of CSEC in caseload:** The largest proportion of both those who often/always and sometimes have individuals experiencing CSEC in their caseload said their level of training was *somewhat* adequate (46.4% and 44.2%, respectively). However, those who often/always have CSEC cases were more likely to indicate their level of training was *very much* adequate, while those who sometimes have CSEC cases were more apt to say it was *not at all/slightly* adequate (data not shown).

## Knowledge and Skills in Selected CSEC Subject Areas – Overall and By Select Groups

### Overall

We asked respondents to tell us how adequate they felt their knowledge and skills are in a dozen different CSEC subject areas. As shown in Figure 23, across most of the CSEC subject areas, most respondents tended to rate their knowledge and skills as *somewhat* adequate. No more than 42.6% felt their knowledge and skills were *very/extremely* adequate in any given CSEC area (identifying risk factors or possible indicators of CSEC). In most cases, less than one third of respondents said they had *very/extremely* adequate skills and knowledge. Conversely, the percentage of respondents who felt their knowledge and skills were *slightly/not at all* adequate ranged from a low of 14.9% to a high of 46.8% across the subject areas.

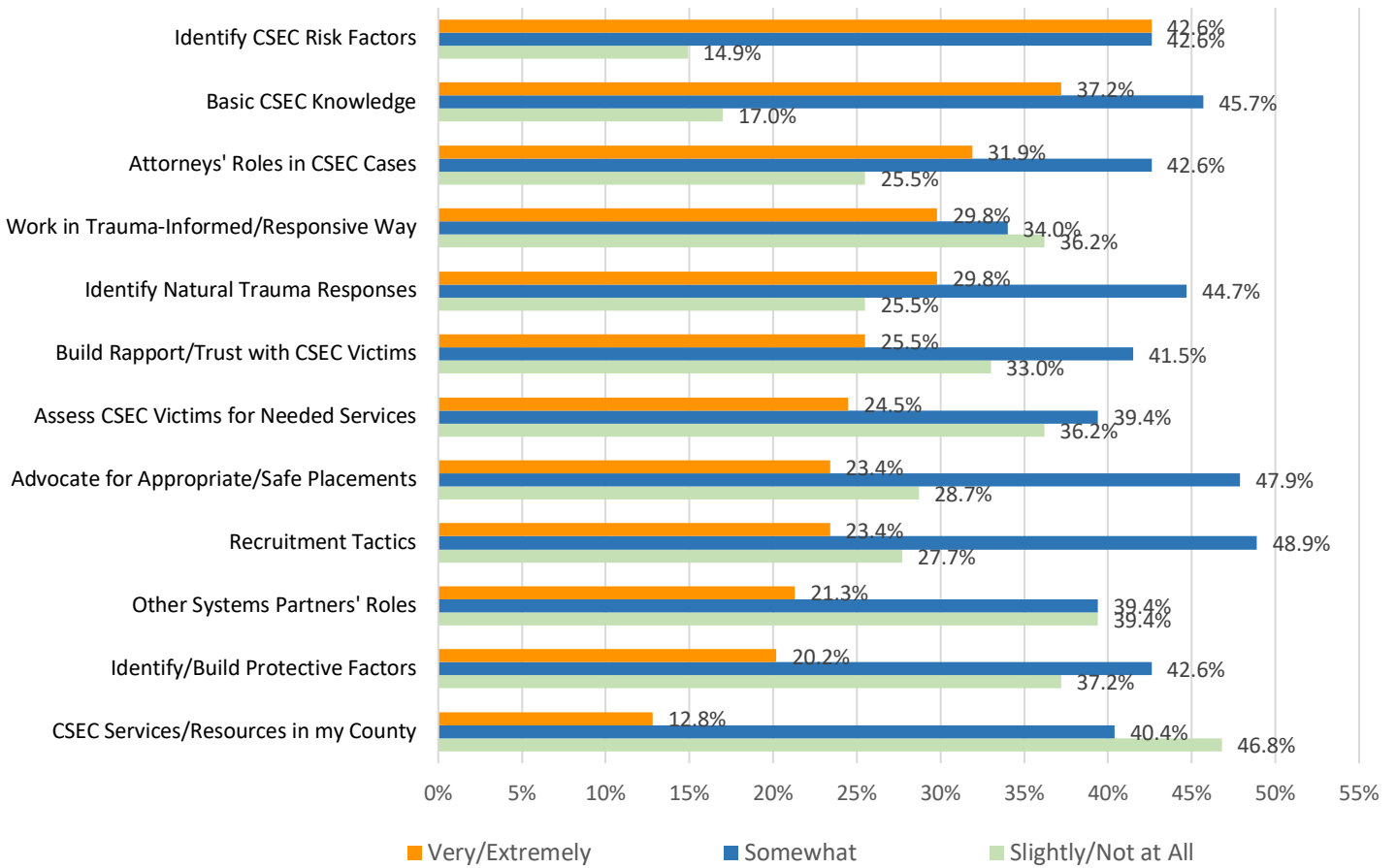
The top five training and educational needs, based on the highest percentages of respondents who said their knowledge and skills was *not at all/slightly* adequate, spanned the following areas:

Attorneys for children and youth may feel they have somewhat adequate knowledge and skills to advocate for appropriate placements, but the problem is such placements are too few and far between. The lack of appropriate and safe placements is a predominant, pressing need for victims of child sex trafficking involved in the child welfare system. To further complicate matters, placement staff typically lack sufficient training on the dynamics of CSEC, the trauma these children have experienced and how to therapeutically respond to these children and their trauma responses.

