Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children FAQ

1. What is Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC)?

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) refers to the sexual exploitation of a person under the age of 18 in exchange for money, goods, services, shelter, protection, or other forms of compensation.

It involves the exploitation of a child for the financial or material benefit of another person or group. The perpetrator may be an individual exploiter, trafficker, organised criminal network, or someone in a position of authority over the child.

CSEC is a form of child sexual abuse and a violation of children's fundamental rights. A child cannot legally or meaningfully consent to commercial sexual exploitation.

2. What are the different forms of CSEC?

Commercial sexual exploitation of children can take several forms, including:

- Child sex trafficking: Recruiting, transporting, transferring, harbouring, or obtaining a child for the purpose of sexual exploitation.
- Commercial sexual exploitation through prostitution: Exploiting a child in exchange for money or other forms of compensation.
- Child sexual abuse material (CSAM): Producing, distributing, selling, or possessing sexually explicit material involving children.
- Online sexual exploitation: Using digital platforms to facilitate sexual abuse, exploitation, coercion, or the production of CSAM.
- Sexual exploitation in tourism and travel: Exploiting children in connection with travel or tourism.
- Exploitation through organised networks: Involving multiple individuals who facilitate, profit from, or participate in the sexual exploitation of children.

These forms of exploitation can overlap.

3. Is CSEC the same as child sex trafficking?

The terms are closely related, but they are not identical.

CSEC is a broad term covering the commercial sexual exploitation of children in different settings.

Child sex trafficking is a specific form of human trafficking involving the recruitment, harbouring, transportation, provision, obtaining, or patronising of a child for the purpose of a commercial sex act.

Under United States federal law, a minor involved in a commercial sex act is considered a victim of sex trafficking regardless of whether force, fraud, or coercion was used.

4. Can a child consent to commercial sexual exploitation?

No. A child under the age of 18 cannot legally consent to being commercially sexually exploited under United States federal sex-trafficking law.

Children may appear to cooperate, comply with demands, or describe an exploitative situation as voluntary. These circumstances do not make the exploitation consensual.

Manipulation, grooming, dependency, threats, financial vulnerability, and psychological coercion can all influence a child's behaviour.

5. Who is responsible for commercial sexual exploitation of children?

Responsibility lies with the individuals who exploit children and those who knowingly facilitate, organise, or profit from their exploitation.

These may include:

- Sex traffickers.
- Buyers of commercial sexual acts involving minors.
- Individuals who recruit or groom children.
- Organisers of commercial exploitation.
- People who arrange transactions or transportation.
- Individuals who produce or distribute CSAM.
- Others who knowingly facilitate the exploitation.

Children who are exploited are victims, not perpetrators of their own abuse.

6. What is the difference between CSEC and child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse is a broad category involving sexual abuse or exploitation of a child, whether or not money or other material benefits are involved.

CSEC specifically involves a commercial or material exchange associated with the sexual exploitation.

For example, a child may experience sexual abuse without any financial transaction taking place. However, when sexual exploitation involves payment, goods, services, or other benefits, it may fall within the definition of CSEC.

7. What is grooming, and how is it connected to CSEC?

Grooming is a process through which an individual builds trust, emotional attachment, dependency, or access to a child in order to facilitate abuse or exploitation.

Grooming may involve:

- Giving gifts or money.
- Offering attention and affection.
- Making promises of protection or security.
- Exploiting a child's emotional needs.
- Gradually introducing inappropriate behaviour.
- Normalising sexual exploitation.
- Encouraging secrecy.
- Creating emotional or financial dependency.

Grooming may be carried out by an individual exploiter or by someone acting on behalf of a wider network.

8. What is the role of organised networks in CSEC?

Commercial sexual exploitation may involve organised networks in which multiple individuals perform different roles in facilitating or profiting from the abuse.

These networks may involve recruiters, traffickers, exploiters, buyers, intermediaries, and individuals who provide accommodation, transportation, or other services.

However, CSEC does not always involve an organised criminal network. Exploitation can also be carried out by a single individual or someone known to the child.

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9. Does CSEC always involve transporting a child?

No. A common misconception is that child trafficking requires a child to be transported across geographical boundaries.

Children can be sexually exploited within their own neighbourhoods, communities, towns, or homes.

Under US federal law, crossing state or international borders is not required for an offence under the federal child sex-trafficking statute.

