

Hidden in Plain Sight: Child Sexual Exploitation in Aotearoa, New Zealand

Research article

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Abstract

In Aotearoa, New Zealand (Aotearoa) there is limited awareness among social workers about Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and its impact on survivors. This research paper examines systemic barriers, including non-specific legislation, insufficient training, and gaps in multi-agency collaboration. It highlights the need for context-specific risk assessment tools and culturally responsive practice frameworks.

This qualitative research aimed to explore the views and experiences of child protection workers regarding CSE in Aotearoa and identify knowledge gaps and practices related to this form of abuse. The research objectives included assessing the awareness and understanding of CSE among child protection workers, identifying barriers to effective recognition and intervention, and proposing recommendations for improving responses within the child protective system.

Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling. Fourteen individual interviews and one discussion with two participants were conducted, and the data was analysed thematically.

Many participants highlighted a lack of awareness of CSE, barriers to effective recognition and intervention such as victim blaming and shame, the need for training/education and a more coordinated multi-agency response.

Keywords: *Child sexual exploitation; Vulnerability; Survivors and needs; Social work.*

Background

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a form of child sexual abuse. It happens when children and young people are coerced, manipulated or deceived into sexual activity in exchange for things that they may need or want like gifts, drugs, money, status and affection (NSPCC., n.d). Child Sexual Exploitation has a very detrimental effect on a young person's total well-being, impacting physical, mental, emotional, and sexual development. Long-term trauma can lead to personal difficulties years after the abuse, often compounded by other childhood trauma and subsequent experiences of domestic violence, drug, and alcohol dependency (Palmer & Foley, 2017; Jay, 2014).

There exists however a widespread misunderstanding amongst professionals and society about the true nature of CSE, leading to inconsistent language and views that contribute to its status as a hidden form of abuse (Jay, 2014). Additionally, the manifestation and responses to CSE vary across different cultural and socio-political contexts. However, in Aotearoa New Zealand, colonial legacies and inequalities, contribute to challenges in addressing CSE and abuse effectively (Atwool, 2019). Moreover, systemic issues for example the lack of data collection systems, non-specific legislation, and negative professional attitudes further contribute to challenges in tackling CSE effectively (Eaton, 2019).

CSE involves the coercion of young people into sexual activity as a way for them to obtain things like as drugs, alcohol, and life necessities such as food, (Kerr, et al 2017). Victims are often recruited from situations of poverty, dysfunction, or marginality, and those in desperate need for basic life essentials or in 'survival mode' are some of the most vulnerable to CSE (Alderson et al., 2021; Kerr, 2017), (Thorburn (2016) Melrose and Pearce's (2014) Victim versus Agency Model of Child Sexual Exploitation focuses on the specific dynamics between the victim and perpetrator, highlighting the power imbalance that takes place in CSE. This model conceptualises the victim as being drawn into exploitation through the manipulation and coercion of the perpetrator. It contrasts the agency of the perpetrator, who actively employs grooming techniques to exploit the victim, with the vulnerability and lack of agency of the victim, who often feels trapped and unable to escape from the abusive situation. The transactional arrangements between victim and perpetrator observed in CSE can lead to the assumption that survivors are making informed choices and concealing their status as survivors. These assumptions and misunderstandings raise questions about effective approaches for tackling CSE by social workers and other professionals (Eaton & Holmes, 2017). This approach emphasises addressing power imbalances, incorporating trauma-informed care, and recognising the intersectionality of race, gender, and socio-economic status in CSE contexts (Lefevre et al., 2019; Pearce, 2013).

Manipulation typically facilitated by a "boyfriend" figure or family member exploits the power imbalance between child and perpetrator (Reid & Jones, 2011). In this model of exploitation, the child is seen as being manipulated through grooming tactics—carefully planned strategies that are used to build trust, create dependency, and exert control, ultimately, making it easier to undertake the abuse. (Barnardo's, UK n.d).

Grooming exploits the vulnerabilities of the victim, whether through emotional manipulation, coercion, or deception, to establish control and perpetrate abuse and while it involves the development of an emotional relationship between the victim and abuser; this process is always manipulative and exploitative (Chisnell & Elliott, 2022).

