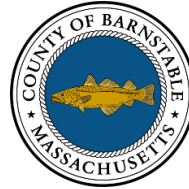




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**CHILDREN'S**  
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Office of Plymouth County District Attorney Timothy J. Cruz



**Children's**  
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# Sexual Exploitation of Children in Southeastern Massachusetts The Regional Report for 2024 *A Surge in Online Exploitation*

This report, and the data and information included within was written with input provided by team members from Children's Cove: The Cape & Islands Child Advocacy Center, the Children's Advocacy Center of Bristol County – a program of JRI, and the Plymouth County District Attorney's Office Children's Advocacy Center.



## Background

The Children's Advocacy Centers (CAC) for Cape Cod & the Islands, Bristol County, and Plymouth County work collaboratively with every branch of law enforcement and child protective services to provide a coordinated response to the sexual exploitation and trafficking of children in our respective regions. Per state regulation, each Child Advocacy Center (CAC) has a response protocol and acts as the hub for cases which may involve a child at risk for, or who is actively being sexually exploited. Each of our centers works together and communicates regularly because often the children we support are victimized across our county lines. It is because of our unique roles and working relationship we see the trends which impact vulnerable children across our communities.

Each year our CAC's look back at the previous year to identify the numbers, issues, trends, and information regarding the sexual exploitation of children in southeastern Massachusetts. This report contains facts, data, information and guidelines we believe our communities need to know to work together to create a future where children are free from abuse.

## Defining the Issue

The term "human trafficking" for most, immediately brings certain images to mind. Perhaps these perceptions are from popular movies, awareness campaigns, or specific people or places. The issue is, however, far more complex and nuanced, and can be presented differently from region to region.

To start, this topic can seem confusing and full of nuance, but human trafficking can be generally broken down into two categories, labor trafficking and sex trafficking. Labor trafficking involves forcing a person to provide labor services whereas sex trafficking does not require an element of force but contributing or facilitating a person to engage in commercial sexual acts. In Massachusetts, "force, fraud or coercion" are not required for commercial sex acts for it to be considered human trafficking. For anyone under the age of 18, the definition is widely expanded due to the vulnerabilities inherent to this age group. Due to this fact, and in the interest of an accurate definition, we often use terms such as "*sexual exploitation*" to better capture these nuances of meaning.

## Sexual exploitation can fall into several categories:

- 1) Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSEC) *occurs when a person under the age of 18 is offered or given something of value to them in exchange for some type of sexual act.* It doesn't have to be in person, and it doesn't need to be money for it to be commercial sexual exploitation. Value could be anything to a child, this includes food, clothing, a warm place to sleep, better grades, vapes, alcohol, or other substances, a trip to a salon, or even a ride somewhere.
- 2) Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) *is defined as any visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving a minor (a person less than 18 years old.)* CSAM is much more than photos and videos; it is a form of exploitation and abuse documented and shared across the internet in perpetuity. Every time an image is viewed, shared, paid for, or downloaded, the child is being revictimized and a crime takes place.
- 3) Sextortion is a form of child sexual exploitation where *a child is blackmailed with the threat of sharing with the public a nude or sexual images of them by a person who wants more images/ videos or money from the child.* Because these images are CSAM, with a child being threatened, sextortion is a form of sexual exploitation of children.
- 4) Online Enticement is when an *individual communicates online with someone believed to be a child with the intent of committing a sexual offense or abduction.*

Across all these definitions, there are a few other notable constants. First, the perpetrator of the exploitation may, or may not be known to the child. This could be a stranger online, a current or former romantic partner, or a family member. Second, an exchange of something of value or images does not need to have taken place for it to be a crime. The act of offering or threatening someone for sexual exploitation is a crime in and of itself. Third, we must emphasize that all these circumstances are not just crimes, but child sexual abuse as well, which means that for mandated reporters in our Commonwealth there is a legal obligation to file a report for suspected abuse or neglect of a child if someone hears, knows or reasonably suspects this is impacting a child.

## The State of Our Region

### By The Numbers

Regionally, our centers had dramatic increase in referrals, with a **staggering increase of 46% from last year**. In 2024, regional CACs received **533 referrals, impacting 471 children**. The youngest children impacted were from **4 years old**, with 57 cases (approximately 10.7%) involving children 12 years old or younger. Most cases involved children between 13 years old and 17 years old, with 401 referrals (approximately 75%). 75 referrals for high-school aged adults make up the remainder of referrals (approximately 14%.) Of the referrals made, approximately 18% of youth were identified as male, 80% identified as female, and 2% identified as transgender or non-binary youth.

### Key Data Points

After we reviewed and analyzed this data, we found several key points to highlight:

First, referrals took a significant jump in a calendar year. We are often asked, *"is this because it is happening more, or is it being reported more often?"* The answer to that question is complicated, however, to put it simply, we speculate that it is both. Regionally, our CAC's have provided increased training on these issues to community members, youth serving professionals, and multidisciplinary team members. However, the dramatic nature of the rise also indicates cases have increased in frequency as well.