- Existing services and resources in my county for CSEC children and youth: 46.8%
- Roles and responsibilities of other systems partners in CSEC cases: 39.4%
- Identifying and building protective factors that may reduce the risk of CSEC: 37.2%
- Assessing CSEC children and youth for needed services: 36.2%
- Working with CSEC children and youth in a trauma-informed and trauma-responsive way: 36.2%

Understanding the different community services and resources that are available and appropriate for children who have experienced CSEC is important and needed for providing informed recommendations about specialized services for CSEC victims. Further, understanding how to recognize and respond to trauma is particularly important to ensure professionals' interactions with CSEC victims are supportive and not re-traumatizing.

**Figure 23: Extent to Which Respondents' Feel Knowledge and Skills is Adequate, by CSEC Subject Area**  
(Percentage Indicating Adequacy Level, n=94)



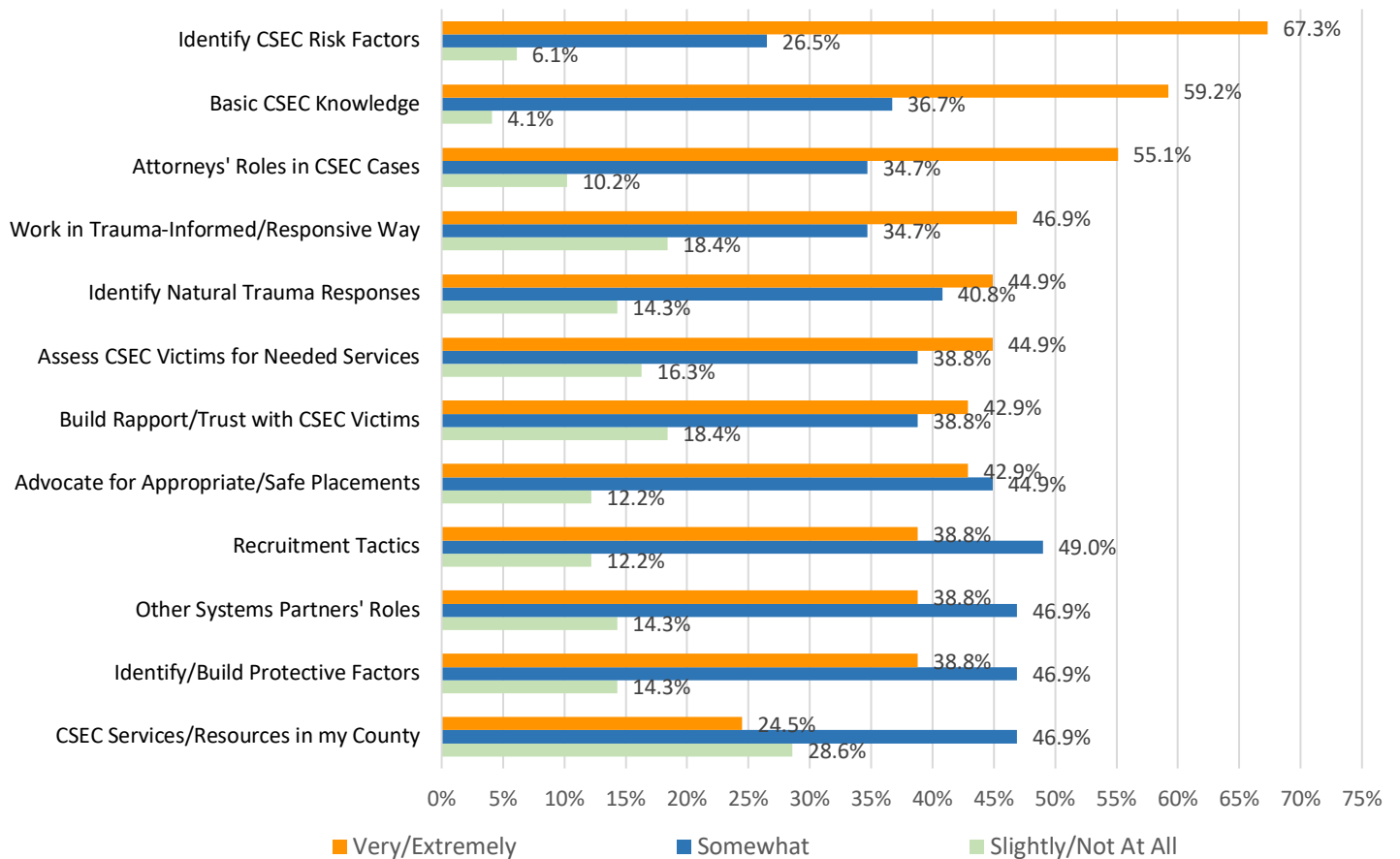
**By Amount of Training Received**

Among those who said they had a **moderate/great deal** of training the results were more positive. As shown in Figure 24, a majority of these respondents felt their knowledge and skills were *very/extremely* adequate in several CSEC subject areas. The top educational strengths among those with a moderate/great deal of training were similar to the overall responses. However, the percentage of

respondents with a moderate/great deal of training who said their knowledge and skills were *very/extremely* adequate was substantially higher.