Understanding the impact of the power, control and coercion exerted on victims enables professionals and communities to better recognize the signs of grooming and take proactive steps to prevent child sexual exploitation (Arthur and Down 2019).

In relationships characterised by CSE Perpetrators can exploit relational deficits by offering emotional support that mimics attachment figures, thereby gaining trust and control (Hopper, 2017). Routine activity theory further informs the analysis by framing CSE within a context where the risks associated with motivated offenders, vulnerable victims, and a lack of capable guardians converge (Cohen & Felson, 1979). This theoretical lens can provide a deeper insight into risk factors, and preventive strategies, such as reducing opportunities for exploitation through systemic safeguards.

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In the UK, despite the recognition of CSE and known grooming models, there remains an inconsistent response to addressing risk factors (Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse, 2022). The Jay Report, published in 2014, is a comprehensive inquiry into child sexual exploitation (CSE) in Rotherham, South Yorkshire, UK. The report uncovered widespread and systemic sexual exploitation of children in Rotherham for more than a decade, and it has been estimated that at least 1,400 children were subjected to CSE between 1997 and 2013, with some of the survivors being as young as eleven.

The survivors of (CSE) were predominantly girls, with specific risk factors including involvement in state care and prior experiences of trauma. Perpetrators targeted vulnerable individuals, employing grooming tactics and manipulation to establish abusive relationships and coerce them into sexual activities (Jay, 2014). Additionally, the report identified a pattern of failure among various social agencies in adequately protecting survivors of CSE.

Kwhali et al (2018) identified gaps and challenges in social workers' understanding of CSE, highlighting an urgent need to improve education, training, and multi-agency collaboration. They suggest that by developing social workers' awareness, confidence, and capabilities, we can move towards more effective and inclusive practice.

Laird, Klettke, Hall, & Hallford (2023) found that children and adolescents with a background of sexual exploitation often had experiences of other childhood trauma, exposure to pornography, sexual abuse, and posttraumatic stress disorder. They suggest that identifying instances of child sexual exploitation creates opportunities for intervention and support recovery. Furthermore, integrating these factors into screening, assessment, and treatment processes could enhance prevention and intervention initiatives. Bond, & Dogaru, (2019). also highlight the need for multiagency training and the use of case studies as effective tools for raising awareness of the risk factors associated with CSE.

The fear of accusations of racism and Islamophobia also played a role in obscuring CSE in the UK (Jay, 2014) and could raise critical questions for New Zealand regarding cultural sensitivities in the identification and intervention of CSE.

CSE – Aotearoa

Despite increasing awareness of this issue, information on the prevalence, demographic profile, and psychosocial needs of survivors of CSE is limited in Aotearoa New Zealand, social service agencies have contacts with young people suspected of being involved in CSE, yet there is no official data source on the prevalence of such exploitation. Jordan (2022), highlights systemic deficiencies within New Zealand's approach to addressing sexual violence, including CSE. She emphasises the lack of coordinated responses and attitudes which can contribute to a minimisation of cases violence and exploitation. She asserts that unless there is specific training, professionals will continue to fail to recognise abuse and sexual violence. This lack of response compounds the limited understanding of CSE by those who may be most likely to encounter it in practice. (Chisnell and Elliott 2022).

Colonisation and trauma

Historically, Māori communities have experienced colonisation, marginalisation, and intergenerational trauma, which has contributed to vulnerabilities and exploitation (Durie, 2003; Moewaka, & McCreanor, 2019). This has led to an over-representation of Māori within care and protective services (Fitzmaurice-Brown, 2023). Atwool (2019) suggests that failure to implement a more culturally inclusive system enabling effective engagement with Māori will result in the "perpetuation of practices resulting in intergenerational patterns of engagement with child protection services" (p. 28). Therefore, a specific Aotearoa lens on CSE is required to ensure that there is a greater understanding of the intersection between CSE, child protection and Māori and that we do not repeat patterns of greater stigmatisation and over-representation of Māori due to historical inequality (Atwool, 2019).

