

Figure 1: Portland, Oregon. Source - Wikimedia Commons

INTRODUCTION

Portland, Oregon has recently received a great deal of press attention as a hub for sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC). Since around 2010, several high-profile cases of raids and prosecution of traffickers have been national news. In 2012, a highly-publicized “Dan Rather Reports” episode dubbed the city “Pornland,” cementing that reputation. While the data supporting this idea of Portland as a hub for CSEC are inconclusive, the city’s response to the designation merits serious attention as a test case for operationalizing practices around CSEC response.

According to a report by Portland State University Associate Professor Chris Carey, 469 children were identified as victims of CSEC in the Portland metro area between 2009 and 2013. This number represents only those victims who came in contact with state or non-profit services, suggesting that the unreported number may be much higher. The Multnomah County government and a range of local non-profit and advocacy agencies have taken action to address child sex trafficking in Portland, via targeted law enforcement, campaigns, and work with possible and identified victims. This paper investigates the array of practices and potential solutions to CSEC in Portland.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) – According to the US Department of State: “The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, as amended, provides the tools to combat trafficking in persons both worldwide and domestically. The Act authorized the establishment of the State Department’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons and the President’s Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons to assist in the coordination of anti-trafficking efforts.”

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) – as used in this paper, CSEC refers to any acts that facilitate minors’ participation in sex work, whether coerced or voluntary; legally, children under the age of 18 in the United States are considered trafficking victims without the need to demonstrate force or coercion as adults are.

Human Trafficking – the recruitment, harboring, transporting, obtaining, or maintaining of a person by means of force, fraud or coercion, for purposes of involuntary servitude, debt bondage, slavery, or participation in the sex trade. “Sex trafficking” refers to human trafficking for sex work.

Trauma-Informed Care – based on principles of establishing safety, maintaining connections, and managing emotions, grounded in a recognition of the symptoms that are common in responses to trauma. This form of treatment is often recommended for CSEC survivors. See Bath: “The three pillars of trauma-informed care”

WHY PORTLAND?

It is not precisely clear why Portland may be a hub for CSEC or other forms of sex trafficking. As noted earlier, that status is not necessarily accurate – meaningful statistics are difficult to accumulate. Cases in Portland and elsewhere are also likely underreported, since they depend on individuals coming into contact with reporting organizations.

One frequently cited explanation for the apparent prevalence of CSEC and adult sex trafficking in Portland is the city’s location. Portland is along the I-5 corridor, which connects much of the West Coast, running from California to Washington and through many major cities. Trafficking is an inherently transient and mobile enterprise, so Portland’s relatively easy access to other West coast metro areas and the northern and southern international borders may make it appealing for traffickers. Portland also has an international airport, and access to ocean ports.



Figure 2: I-5 Corridor. Source: Wikimedia Commons

In 2003, the FBI identified 13 areas of “High Intensity Child Prostitution.” While Portland was not on this list, three of the metro areas identified were along the same I-5 corridor (San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego). It is likely that trafficking victims and traffickers move up and down the coast along this route.

Portland’s apparent high rate of youth homelessness may also lead to increased CSEC. As with numbers on CSEC, statistics on youth homelessness are unreliable and difficult to track; however, Portland government officials consider it a significant problem. Homeless minors are considered particularly vulnerable to CSEC due to their likelihood to have experienced personal and/or sexual trauma, and because of their precarious economic and social position. Further, there is evidence to suggest that exploiters specifically target homeless youth. One study from the Department of Justice found that 30% of children experience sexual exploitation or violence within the first 48 hours of homelessness.



Figure 3 - STARS Cabaret, with the men arrested in 2015 for charges related to CSEC. Source: Huffington Post.