The percentage of these respondents who felt their knowledge and skills were *somewhat* adequate ranged from approximately one fourth (in identifying CSEC risk factors) to nearly one half (regarding tactics to recruit children and youth). Finally, the percentage who said their knowledge and skills were *slightly/not at all* adequate ranged from a low of 6.1% to a high of 28.6% across the CSEC subject areas. The primary training and educational need was again knowing what resources and services exist in their county for CSEC victims. However, the 28.6% of those with a moderate/great deal of training who said their knowledge about existing resources and services was *not at all/slightly* adequate was substantially lower than that of all respondents overall (46.8%).

**Figure 24: Extent to Which Respondents' Who Had a Moderate/Great Deal of Training Feel Their Knowledge and Skills is Adequate, by CSEC Topic Area**  
(Percentage Indicating Adequacy Level, N=49)



In contrast (as one might expect), less than 10% of respondents who had received **a little/no training** felt their knowledge and skills were *very/extremely* adequate in any one CSEC area. Moreover, in half of the subject areas, no respondents reported feeling *very/extremely* confident about their knowledge and skills. Figure 25 shows the top training and education gaps among those who had little/no CSEC training.

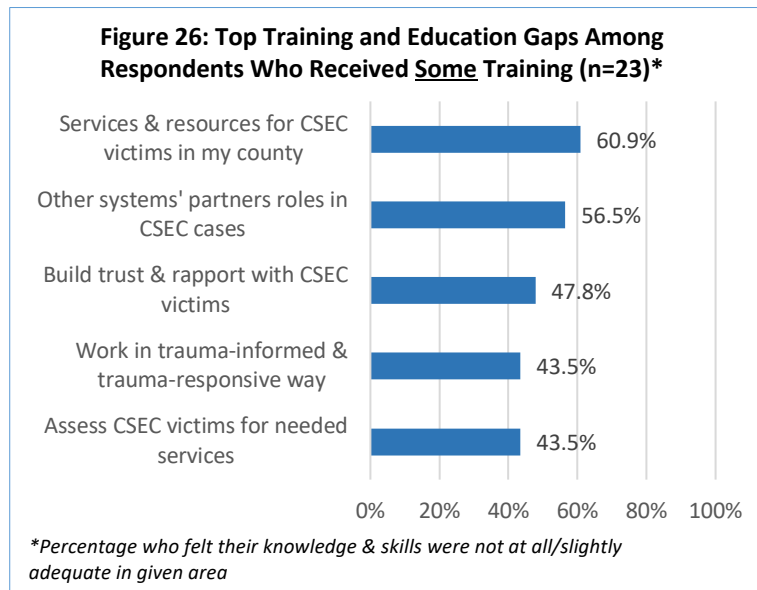
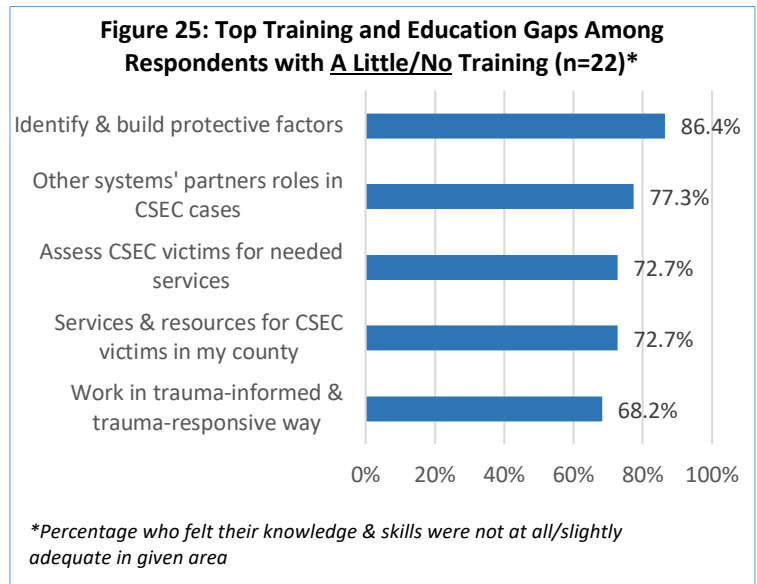
Among those who had received **some training**, the results were a bit more encouraging. In the majority of CSEC subject areas, the percentage that felt their knowledge and skills were *very/extremely* adequate was about one fifth or less. In 4 of the 12 CSEC areas, no respondents reported feeling *very/extremely* confident about their knowledge and skills. Figure 26 shows the top gaps among those who had received some training.