10. What is survival sex, and how is it connected to CSEC?

Survival sex refers to situations in which a person exchanges sexual activity for necessities such as food, shelter, clothing, money, drugs, or protection.

Children experiencing homelessness, family instability, poverty, or inadequate support may be particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

When a minor is involved in a commercial sex act, the circumstances may constitute child sex trafficking under US federal law, even when the child appears to have agreed to the exchange.

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11. How does the internet contribute to CSEC?

Digital technology has created additional opportunities for perpetrators to contact, groom, exploit, and abuse children.

Online exploitation may involve:

- Grooming through social media.
- Sexual extortion (sextortion).
- Manipulation into producing sexual images.
- Live-streamed child sexual abuse.
- Distribution and sale of child sexual abuse material.
- Online advertising associated with sexual exploitation.
- Contact through messaging applications and gaming platforms.

Online exploitation can occur without the perpetrator and child ever meeting in person.

12. What is child sexual abuse material (CSAM)?

Child sexual abuse material (CSAM) refers to visual or other material depicting the sexual abuse or exploitation of children.

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It may include photographs, videos, digital images, and recordings of live-streamed abuse.

The term CSAM is generally preferred to the older term child pornography because it recognises that the material documents or represents the sexual abuse and exploitation of a child.

Producing, distributing, selling, requesting, or possessing illegal CSAM can constitute serious criminal offences.

13. What is sextortion involving children?

Sextortion is a form of sexual exploitation in which an individual uses threats, intimidation, manipulation, or blackmail to pressure someone into providing sexual images, engaging in sexual activity, or giving money.

In cases involving children, perpetrators may threaten to distribute existing images, reveal private information, or contact family members and friends.

Sextortion can cause considerable psychological distress, fear, shame, and anxiety. The child is the victim of the exploitation and is not responsible for the perpetrator's actions.

14. What are some possible warning signs of CSEC?

There is no single indicator that definitively establishes commercial sexual exploitation. However, certain behavioural, emotional, and situational changes may warrant further attention.

Possible indicators include:

- Having unexplained money, gifts, clothing, or possessions.
- Possessing multiple mobile phones or unexplained communication devices.
- Suddenly becoming withdrawn or secretive.
- Frequently going missing or being absent from home.
- Having relationships with significantly older individuals.
- Showing signs of fear, intimidation, or psychological distress.
- Experiencing unexplained injuries.
- Having someone else control their movements or communications.
- Demonstrating anxiety about disappointing or upsetting a particular person.
- Experiencing sudden changes in school attendance or performance.
- Appearing unable to speak freely about their circumstances.

These signs should be considered in context. None of them independently proves that a child has been exploited.

15. Which children are vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation?

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CSEC can affect children from all backgrounds, communities, and socioeconomic circumstances.

However, certain circumstances may increase vulnerability, including:

- Homelessness or housing instability.
- Family conflict or abuse.
- Previous experiences of sexual abuse.
- Neglect or inadequate parental support.
- Social isolation.
- Poverty and financial insecurity.
- Running away from home or placement.
- Foster care or institutional instability.
- Discrimination and marginalisation.
- Online vulnerability and lack of protective support.

Importantly, vulnerability is not responsibility. Exploitation is the responsibility of the perpetrators.

16. What are the psychological consequences of CSEC?

Commercial sexual exploitation can have serious and lasting psychological consequences.

Potential effects include:

- Post-traumatic stress symptoms.
- Depression and anxiety.
- Shame and self-blame.
- Dissociation.
- Difficulty trusting others.
- Low self-esteem.
- Sleep disturbances and nightmares.
- Hypervigilance.
- Emotional dysregulation.
- Difficulties establishing healthy relationships.
- Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.
- Substance misuse.
- Suicidal thoughts or self-harming behaviours.

Not every survivor experiences all these effects. Individual responses vary according to their experiences, circumstances, developmental stage, and access to support.

17. Can CSEC survivors develop complex trauma?

Yes. Prolonged or repeated sexual exploitation, particularly when accompanied by threats, intimidation, captivity, betrayal, or other forms of abuse, can contribute to complex trauma.

Children who experience repeated exploitation may have difficulties with emotional regulation, self-identity, interpersonal relationships, and their sense of safety.

Some survivors may experience symptoms associated with Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD).

A qualified mental health professional can assess symptoms and determine whether a particular diagnosis is appropriate.

18. Can CSEC occur alongside other forms of organised abuse?

Yes. Commercial sexual exploitation may occur alongside other forms of child abuse and exploitation.