Another frequently cited explanation is Portland’s high number of strip clubs. Per a Portland newspaper, *Willamette Week*, in 2015, the state of Oregon had the highest number of strip clubs per capita. With 54 establishments, the Portland metro area also has the second highest number per capita among US cities. The presence of such a large number of clubs is sometimes critiqued by local conservative politicians, but Oregon law protects the establishments to a greater degree than do other states. This is by virtue of a broadly interpreted article in the state’s constitution, which has allowed such clubs to operate under free speech regulations. Because of this, unlike in other locations, clubs featuring sexually explicit displays in Oregon cannot be regulated using obscenity arguments. It should be made clear that strip clubs and other related establishments are not *de facto* connected to trafficking of adults or minors. However, a number of such clubs have been implicated in CSEC operations in recent years. For example, Anthony Curry (above, left) used strip clubs, including the STARS Cabaret, outside of Portland, as a means to force a 15-year-old girl to engage in sex work.

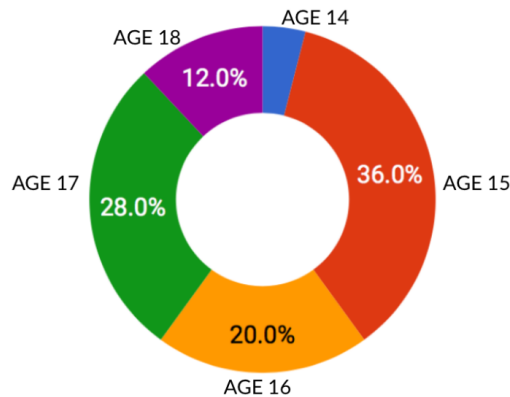
WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT PORTLAND'S CSEC VICTIMS?

A 2013 report from Chris Carey looked at CSEC victim records in Multnomah County (where Portland is located) between December 2012 and June 2013. These records represent only those victims who came into direct contact with the Department of Human Services CSEC Unit, or an advocacy agency affiliated with the study. Some highlights from that research are shown in Figure 4. While these data are helpful in painting a picture of CSEC in the Portland area, they remain incomplete.

Figure 4: PSU Research on CSEC Victims in Portland.

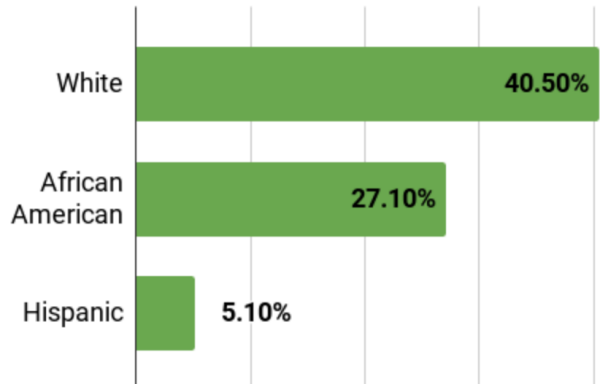
AGE

(AT TIME OF INTERACTION WITH DHS OR RESPONSE AGENCY)



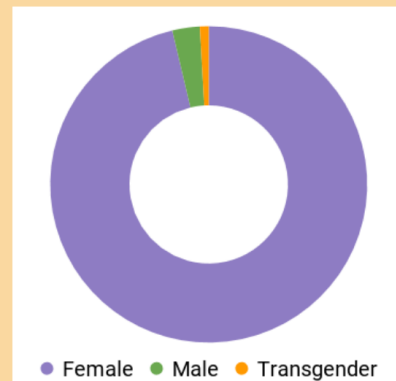
The average age at which victims were referred to DHS or SARC was 15.5.

The youngest CSEC victim in the data was 8 years-old. The chart to the left shows the age breakdown overall.



RACE/ETHNICITY

While children of color are not the largest group among known Portland CSEC victims, they are overrepresented. For example, African Americans make up only 5.8% of Multnomah County's population, but 27.1% of CSEC victims in this report.