**By Prevalence of CSEC in Caseload**

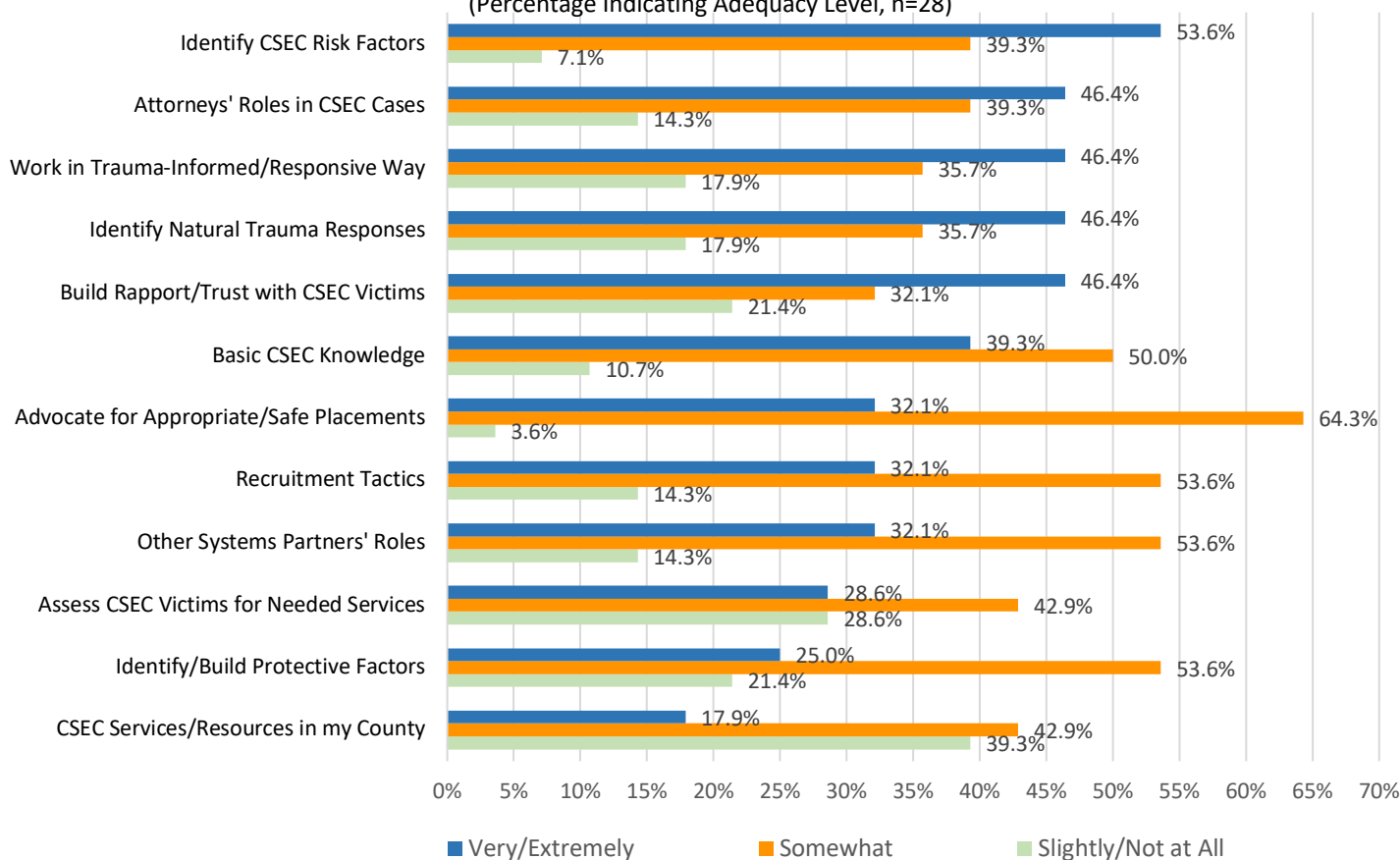
As Figure 27 shows, among respondents that **often/always** have CSEC cases (n=28), less than half felt their knowledge and skills were *very/extremely* adequate in all but one area: identifying CSEC risk factors.

The majority of this subgroup felt their knowledge and skills were *somewhat* adequate in 5 of the 12 subject areas: roles and responsibilities of attorneys in CSEC cases, working with CSEC youth in a trauma-informed and trauma-responsive way, identifying behaviors that are natural trauma responses and how to build rapport and trust with CSEC victims.

Further, the percentage of this subgroup who said their knowledge and skills were *slightly/not at all* adequate ranged from a high of 39.3% (regarding existing services and resources in their county for CSEC victims) to a low of just 3.6% (for advocating for safe and appropriate placements).



**Figure 27: Extent to Which Respondents Who Often/Always Have CSEC Children and Youth in Their Caseload Feel Knowledge and Skills is Adequate, by CSEC Subject Area**  
(Percentage Indicating Adequacy Level, n=28)



Among respondents who **sometimes** have CSEC cases, the percentage who felt their knowledge and skills were *very/extremely* adequate ranged from a high of 36.5% (identifying CSEC risk factors) to a low of 11.5% (existing services and resources for CSEC children and youth in my county). Moreover, half of these respondents said their knowledge was *slightly/not at all* adequate regarding existing services and resources in their county for CSEC victims.