The aims of this research were threefold;

- assess the level of awareness and understanding among child protection workers of CSE, including its prevalence, dynamics, and impact on survivors.
- identify barriers that hinder the effective recognition and intervention of CSE.
- propose recommendations for improving responses within the child protective system.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was utilised to draw out the perspectives, beliefs, and experiences of participants. With its person-centred, holistic, and contextual emphasis, a qualitative approach was considered appropriate to manage the likely sensitivity and emotional depth of the data and is particularly in exploring situations and phenomena about which little is known (Padgett, 2016).

Face-to-face interviews were undertaken with care and protection social workers from various social service organisations in Tairāwhiti and Hawke's Bay. Our objective was to gain insight into the knowledge of these social workers regarding CSE, their responses to it, and potential barriers to effective practice in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Utilising focus groups and in-depth semi-structured individual interviews enhance the depth, breadth, and richness of qualitative research by facilitating open dialogue, exploring diverse perspectives, and engaging participants in the research process (Gill & Baillie, 2018).

Both purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit participants. Snowball sampling may introduce bias by recruiting within similar professional circles, potentially limiting diverse perspectives. This method risks creating a similar set of data which could be more reflective of shared professional ideologies rather than a broader range of views (Bryman, 2016). However, both sampling methods were incorporated to allow the selection of participants with relevant experience and knowledge in child protection while also utilising participants' networks to identify and explore the experiences of other participants (Bryman, 2016).

In total, data was collected from sixteen participants, one male and fifteen female participants; Six participants identified a Māori, two as Pasifika and eight as Pākehā. Fourteen were employed by Oranga Tamariki, and two from other child protection agencies (NGO). Fourteen participants were interviewed individually, while two participated in discussion group.

Ethical and cultural considerations:

The research received approval by the Eastern Institute of Technology's Research Ethics Approvals Committee (REAC) and the Research and Insights Team at Oranga Tamariki.

Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation and the right to withdraw at any point, with provisions made for support or counselling should they experience distress. Informed consent and confidentiality were carefully explained, with data stored securely and destroyed post-research.

In keeping with the principles of social work practice, all information was treated with respect, and researchers adhered to the guidelines of professional codes of ethics, as outlined by ANZASW (2019). Additionally, a commitment was made to recognise the bicultural context of Aotearoa, uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and protect Te Ao Māori worldviews throughout the research process. Recognising the bicultural context of Aotearoa and upholding Te Tiriti o Waitangi involves several key practices that researchers can incorporate into their work to protect Te Ao Māori worldviews:

Researchers approached interactions with participants, data collection, and analysis with respect for Māori culture, customs, and values. We ensured that research environments were culturally safe and inclusive for Māori participants, using tikanga-based principles, and that research findings accurately represented Māori perspectives and experiences, advocating for equity and social justice in all research.

Findings

Reflexivity and iterative coding were employed to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the thematic analysis (Padgett, 2016). Following this process, the following themes were identified.

Understanding and awareness of CSE

Initially, 15 of the participants expressed limited awareness of CSE and its potential impact on children and young people in Aotearoa, often associating it as an international phenomenon; For instance, one respondent stated, *“I didn’t think that this happened in New Zealand.”*

Despite their lengthy careers in social work, many had not encountered the term ‘CSE’. However, upon receiving a definition and explanation of CSE from the researchers, all participants immediately recognised cases they had worked on involving survivors of this form of abuse. They could provide specific examples of CSE, including grooming, manipulation, and exploitation.

I think the first thing that pops into your brain is child trafficking overseas ... children being taken or kidnapped and sent somewhere else to be used in the sex trade (Participant 4).

My initial understanding was that child sexual exploitation related to international drug trafficking and sex rings and that sort of thing (Participant 15).

The more I have thought about it, I can see that I have young people on my caseload who were experiencing CSE, why didn’t I see this before?” (Participant 14). “

OK, now I can recognise cases over the years where young people have been survivors and we haven’t done enough to support them (Participant 11).

Upon reflection, participant 6, identified a lack of understanding of CSE as a big barrier:

“Just from a professional sense is that people don’t understand what it is. There are times when we may lose track of children being passed through whānau. I can see now that this is actually happening Aotearoa.”