GENDER IDENTITY

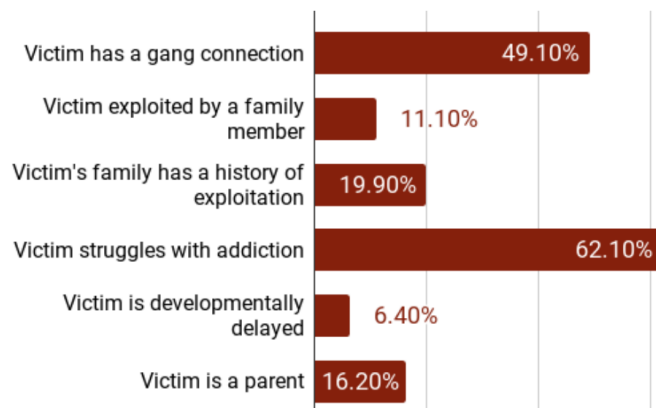
96.4% of victims identified as female

2.8% identified as male

0.9% identified as transgender

OTHER CHARACTERISTICS

The Portland State Study also looked at CSEC victims by possible risk factors and co-occurring challenges. Addiction and gang-affiliation were the most common of these.



PORTLAND'S APPROACH TO ADDRESSING CSEC



Figure 5 - Campaign Logo of "Shared Hope." Source: Shared Hope, 2015

Over the last decade, Portland has responded to calls from activists to integrate a range of best practices into its approach around CSEC. One major aspect of this is the CSEC Steering Committee. The Committee was founded in 2009 to coordinate response among different aspects of CSEC response. They are using a model that emphasizes the needs of victims, while also working on legislative and enforcement approaches against demand and traffickers.

Portland's CSEC Working Groups

"This is a victim-focused collaborative, which means that, above all else, our primary goal is the restoration of the victim. The steering committee is intended to bring together active partners in our jurisdiction to collaboratively address and share ideas in an effort to better investigate, prosecute and supervise offenders; better identify and support survivors of CSEC; and increase education, prevention, and civic engagement within the community." CSEC Steering Committee 2015 Report

Victim Services Advisory Committee

Composed primarily of direct service providers, who meet monthly. Goal is to be victim-focused, and to build a community-based "continuum of care" within Portland.

Medical and Mental Health

Focus on improving services and access for CSEC victims. For example, one project is to train public school health staff in trauma-informed services.

Legislative Workgroup

Meets in response to relevant pending legislation (around such issues as law enforcement, victim services, etc.). Provides feedback to legislators based on best practices and in line with the goal of remaining victim-focused.

Demand Reduction Team

A new group as of 2015, when their initial goal was to to reduce demand for CSEC by 20%. Includes DA office, police and nonprofit organizations that work to involve men in anti-trafficking work.

Speakers Bureau

Volunteer advocacy group that gives presentations on CSEC in Portland to community groups, schools, and others who request them. Also solicits and manages donations to support victims during these events.

Figure 6 - Overview of Integrated Approach in Portland. Source: CSEC Steering Committee Report, 2015

LOOKING FORWARD - RECCOMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Whether Portland, OR is indeed a hub for CSEC, its active and integrated response to the issue is worth studying – and, assuming evidence shows it to be successful, emulating. This must, however, be done with some caution. Because data on victims are unreliable and difficult to track, it is not possible to say at this stage whether the city’s actions have reduced demand for CSEC. In terms of enforcement, increased efforts by state, local and federal agencies in the area show higher numbers of victims and traffickers in Portland than elsewhere. This may paint a misleading picture, however, since this is a result of active searching for CSEC operations. According to the Portland Human Trafficking Jail Intelligence Sargent, enforcement efforts have identified 300 minor trafficking victims and 900 suspected traffickers between 2009 and December 2017.

Research from the fields of mental health and social services suggests that victims benefit from integrated, trauma-informed assistance. **Portland’s approach to advocacy and treatment as an integral part of addressing CSEC is commendable, and likely to benefit victims.**

Looking forward, the organizations and individuals involved in services for CSEC victims will continue to collect data to evaluate outcomes for their reintegration. Other areas looking to address CSEC may benefit from closely following this reporting. It will be an important test of the effectiveness of these approaches.