Other major training and education needs for this particular subgroup centered on roles and responsibilities of other systems partners in CSEC cases; identifying or building protective factors that may reduce risk of CSEC; working with CSEC children/youth in trauma-informed, trauma-responsive way; and assessing CSEC children and youth for needed services (see Table 1). The percentage that felt their knowledge and skills were *somewhat* adequate ranged from 50.0% (able to identify behaviors that are natural trauma responses) to 28.8% (working with CSEC children and youth in a trauma-informed and trauma-responsive way); data not shown.

The summary table below (Table 1) shows the major strength and gap areas among those who **often/always** and **sometimes** have children and youth with CSEC in their caseload. While there are similarities in subject areas for both respondent groups, the degree to which something is a strength or gap varies greatly.

<b>TABLE 1</b>			
<b>Top Training and Educational Strengths</b>			
<b>by Prevalence of Children and Youth Experiencing or At Risk of CSEC in Caseload</b>			
<i>(Percentage of respondents indicating knowledge and skills is very/extremely adequate in given area)</i>			
<b>CSEC Often/Always in Caseload (n=28)</b>		<b>CSEC Sometimes in Caseload (n=52)</b>	
• Identify CSEC risk factors and possible indicators:	53.6%	• Identify CSEC risk factors and possible indicators:	36.5%
• How to build trust and rapport with CSEC children/youth:	46.4%	• Basic CSEC knowledge:	34.6%
• Identify behaviors that are natural trauma responses:	46.4%	• Roles and responsibilities of attorneys in CSEC cases:	28.8%
• Working with CSEC children/youth in trauma-informed, trauma-responsive way:	46.4%	• Working with CSEC children/youth in trauma-informed, trauma-responsive way	26.9%
• Roles and responsibilities of attorneys in CSEC cases:	46.4%	• Identify behaviors that are natural trauma responses:	26.9%
<b>Top Training and Educational Needs</b>			
<b>by Prevalence of Children/Youth Experiencing or At Risk of CSEC in Caseload</b>			
<i>(Percentage of respondents indicating knowledge and skills is not at all/slightly adequate in given area)</i>			
<b>CSEC Often/Always in Caseload (n=28)</b>		<b>CSEC Sometimes in Caseload (n=52)</b>	
• Existing services and resources for CSEC children and youth:	39.3%	• Existing services and resources for CSEC children and youth in my county:	50.0%
• Assessing CSEC children/youth for needed services:	28.6%	• Roles and responsibilities of other systems partners in CSEC cases:	46.2%
• Identify and build protective factors that may reduce the risk of CSEC:	21.4%	• Identify and build protective factors that may reduce the risk of CSEC:	44.2%
• How to build trust and rapport with CSEC children/youth:	24.5%	• Working with CSEC children/youth in trauma-informed, trauma-responsive way:	44.2%
		• Assessing CSEC children/youth for needed services:	40.4%

**By State Grouping**

As discussed earlier in this section, nearly three fourths of California respondents said they had received a moderate or great deal of training on CSEC, compared to slightly more than one fourth of respondents from other states. Perhaps not surprisingly, the proportion of California respondents who felt their knowledge and skills were *very/extremely* adequate was substantially higher across all CSEC subject areas than respondents from other states. In fact, less than one fourth of respondents from other states felt their knowledge and skills were *very/extremely* adequate in any one subject area. Table 2 shows the major strength and need areas for each of these respondent groups. While there are similarities in subject areas for both, the degree to which something is a strength or need varies greatly.

TABLE 2			
Top 3 Strengths by State Grouping			
Percentage of Respondents Indicating Knowledge and Skills is Very/Extremely Adequate in Given Subject Area			
California (n=53)		Other States (n=41)	
• Identify CSEC risk factors/possible indicators	62.3%	• Basic CSEC knowledge:	22.0%
• Basic CSEC knowledge:	49.1%	• Identify behaviors that are natural trauma responses:	22.0%
• Roles and responsibilities of attorneys in CSEC cases:	41.5%	• Roles and responsibilities of attorneys in CSEC cases:	19.5%
Top 5 Educational Needs by State Grouping			
Percentage of Respondents Indicating Knowledge and Skills is Not at All/Slightly Adequate in Given Subject Area			
California (n=53)		Other States (n=41)	
• Existing services and resources for CSEC children and youth:	41.5%	• Identify and build protective factors that may reduce the risk of CSEC:	61.0%
• Roles and responsibilities of other systems partners in CSEC cases:	30.2%	• Assessing CSEC children/youth for needed services:	53.7%
• How to build trust and rapport with CSEC children/youth:	28.3%	• Existing services and resources for CSEC children/youth:	53.7%
• Identify behaviors that are natural trauma responses	24.5%	• Working with CSEC children/youth in trauma-informed, trauma-responsive way:	51.2%
• Working with CSEC children/youth in trauma-informed, trauma-responsive way:	24.5%	• Roles and responsibilities of other systems partners in CSEC cases:	51.2%

### The Continued Challenge of Combatting CSEC Victim Criminalization and Punishment

In FSI’s prior CSEC research project, key stakeholders stressed the ongoing need to shift away from criminalization and punishment of children and youth who are victims of CSEC (e.g., arresting, detaining, charging and prosecuting minors for prostitution offenses, and punishing children and youth for challenging behaviors that are natural trauma responses).

