

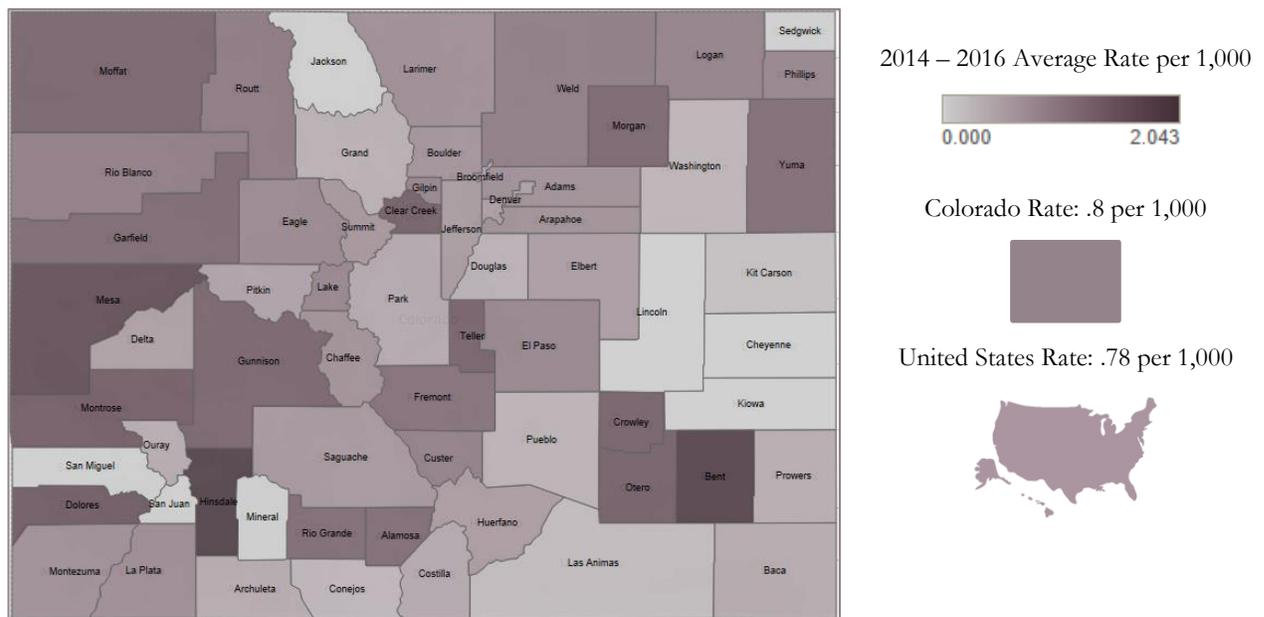
Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Efforts in Colorado

Issue Brief & Recommendations

Child sexual abuse is a root cause of many health and social issues in Colorado communities. The individual and societal impacts include mental health concerns, substance use disorders, medical conditions, suicide, special education, criminal justice, and child welfare, costing the United States billions of dollars annually. This brief describes child sexual abuse prevention efforts in Colorado and presents recommendations to prevent child sexual abuse.

While exact data on the prevalence of child sexual abuse remains somewhat imprecise, estimates are that 1 in 10 children are sexually abused before their 18th birthday. Without significant investments in prevention, this translates to approximately 6,000 of the babies born in Colorado this year experiencing sexual abuse before they turn 18. That said, child sexual abuse is significantly under-reported and no single data source accurately represents prevalence of cases in any one locality. Substantiated cases of child sexual abuse are one indicator to demonstrate the variation across Colorado, with rates affected by state and local policy, practice, and investments in prevention.

Child Sexual Abuse Rates in Colorado Counties, 2014 – 2016 Average



A review of national research, Colorado data, and collaborative work culminated in the formation of the following research based recommendations to advance Colorado’s child sexual abuse prevention efforts:

- Establish a shared understanding of child sexual abuse in Colorado.
- Improve adult understanding of healthy development of children.
- Expand best practice, trauma-informed, culturally responsive child and youth sexual abuse prevention programs.
- Implement policies to amplify child sexual abuse prevention efforts in Colorado.



Establish a shared understanding of child sexual abuse in Colorado.

The complex nature and varying definitions of child sexual abuse creates confusion. Several national definitions exist, and many states have defined the guidelines in state statute. To ensure coordination and alignment, a collaborative workgroup developed a shared understanding of child sexual abuse to guide prevention programs and policy reforms. This understanding is distinct from the definitions used by the child welfare and criminal justice systems, based on the inclusion of youth as victims, youth on youth sexual abuse, and youth trafficking. The intent of this shared understanding is to aid in the alignment and expansion of prevention, intervention and rehabilitation efforts, with opportunities to consider application to associated statutory definitions for Colorado.

upon child pornography
child upon child
unwanted sexual behavior
touching or non-touching adult upon child
upon youth by person
forced sexual behavior
unequal power
tricks into sexual behavior

Shared Understanding

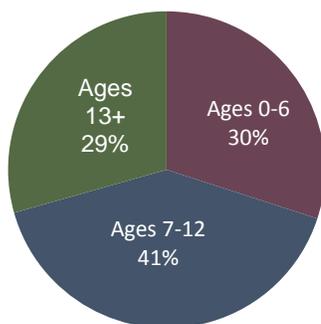
Child sexual abuse is involvement of a child or youth (aged 0-18) in sexual activity he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which he or she is not developmentally prepared, or else that violates the laws or social taboos of society.

Children can be sexually abused by adults, youth or other children who have power or perceived power in the relationship— by virtue of authority, physical ability or disability, age or stage of development, trust, or responsibility.