These can include:

- Child sexual abuse.
- Child sex trafficking.
- Physical abuse.
- Psychological abuse.
- Domestic servitude.
- Forced labour.
- Online sexual exploitation.
- Financial exploitation.
- Grooming and coercive control.

In some cases, multiple perpetrators may be involved. However, the presence of one form of exploitation does not automatically establish the presence of others. Each allegation requires appropriate assessment and evidence.

19. What are the long-term effects of CSEC?

The consequences can extend into adulthood, particularly when exploitation is prolonged or when survivors do not receive appropriate protection and support.

Potential long-term difficulties include:

- Chronic anxiety and depression.
- Post-traumatic stress symptoms.
- Relationship difficulties.
- Distrust of authority figures.
- Problems with personal boundaries.
- Educational disruption.
- Employment difficulties.
- Housing and financial instability.
- Social isolation.
- Physical health problems.
- Difficulties with self-esteem and personal identity.

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Many survivors also demonstrate resilience and can make meaningful progress with appropriate support and opportunities for recovery.

20. How should professionals respond when CSEC is suspected?

Professionals working with children should respond in a child-centred, trauma-informed, and non-judgemental manner.

Important considerations include:

- Prioritising the child's immediate safety.
- Listening without blame or judgement.
- Avoiding leading or suggestive questions.
- Taking disclosures seriously.
- Following safeguarding and mandatory reporting requirements.
- Documenting relevant observations accurately.
- Avoiding unnecessary repetition of interviews.
- Referring the child to specialist services.
- Recognising the potential effects of trauma.
- Maintaining appropriate confidentiality while meeting safeguarding obligations.

Professionals should avoid interpreting compliance, apparent cooperation, or delayed disclosure as evidence that exploitation did not occur.

21. Why might a child not disclose commercial sexual exploitation?

Children may be unable or unwilling to disclose exploitation for many reasons.

These may include:

- Fear of retaliation.
- Threats against family members or loved ones.
- Shame and embarrassment.
- Fear of not being believed.
- Emotional attachment to the exploiter.
- Fear of being punished or blamed.
- Threats involving the release of images.
- Psychological manipulation and grooming.
- Fear of losing financial or practical support.
- Confusion about whether what happened constitutes abuse.

Disclosure may occur gradually, sometimes years after the exploitation has ended. Professionals should not assume that a delayed disclosure is unreliable.

22. Can a child be exploited by someone they know?

Yes. Perpetrators are not necessarily strangers.

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A child may be exploited by someone they know or trust, including a family member, romantic partner, acquaintance, caregiver, or other individual in a position of authority or influence.

The perpetrator may use an existing relationship to establish trust, manipulate the child, and facilitate exploitation.

23. What is the difference between a CSEC survivor and a perpetrator?

A CSEC survivor is a child or young person who has experienced commercial sexual exploitation.

A perpetrator is an individual who commits, facilitates, or knowingly profits from the exploitation.

Some exploited children may be pressured or manipulated into recruiting or introducing other children to exploiters. Their circumstances should be assessed carefully, taking into account their age, victimisation, coercion, and individual actions.

Children should not automatically be treated as perpetrators simply because they have been involved in activities controlled by exploiters.

24. Can CSEC survivors recover?

Yes. Recovery is possible, although the process can be complex and individual.

Appropriate support may include:

- Specialist trauma-informed psychological care.
- Safe and stable accommodation.
- Medical and healthcare services.
- Educational assistance.
- Legal advocacy.
- Support with rebuilding family and social relationships.
- Assistance with financial and practical independence.
- Long-term safeguarding and aftercare.

Recovery should be based on the survivor's individual needs, preferences, developmental stage, and circumstances.

25. What organisations provide assistance to CSEC survivors?

Several organisations provide resources, advocacy, prevention programmes, and assistance to children affected by sexual exploitation.

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In the United States:

- National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC): Provides assistance with missing children, child sexual exploitation, and online abuse.
- National Human Trafficking Hotline: Provides assistance and referrals for trafficking victims. Telephone: 1-888-373-7888.
- Childhelp: Provides resources and support concerning child abuse. Telephone: 1-800-422-4453.
- Polaris: Works to combat human trafficking and supports anti-trafficking initiatives.

Immediate danger should be reported to emergency services. Suspected child sexual exploitation can also be reported through the appropriate child protection and law enforcement authorities.