Children who have been sex trafficked and exploited have histories of complex trauma, often distrust the systems designed to serve them due to prior negative experiences and have typically adopted survival coping strategies that may make working with them challenging. Key stakeholders cited a need for increased training, education and awareness on the dynamics of CSEC, the trauma these children and youth have experienced and how to therapeutically respond to CSEC victims and their trauma responses. Rather than treating CSEC victims as a problem or labeling them as manipulative, combative or defiant, these children and youth need to be engaged and supported as survivors of CSEC.

*“I have had a child prosecuted for ‘falsely reporting’ a rape because she didn’t give the officers correct information on how she met the man. Despite being 14, no charges ever were brought against the man and we later learned numerous adults were taking advantage of her and her siblings.”*

Attorney survey respondent

The country has been moving away from criminalization of CSEC victims, but not at a uniform pace. State laws regarding non-criminalization vary. Currently, 30 states (including Washington, D.C.) have safe harbor laws that, at a minimum, prohibit the criminalization of child sex trafficking victims for

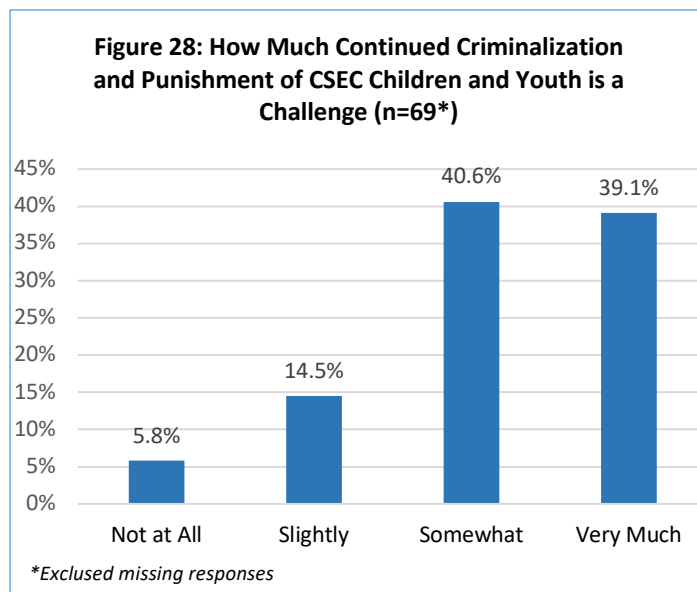
prostitution offenses. Yet 21 states still have laws that allow child sex trafficking victims to be prosecuted for prostitution.<sup>29</sup> A punitive approach only fuels the stigma and shame that these children and youth experience. Non-criminalization laws ensure CSEC victims are not involved in the juvenile or criminal justice system and receive trauma-informed care.

According to Shared Hope International, of the 21 states represented by our survey respondents, 14 have non-criminalization laws that remove criminal liability, while 6 have alternative response through juvenile justice (e.g., diversion, discretionary referral/dismissal) and 1 has affirmative defense only, which allows a CSEC survivor charged with a crime directly related to their trafficking to argue their actions were a direct result of being trafficked and exploited and that they should not be held criminally responsible. In addition, of the 21 states represented, 6 have non-criminalization protections that cover offenses other than prostitution.<sup>30</sup>

*“Although we were able to decriminalize the ‘prostitution’ offenses for youth in California and enact other legislation as well, it is still hard to use the existing statutes to minimize the ‘non-prostitution’ offenses our youth may be involved in, such as robbery, drug sales, etc. as a result of the trauma or force of being a CSEC youth.”*