Sexually abusive acts include, but are not limited to, sexual penetration, sexual touching, and trafficking; non-contact sexual acts include, but are not limited to such acts as exposure, voyeurism, and participation in pornography.

Improve adult understanding of healthy development of children and youth.

**Age of Children Served,
Colorado Child Advocacy
Centers, 2014-2016 Average**



Almost one third of victims of child maltreatment served by Colorado Child Advocacy Centers are under the age of 6. The majority of these children are victims of child sexual abuse. Given this, it is recommended that prevention strategies be implemented with all adults that interface with children of any age, beginning in preschool.

Parents and other adults need to understand the boundaries of healthy development for children and youth and be able to guide them in applying these complex concepts in an age-appropriate manner. Healthy sexual development education for adults includes topics such as anatomically correct language for body parts, range of behaviors from healthy to concerning, answering children’s questions, as well as issues of consent, sexual orientation, and gender identity. It also ensures that adults are aware of a range of behaviors and equipped to intervene appropriately when needed to guide children through their development in a supportive manner.

“Conversations need to start early, be age appropriate and become a normal part of raising our children into healthy adults.”

*- Survey
Respondent*

Expand best practice, trauma-informed, culturally responsive child and youth sexual abuse prevention programs.

Colorado communities implement a great variety of child sexual abuse prevention and identification programs. It is the responsibility of adults to ensure the safety of children and in a recent survey community service providers voiced a concern that the workforce is unprepared to address child sexual abuse prevention and intervention with children, youth and families. Child sexual abuse prevention programs need to be tailored and meaningful to the audience given their role in children’s lives and can be taught specific to child sexual abuse prevention or integrated into existing health and wellness programming for children and adults.

Best practice themes have been identified in the literature to help guide program implementation, as very few evidence-based practices exist in child sexual abuse prevention. It is recommended that communities utilize best practice themes from the literature to select trauma-informed, culturally responsive sexual abuse prevention programs. Research suggests programs delivered directly to children should include an educational component for their parents or caregivers as well. Program evaluation must be a key component to improve future program implementation.

Best Practice Themes	
 <p>Adults</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Articulate adult responsibility for establishing safe environments – Encourage creation of effective policies to prevent sexual abuse – Teach adults to identify abusive behaviors and boundary violations – Equip adults to provide support and take action at time of disclosure
 <p>Children</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Use age appropriate themes across multiple stages of development – Use normalized language including anatomically correct terms – Teach children to identify healthy adults and to disclose to safe adults – Describe healthy development, relationships, and boundaries

Implement policies to expand child sexual abuse prevention efforts in Colorado

Across the nation, efforts are being made to prevent child sexual abuse. Strategies vary greatly from state to state, with some states creating task forces to develop recommendations, other states mandating in-school education, and a few states implementing comprehensive strategies to ensure safe environments and protect children from sexual abuse.

More could be accomplished with a coordinated policy approach that encompasses law, rule, licensing regulations, and funding necessary to prevent child sexual abuse.

In Colorado, schools are encouraged to provide education to staff on identification of child sexual abuse and avail themselves of the multiple optional training courses. Many opportunities exist to bolster prevention opportunities including: mandating training for educators on both prevention and identification, in both K-12 settings, as well as early childhood settings; ensuring all kids have access to comprehensive health education; providing adequate funding resources for research based programming; address loopholes that allow perpetrators of child sexual abuse to work with children; and establish standards for safety in youth serving organizations. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed in December 2015, specifies child sexual abuse prevention, and creates an opportunity for allocation of funds to child sexual abuse prevention including addressing school climate issues, norms, and a culture of consent and respect.

Further Research

Throughout the environmental scan and development of these recommendations, multiple areas arose for additional research on child sexual abuse trends to identify additional prevention opportunities. Areas in need of further exploration include:

- Integrate existing research on the role of bystanders in sexual abuse of children and youth and identify areas for additional prevention education.
- Research relationship of child sexual abuse with family substance use and mental health issues.
- Explore trend data on reported increases in sibling victimization.
- Analyze relationship between child and youth sexual abuse and special populations.
- Review juvenile offender investigation & rehabilitation efforts, particularly very young offenders.
- Review Colorado youth survey questions related to child sexual abuse.

Process

These recommendations were developed through an environmental scan including an analysis of trends and emerging issues. The purpose of the process was to:

- Review and summarize recent national trends in research, data, policy, programs related to child sexual abuse prevention.
- Explore application of national findings to Colorado state- and county-level realities.
- Collaborate with prevention, identification, & policy workgroups to include diverse perspectives.
- Conduct a survey and interview stakeholders at state and county levels to understand prevention and intervention activities at the most local level.
- Develop research-based recommendations for child sexual abuse prevention policies and programs, based on national and state trends and local emerging issues.

In total, representatives from over 40 organizations from 49 counties across Colorado participated in this effort.

Conclusion

Effective child abuse prevention efforts involve a spectrum of strategies implemented across multiple levels to ensure children and youth in Colorado grow and develop free from abuse and neglect. Through this environmental scan and recommendations development process, a shared understanding of child sexual abuse was developed and clear consensus was established on the need for Colorado to continue moving in the direction of best practice program implementation. The recommendations center around the following consistent themes: educate and empower adults to protect children; implement supportive public policies; promote healthy sexual development in children and youth; and expand programs for prevention, identification, treatment, and rehabilitation of children and youth that have experienced sexual abuse. This multi-tiered approach encompasses the spectrum of prevention strategies that need to be implemented concurrently in Colorado to prevent child sexual abuse.

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