Participant 7, acknowledged that a lack of professional understanding/ awareness could lead to survivors going unnoticed. Participants 2 and 14 had worked in the UK, where CSE has received significant attention, they both had a stronger grasp of the concept. One remarked on the relative lack of awareness in Aotearoa, New Zealand compared to the UK, even among social work colleagues.

Here in NZ unfortunately it is not so known, my colleagues are not familiar with the term. A big barrier, just from a professional sense is that people don’t understand what it is. There are times when we may lose track of children being passed through whānau... it’s actually happening and we are not protecting our tamariki (Participant 2).

Need for training and education

Participants unanimously reported receiving no formal training on recognising and responding to CSE in Aotearoa. Two of the participants who came from overseas (UK) had undergone training related to CSE before coming to Aotearoa.

The participants offered several recommendations for skill enhancement and areas of improvement, these include the need to develop sensitive and competent interviewing techniques, to provide training on recognising grooming and exploitation, and to encourage more awareness and a deeper empathy for victim experiences. Most of the participants identified the need for systemic reforms, such as introducing risk assessment tools and a shift in attitude towards and responses to young survivors of CSE.

Our language and interviewing skills should be improved, in fact they need to be more empathetic, and we need to dig deeper and respond better. (Participant 11).

We need some training around grooming, people trafficking, communication with young people who are survivors, and helping young people to feel safe. (Participant 3).

We need training to highlight the issues that survivors are experiencing. (Participant 5)

Participant 6, identified the importance of multi-agency training “It helps to kind of shift thinking around...to help change a culture.

We need training, otherwise, how do we know what to look out for? We are letting these young people down so very badly.

Participant 9 stated that:

We need specific risk assessment tools, a traffic light system, risk factors of exploitation, and a database, overall, we need a culture change we need to view young people as survivors of CSE.

Supports, services and the need for collaboration

None of the participants stated that they knew of any specific or specialist support services, or interventions, available for survivors of CSE in Aotearoa, although ACC counselling was briefly mentioned as a possible avenue for some support. All participants highlighted the need for some type of specialist services, as they (social workers) did not have the current expertise work with this type of abuse therapeutically.

We need to know how best to support people and identify it, we need a more specialised service to meet the needs of survivors. (Participant 15).

We need to hear experts' advice on what is the best therapeutic pathway for children and young people who have experienced this abuse. (Participant 4).

Most participants talked about the need for multi-agency collaboration and working together across agencies and sectors; with OT, police, health and education regularly mentioned:

Social workers need to be on board with the police and the police need to change their attitude towards it as well. We can work from a child protection angle but there needs to be prosecutions as well...multi-agency forums where key people come together to discuss how to address risk. (Participant 11).

Many participants suggested that early intervention could take place in schools:

It needs to be more in school's education around consent. Kids need to know about consent and what is a healthy relationship. How do kids know without proper education (Participant 7).

One participant observed that many of the most vulnerable and at-risk young people are often those who do not regularly attend school.

Need for collaboration, prevention, and specialised services

While participants lacked knowledge of specific support services for CSE survivors in Aotearoa, they emphasised the urgent need for and importance of such resources. They highlighted the importance of multi-agency collaboration involving sectors such as law enforcement, health, education, and social services. Participants also stressed the need for early intervention, particularly within educational settings, although some acknowledged the challenge of reaching vulnerable youth who may not be attending school regularly.

We need to be working together, let's start working with tamariki, schools, and whānau to raise awareness of the risk of exploitation, this might help tamariki and their whānau to recognise the risks. (Participant 14).

There were calls for a more holistic approach to support services, minimising trauma for survivors and providing consistent, empathetic support. The two participants who had worked in the UK, drew from examples of effective multi-agency collaboration, emphasising the need for specialised workers and joint interventions.

One participant commented on wider systems that need to be developed:

We need: specific risk assessment tools, a traffic light system, risk factors of exploitation, a database, and tracked movement of people over the country. (Participant 2).