Attorney survey respondent

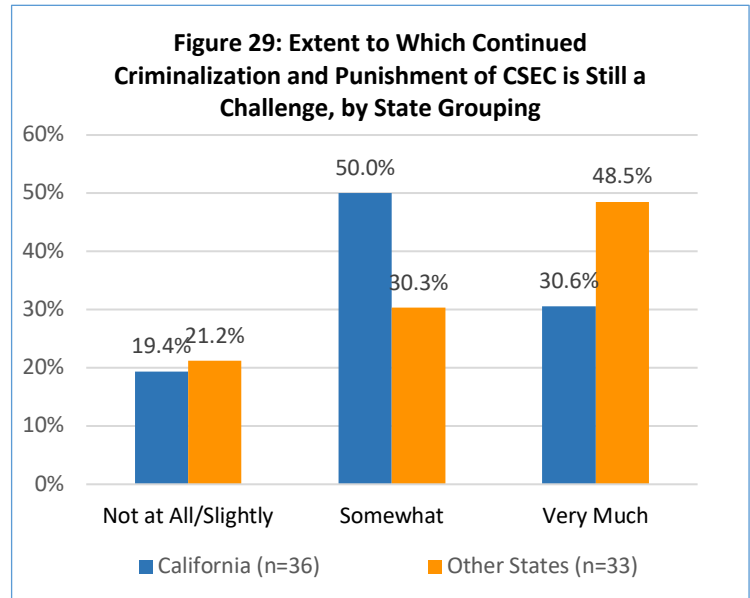
For this current project, FSI asked attorneys for children and youth the extent to which they felt the continued criminalization and punishment of children and youth who are experiencing CSEC is a challenge. Overall, as shown in Figure 28, 40.6% of attorney respondents said it is *somewhat* of a challenge, while 39.1% said it is still *very much* a problem; one fifth (20.3%) said it was *not at all* or *slightly* a problem (data excludes 26.6% of respondents who said they didn’t know or weren’t sure). However, there was significant variation among respondents when delving into this issue by different groups.



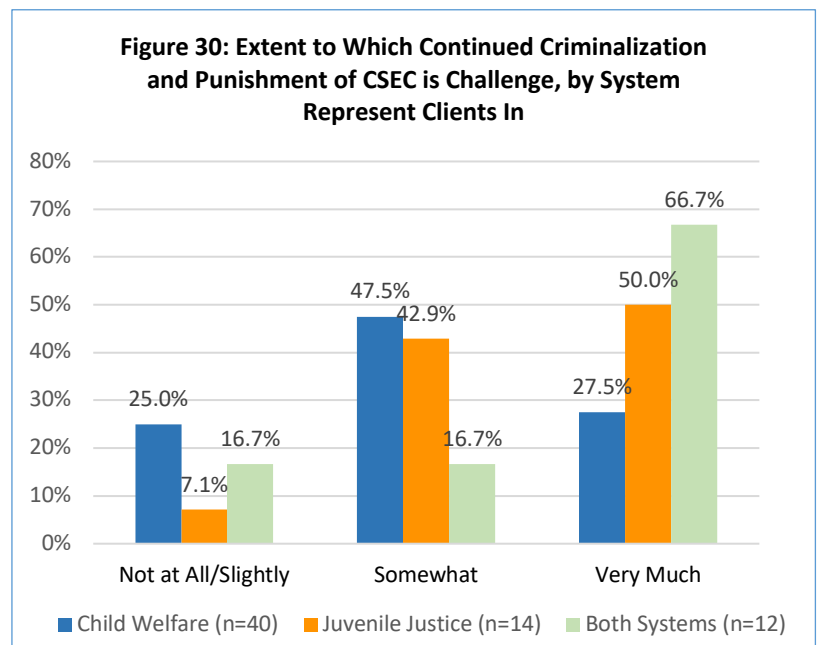
<sup>29</sup> Shared Hope International (2024). Report Cards on Child and Youth Sex Trafficking – 2023 Toolkit. Washington, DC: author. Shared Hope notes that non-criminalization laws should prohibit arresting, detaining, charging and prosecuting all minors for prostitution offenses, regardless of whether a finding of trafficking victimization is made, and instead require law enforcement to direct child and youth survivors to specialized services and care. Further, Shared Hope indicates non-criminalization laws should also prohibit criminalizing child sex trafficking survivors for other crimes committed as a result of their victimization. Safe Harbor laws (which included non-criminalization) are defined as those that protect victims from a punitive response and directs them toward restorative and protective services.

<sup>30</sup> Shared Hope International (2024). Non criminalization Laws. Retrieved April 22, 2025 from <https://reportcards.sharedhope.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/SafeHarborMapA-NonCrim-April24.pdf>. Shared Hope’s evaluations are based solely on an analysis of state statutes and do not reflect case law, agency rules, regulations or practices that exist outside of statutory law.

- By state grouping:** Respondents from other states were more likely than those from California to say criminalization and punishment continued to be *very much* a challenge – 48.5% versus 30.6%, respectively. Half (50.0%) of California respondents felt it was still *somewhat* of a challenge. Approximately one fifth of both groups felt it was *not at all/slightly* a continued challenge (Figure 29).



- By system representation:** Approximately two thirds (66.7%) of those who provide representation in both the child welfare and juvenile justice system said continued criminalization and punishment remains *very much* a challenge as did half (50.0%) of those working in the juvenile justice system. In contrast, slightly more than one fourth (27.5%) of those representing children and youth in the child welfare system said this was *very much* a problem; another quarter (25.0%) said it was *not at all/slightly* a challenge. (Figure 30). Again, given the disproportionality in system representation among respondents, these data should be interpreted with caution and are not generalizable to the larger population of attorneys for children and youth.



- By prevalence of CSEC in caseload:** Respondents who sometimes have CSEC among their population served were more likely than those who often/always have CSEC in their caseload to say criminalization and punishment of CSEC is still *very much* a challenge: 47.4% compared to 30.4%. The majority (52.2%) of those who often/always serve individuals with CSEC considered continued criminalization and punishment to be *somewhat* of a challenge. Less than one fifth of both groups said continued criminalization is *not at all/slightly* a problem. (Data not shown).