Portland’s approach to integrated services also includes legislative review of anti-trafficking legislation by experts in the field. This practice has been requested by policy groups and advocates in many other places, but is rarely realized.

An Essential Difference: Voluntary Sex Work Vs. Exploitation and Child Trafficking

A frequent critique of CSEC and adult trafficking enforcement is the conflation of voluntary sex work with exploitative or coercive practices. Laws that are nominally targeted at trafficking often instead negatively impact the health and safety of voluntary adult sex workers. Increased attention from law enforcement on trafficking may prevent others engaged in consensual prostitution from operating in safer ways, or from reporting violence to police.

If Portland wishes to engage in a truly “victim-focused” approach to CSEC, they will be well-served by working with voluntary sex workers and their supporters to understand and anticipate these unintended consequences.

Portland has an outspoken community of sex worker activists who can be vital partners in identifying and preventing CSEC. These include STROLL PDX, a “Harm Reduction, Outreach, and Education Group Run by and for Sex Workers” and Rahab’s Sisters, a group that offers “radical hospitality” to women involved in sex work in Portland. Members of such groups are ideally positioned for outreach to underage and exploited sex workers, since they understand the dynamics of the work. Further, they can and do advocate for themselves as voluntary workers; their insight would be an invaluable addition to conversations about legislation and enforcement.

Coordinating public agencies, nonprofit groups and researchers to look at laws impacting trafficking and sex work is an important step. To fully benefit from such coordination, decision-makers in Portland may also wish to consider which voices are not currently at the table. This includes voluntary adult sex workers (see sidebar on page 6). Because CSEC victims in Portland are disproportionately children of color, including a racialized, equity-focused lens may also improve outcomes. CSEC working committees could gain better perspective by being sure to include members of Portland's African American and Hispanic communities, and by ensuring that barriers, challenges and other issues specific to children of color are addressed. And while CSEC victims who identify as transgender represent a small percentage, their needs are specific and important to address. Activists and advocates with a specific understanding of such needs would also benefit the project, and help ensure all CSEC victims' challenges are addressed.

As stated, data on CSEC enforcement, integration and outreach are difficult to collect and verify. Portland's CSEC working group claims an interest in evidence-based work – this requires that as many of these missing pieces as possible are filled in. Going forward, the agencies and organizations involved in addressing CSEC in Portland can play a vital role in improving the information available. Research on Portland's CSEC victims to date has looked at demographic data, experience with co-occurring and risk factors like substance addiction, gang affiliation and history of abuse. It will be helpful to continue tracking these data points. In addition, Portland's CSEC researchers could contribute greatly to the field by looking at outcomes from the victim-focused treatment model. Does trauma-informed, holistic care lead to the intended results for minor trafficking victims? Are there differences based on race/ethnicity, gender, class, or past experience? What can police officers learn about best practices for enforcement that avoid re-traumatizing victims? What are the lessons learned that might be applied in other places seeking to provide services for CSEC victims? Answers to such questions could be of great benefit to Portland and to the field as a whole.

Finally, while Portland's leadership on CSEC appear to largely agree on their victim-focused approach, continued outreach will likely be necessary to harness the community's best intentions in a positive direction. There are a range of faith-based, non-profit and other advocacy groups in the city, and each has its own position on how to address child sex trafficking in their communities. For example, there are faith-based groups that use an "abolitionist" lens around all forms of sex work. Evidence suggests that this is not an effective approach for harm-reduction for CSEC, or for the health and safety of others in sex work. Nonetheless, these groups' passion for protecting children from abuse is commendable and valuable. Outreach efforts from the CSEC working group might gain ground by presenting the victim-focused, harm-reduction approach, and by clarifying the intentions and research behind it. This approach could help engage these activists, broaden the base of supporters, and provide those who interact with victims with the skills and knowledge they need to be of help.

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