This same participant went on to discuss the need for a culture change and how we view young people who are survivors of CSE.

Multi-agency training...it helps to kind of shift thinking around...to help change a culture. (Participant 2).

All of the participants identified the need for specialised training.

We need training, otherwise, how do we know what to look out for? We are letting these young people down so very badly. (Participant 6).

Circumstances leading to CSE

Upon reflection and with an increased awareness of CSE, participants frequently mentioned drug use, gang involvement, homelessness, and exploitation within familial contexts as factors contributing to CSE. They recounted cases of young people coerced into sexual activity to satisfy drug debts or gain access to substances. Homelessness was identified as a significant risk factor, leaving youth vulnerable to exploitation in exchange for basic needs such as shelter and safety.

The participants discussed young people who were coerced into sexual activity as a means to gain drugs for themselves or a family member, or to pay off either their drug debt or the debt of a family member.

Her older sister (14) made several allegations that they were being 'pimped out' to pay for mom and Auntie's P habit. (Participant 5).

This chronic meth-using mum was selling her 14-year-old, exchanging her for blow jobs. The 14-year-old was very protective of mum and wouldn't disclose the information, perhaps she could have said no. But she didn't choose to. (Participant 12).

I had a 16-year-old girl on my caseload who was sexually passed around gang members as a means of paying off her family's drug debt, the entire experience was brutal and incredibly traumatic for the young woman; her response to the events was heart breaking; 'At least we will all be safe now.' (Participant 8).

Participant 11, was able to identify several 'tweens' she had worked with over the years (11–13yr olds) who were in sexual 'relationships' with 20+yr olds. All of the older partners were supplying the 'tweens' with drugs and alcohol. This has then 'trapped' the young people into the situation as they become reliant on their older 'partner' to get them drugs and alcohol to fund a habit or lifestyle.

This is an area that requires further research, with the allocation of more resources to support social workers to navigate the combination of CSE, gangs, and familial drug dependency.

Being homeless or in 'unsafe' housing was another regular theme identified as a reason for some young people to become entrapped in sexually exploitative relationships. This highlights the lack of options a young person may have to meet their survival needs in other ways.

A lot of the young people who are referred to our team have nowhere to go, they are running out of options. Many do exchange sex for a safe place to stay. (Participant 3).

They run away from either their whānau or state care because of bad experiences, they must feel desperate. I feel that a lot of my young people get exploited because of this vulnerability. (Participant 10).

Participant 5, described a situation in which a group of young women had been moved into a house by a group of older men. When she raised this as a possible protection issue, she was told that the girls were 16 years of age and therefore able to consent, and if they were unhappy they could leave the property; all of the young women had been known to Oranga Tamariki for several years, all of whom had been involved with protective services and had experienced trauma.

Victim shame and victim blame

Concerns were raised about victim shaming and blame within professional circles, hindering the recognition and support of survivors. Participants highlighted the importance of understanding the complexities of victimisation and the barriers to seeking help.

Six of the participants identified that professional attitudes and views about age and consent could contribute to a lack of recognition of their victim status.

So, agencies think that because young people have made a choice, they have entered into the sexual relationship willingly, so it is effectively their choice and therefore their fault; how do we expect a child to understand the consequences of this decision? (Participant 8).

I have heard some social workers say that, at 13 years of age a young person can make their own decisions does this mean that they begin to be seen as less vulnerable or more able to protect themselves, or to vote with their feet, and as a result less protections are placed around the young person (Participant 4).

Some participants wondered if survivors of CSE saw themselves as survivors and if they understood there could be other options or support for them, or perhaps they too blame themselves for what is happening to them.

The scary thing is that young people don't realize that they are at risk, they don't ask for help, and they don't recognise that they are survivors; they are children, how would they know? (Participant 1)

Their mana has been trampled, they have little or no self-esteem; they often don't think that they deserve a better life; this life is sometimes all they know. (Participant 5).

Another participant commented that in a system where young people may not have had positive experiences how can we expect them to trust professionals?

She had no trust in anybody. Why would she how could she? How can a young person recognise that they are a victim if we as professionals don't recognise them as survivors? (Participant 7).