## VI. Concluding Thoughts and Suggested Next Steps

Survey respondents identified a few effective or promising practices. Two of these – specialty trafficking courts and multidisciplinary team (MDTs) – echo the effective approaches that key stakeholder interviewees identified in FSI’s prior project. These approaches emphasize the value of a trauma-informed, cross-systems collaborative approach to respond to CSEC and underscore that the complex needs of these children and youth cannot be met effectively by one system. Other initiatives and promising practices (some that are general strategies and others that are more specific projects) that attorneys for children and youth mentioned included:

- The Commercial Sexual Exploitation-Identification Tool (CSE-IT) to screen and regular re-assess children and youth to flag any potential CSEC issues<sup>31</sup>
- County and statewide trafficking task forces (which may include experts with lived experience)
- Harm reduction approaches for CSEC children and youth that focus on safety, building relationships and reducing the impact of risky behaviors rather than focusing exclusively on the sexual exploitation itself
- Outreach and education by the Bakhita Empowerment Program (that operates within the Catholic Charities of Louisville). This initiative provides direct assistance and case management to survivors of human trafficking and also educates the community about human trafficking and how to identify individuals who may be victims of sex or labor trafficking.
- Project PROTECT (Philadelphia Response & Outreach To End Child Trafficking) at the Support Center for Child Advocates. The project focuses on identifying and meeting the needs of children and youth who have been trafficked for sex and labor to allow them a chance to heal and regain control of their lives.
- Safe Harbor Diversion – State Statute O.R.C. 2152.021(F). Ohio’s revised code allows juvenile courts to divert trafficked youth from the juvenile justice system. The law provides an opportunity for treatment and diversion programs for minor victims.
- The Citrus Helping Adolescents Negatively Impacted by Commercial Exploitation (CHANCE) Program’s specialized therapeutic foster care program (Florida).
- Legal Aid of Southern Nevada’s full-time Human Trafficking Survivors’ Rights Attorney, who also trains all Legal Aid attorneys on interacting with and best practices for serving CSEC victims.

This current project pointed to several areas where additional training, education and research would be beneficial:

- **Specialized CSEC training** for attorneys for children and youth, particularly those providing representation in the juvenile justice system and those who may only sometimes have

---

<sup>31</sup> More information about the CSE-IT can be obtained from the Westcoast Children’s Clinic at <https://www.westcoastcc.org/cse-it/>

individuals with CSEC in their caseloads. Attorneys who are already working on behalf of children and youth are poised to be able to advocate on behalf of their clients. Providing increased knowledge and training to equip these attorneys to advocate more effectively stands out as a readily achievable goal requiring minimal effort in the continuing effort to combat sex trafficking. Our survey suggests that training and education should focus on helping attorneys understand what services and resources are available and appropriate for CSEC children and youth in their local jurisdictions; how to identify and respond to possible indicators of CSEC as well as build or strengthen protective factors that help prevent or reduce the risk of CSEC; how to adequately assess children and youth for needed services; and how to work with this vulnerable population in a trauma-informed and trauma-responsive way.

- **Training on how to develop and sustain cross-systems collaboration.** Such training needs to be incorporated into communication avenues, clarify the roles and responsibilities of attorneys for children and youth and other systems partners in CSEC cases, and explain the CSEC screening, assessment and response procedures and protocols of both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.
- Targeted training, education and resources to understand **what resources and services are available to CSEC victims at the local/county level.** As the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council pointed out more than a decade ago – and which is still true today – challenges in locating reliable, timely, comprehensive and essential information about national, state and local level resources and services for CSEC victims is a significant barrier for both the children and youth who need services and the professionals and caregivers who are trying to help them.<sup>32</sup> FSI’s earlier work and that of other research and advocacy organizations has highlighted the critical need for more appropriate and safe placements, survivor-led services and mentors who are skilled in engaging and connecting with CSEC victims, other trafficking-specific services (e.g., substance use and co-occurring disorder treatment specifically for this population, services and supports to help youth transition out of the systems) and an individualized, tailored approach that addresses every child’s unique situation, circumstances and needs.
- **Further research to more accurately determine the true prevalence of children and youth who are experiencing or at risk of CSEC.** Research efforts should include methodologies to produce more representative estimates of this hard-to-reach population and results that are more easily accessible than what currently exists.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, research is needed to document the prevalence of risk factors or possible indicators of CSEC among children and youth involved in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems to inform appropriate prevention and treatment efforts.

---

<sup>32</sup> IOM (Institute of Medicine) and NRC (National Research Council). 2013. *Confronting commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors in the United States*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

<sup>33</sup> Franchino-Olsen, H., Chesworth, B.R., Boyle, C., Rizo, C.F., Martin, S.L., Jordan, B., Macy, R.J. & Stevens, L. (2022). The prevalence of sex trafficking of children and adolescents in the United States: A scoping review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*. 23(1): 182-195.