Discussion

The research findings highlight several critical aspects related to child sexual exploitation (CSE) practice in Aotearoa, including raising understanding and awareness, the need for training and education, support and services for victims, understanding circumstances leading to CSE, and the issue of victim shame and blame which contribute to non-disclosure. However, it should be noted that while this study offers valuable preliminary insights, its small, non-representative sample limits generalisability. Future research should employ broader, randomised sampling to enhance applicability across diverse social work contexts.

In addition to the existing challenges in addressing child sexual exploitation (CSE) in Aotearoa, it is critical to incorporate cultural sensitivity, an understanding of the Treaty of Waitangi, and the impact of colonisation into the training of professionals working in this area. The historical context of colonisation and its ongoing impact on Māori communities cannot be overlooked when addressing issues of exploitation. Failure to acknowledge the enduring legacies of colonisation risks perpetuating systemic injustices and further marginalising Māori communities in efforts to address trauma and how this can intersect with abuse and exploitation (Atwool, 2018). Australia's use of culturally tailored frameworks for Indigenous populations highlights valuable lessons for Aotearoa. (Sawrikar & Catz, 2018; Gauam, 2024).

Canada's trauma-informed approaches within child protection services also provide examples of integrating Indigenous perspectives into policy reforms (Louie, 2018). Combining these findings provides a comprehensive research perspective on the challenges and interventions needed to address CSE in Aotearoa, more effectively.

Understanding and awareness

Initially, participants lacked awareness of CSE in Aotearoa and associated with a practice issue occurring elsewhere in the world. However, upon receiving a definition and explanation, all participants recognised cases they had encountered in their work. The research findings indicate a limited awareness of CSE among social workers which emphasises the importance of clear definitions and explanations within the field of child protection (Thorburn, 2016; Radcliffe et al., 2020). Thorburn (2017) found that social service practitioners in Aotearoa show a tendency to conflate experiences of sex work, domestic violence and trafficking, without clarity on differences. This initial lack of awareness among participants regarding CSE highlights a systemic issue within the field of child protection. (Laird et al., 2023; Kwhali, 2018).

Shame and blame

Research in New Zealand has also highlighted the negative experiences encountered by survivors of child sexual exploitation (CSE) when accessing services, including feelings of shame, stigma, and a lack of empathy from professionals (Thorburn, 2016). Additionally, professionals' tendency to either normalise the experiences of survivors or neglect addressing CSE further exacerbates the issue (Thorburn, 2016). Moreover, the criminal justice system often focuses on reducing survivors' risk and vulnerabilities rather than seeking prosecutions for abusers, inadvertently placing blame on the survivors (Hedges, 2013; Thorburn, 2016). The experiences of survivors encountering shame, stigma, and victim-blaming attitudes when accessing services signify systemic failures within support systems (Chisnell and Elliott, 2022).

Agency and consent

The ambiguity surrounding the term 'youth' further complicates the issue, as individuals experiencing sexual exploitation fall between childhood and adulthood, leading to varied perceptions of their vulnerability (Radcliffe et al., 2020). This lack of clarity can result in some adolescents aged 15 years and older not being viewed as vulnerable children but rather as autonomous individuals capable of making informed decisions (Radcliffe et al., 2020). However, this perspective ignores the power dynamics and coercion that are often involved in CSE situations (Melrose & Pearce, 2013). There will always be a priority to protect younger children, however, we do need to recognise the needs of older children, young people. The lack of clarity and complexity, that surrounds childhood consent and autonomy can often conceal conflicting perspectives among professionals regarding the classification of young people as vulnerable children. However, how individual practitioners perceive vulnerability varies significantly, with some viewing adolescents aged 15 years and older as autonomous individuals capable of making informed decisions, rather than them being vulnerable young people (Jay 2014; Chisnell & Elliott, 2022).

This perspective However overlooks the intricate power dynamics and coercive tactics inherent in CSE situations, (Pearce,2013). It is important to clarify the criteria used to assess vulnerability and the need for a nuanced understanding of the experiences of young people affected by CSE. By closely linking these findings to the broader discourse on vulnerability assessment within the field, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding CSE and agency and informs efforts to effectively identify and support young people. (Pearce, 2013; Chisnell & Elliott, 2022).

Participants' reflections on professional attitudes towards consent align with findings by Melrose and Pearce (2013), The varying interpretations of consent and agency among adolescents often reflect societal biases rather than an understanding of coercion and grooming tactics. Incorporating intersectional frameworks into training can mitigate these biases (Melrose & Pearce, 2013).

The experiences of survivors highlight the need for professionals to recognise the agency of young people while refraining from victim-blaming attitudes, together with being cognisant of the impact of poverty and other socio-economic influences. (Lefevre et al., 2019; Pearce, 2013; Lloyd, 2022). Survivors feel disempowered and mistrustful when their views are ignored or when professionals view them as consenting agents, potentially leading to further trauma (Lefevre et al., 2019; Pearce, 2013; Lloyd, 2022). Lefevre et al. (2019) noted that some young people had their views ignored, leading to feelings of disempowerment and mistrust. Pearce (2013) cautioned against negative professional attitudes arising from viewing survivors as consenting agents, which can result in victim-blaming.

Lack of services and multi-agency working

There is a lack of knowledge about specific support services for CSE survivors. Multi-agency collaboration and early intervention, particularly in schools, are essential for effectively identifying and supporting survivors (Gerassi & Nichols, 2021). The research participants identified the need for specific support services for CSE survivors and emphasised the importance of early, coordinated responses, through education and multi-agency collaboration. Multiagency collaboration can advocate for early intervention, individualised assessments, and comprehensive support to address existing systemic issues (Radcliffe et al., 2020). However, collaboration must adhere to principles of informed consent, data minimisation, and confidentiality to protect the rights of survivors (Gerassi & Nichols, 2021).

The absence of explicit references to police engagement in cases of CSE is a notable gap. Police play a critical role in criminal investigations, section 16 of the Oranga Tamariki Act 1989 mandates collaboration with law enforcement in cases involving sexual abuse. However, participants identified gaps in police engagement. Effective partnerships require balancing investigative imperatives with a survivor-centred approach that prioritises the child's best interests. Ethical dilemmas arise in maintaining confidentiality while fulfilling legal reporting obligations. Future protocols should emphasise joint training to bridge these challenges and enhance interagency trust. Effective collaboration between social workers and law enforcement is essential for ensuring both justice and protection for survivors.

Training

There is a legal and ethical obligation to protect vulnerable young people, but many professionals may lack the necessary training and knowledge to identify and respond to CSE effectively. There is an increasing need to recognise risk factors, understand the law, and apply relevant policies. The research will advocate for additional training for social workers and other agencies to enhance their ability to conduct comprehensive assessments that distinguish between risky situations and typical adolescent behaviour.

Participants' reflections on professional attitudes towards consent align with findings by Melrose and Pearce (2013), which highlighted the need a more consistent, shared understanding and the requirements or multiagency training. However, collaboration must adhere to principles of informed consent, data minimisation, and confidentiality to protect the rights of survivors (Gerassi & Nichols, 2021).

The findings suggest the need for updated multi-agency risk assessment tools that integrate dynamic risk indicators specific to New Zealand's context. For instance, drawing on international comparisons, such as adapting the UK's Barnardo's traffic light tool for cultural relevance could improve early identification. Australia's use of culturally tailored frameworks for Indigenous populations and Canada's trauma-informed approaches within child protection services also provide examples of integrating Indigenous perspectives into policy reforms (Louie, 2018). Additionally, embedding mandatory CSE training within social work curricula would ensure foundational knowledge across the profession.

Conclusion

Addressing CSE in Aotearoa requires tackling victim-blaming attitudes while recognising young people's agency without attributing fault. Integrating these insights into policy and practice can help create safer environments. Despite growing awareness, research gaps persist, particularly regarding prevalence, intervention effectiveness, and the experiences of marginalised communities. A national mixed-methods survey could enhance understanding and generalisability, while longitudinal studies on training outcomes would inform sustainable policy reforms to combat this hidden issue.

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