Second, the increase can also be attributed to more cases involving online facilitated crimes against children. In past years we have seen that more than 90% of cases, on average, contain an online element of communication or exploitation. However, last year more than 50% of all cases referred to our centers were online *only*, meaning that they are exclusively sextortion or online exploitation without an in-person component. This is a significant rise and corresponds to the indication of a general increase in sexual exploitation happening more often.

Third, referrals for male victims have continued to increase year by year, with numbers up by 2% since last year. While this margin may seem insignificant, it corresponds to the

ongoing theory and consensus that males are victimized at higher rates, because their rates of disclosure are significantly lower.

## Trends and Patterns for 2024

### Sexual Exploitation of Children Is Right Here

We cannot underscore the fact that exploitation of children happens right here in our own communities. This is not a “city” issue - Boston, New York, Miami or Las Vegas - but an issue in Hyannis, Brockton, Dartmouth, Mansfield, Berkley, Manomet, Yarmouth, Attleboro and more. More importantly, very often children are being exploited in their own homes through online facilitated crimes. We need to emphasize this fact - when children have access to technology, they can explore the world, and the world has access to them.

### This Issue Is Not Going Away

Last year, we looked back at more than eight years’ worth of data and found there had been an average annual **increase in referrals for sexual exploitation of children in our region of 35%**. Cumulatively, this equals over 2,000 children in our region referred for suspicions of sexual exploitation. Now, with data from 2024 analyzed, we have another year in which referrals have increased even more, with an alarming increase in Plymouth County which witnessed a nearly 80% rise. As a note, referrals originating from one county does not mean that these cases are only restricted to one area. We often see cases crossing jurisdictions.

### Artificial Intelligence (AI) Is Impacting Everything, Including CSAM

With the AI revolution unfolding over the last 18 months, a new form of victimization has become more mainstream. Individuals are carefully crafting “deepfakes” of children and teens to artificially create CSAM. Deepfakes are incredibly realistic videos or images that are manipulated using AI to make them appear real. Non-explicit images of children and teens are being manipulated by AI into content that appears real and exploitative. This is then being used for sextortion and manipulating youth to produce real content or to send money.

## **“Revenge Porn” a Rising Issue**

Regionally, we have also seen an increasing rate of referrals for online sexual exploitation come in the form of peer-to-peer exploitation, often through means of sextortion or revenge porn. “Revenge porn” is a type of sexual abuse committed online by the sharing of nude or sexually explicit photos and/or videos of a person without their consent to shame or punish a current or former intimate partner. Other times, the threat of sharing this content is a way to control the person. Often the child being targeted is told their images will be shared directly with those who have meaningful roles in the child’s life, such as parents, teachers, coaches, members of their faith community or employers. It can be devastating to a person’s reputation, self-esteem, peer relationships, and wellbeing.

Fortunately, in June of 2024, Governor Healey signed into law *An Act to Prevent Abuse and Exploitation*, which seeks to prevent abuse, increase protections for survivors, and educate youth about “sexting”. This law further criminalizes and expands punishments for revenge porn, extends prohibition to deepfakes and AI generated images, and mandates education for youth surrounding these issues.

## **A Misunderstanding of Victimization**

A common misconception of all forms of child sexual abuse is that those who are victims should and will report it. Unfortunately, that is not true. 90% of victims of sexual abuse and assault will never disclose their abuse. In most instances this is because the perpetrator of abuse is someone the victim knows, cares about or trusts. Other reasons are because a victim has been threatened or harmed, or other people they care about have been threatened or harmed. Other times, a victim of abuse may not know that they are being victimized - they may have limited knowledge of sexual matters which prevents them from understanding what is happening is wrong. With sexual exploitation, all these factors could be true, including cases where those who may be experiencing homelessness may face sexual exploitation as a means for survival.

Additionally, with some victims there is an inherent trauma response which may physically prevent them from asking for help. Most people are familiar with the “fight or flight” response, however, there are two others: Freeze and Appease. Freezing is when the nervous system is activated, and the person is not able to fight or flee, and they may be unable to move or respond. Often this can lead to a victim disassociating and may not

remember the abuse or trauma. Appease refers to when the victim responds to abuse by going along with the abuse to minimize additional violence or repercussions. This can give outsiders a perspective that the victim was “willing” to engage in the behavior, however, most survivors who react in this way are unsure or even unaware as to why they acted this way.

Unfortunately, we have seen cases where reports of children being exploited were delayed because of this misunderstanding. We implore providers and community members that if you have a concern, please report it.

## **What We Need Parents to Know**

### **Parents and Caregivers are Critical for Prevention**

Parents need to be informed, engaged, and open with their children to take steps towards preventing sexual exploitation. In our area, this begins with online safety, as online exploitation is the primary method by which youth are being exploited. It is critical for parents to be as involved in their children’s online lives just as they are in their sports and other school activities. Parents need to understand how to use the popular apps and platforms kids and teens are using. Cases of exploitation have taken place on all internet accessible devices, including video game consoles, school-based devices, and even apps associated with school use. If parents and caregivers don’t have regular conversations about online safety, and monitor all internet-enabled devices, the opportunity for exploitation to happen in plain sight remains high.

### **Have Conversations Without Judgment**

It is important for kids and teens to know that if they make a mistake, they can have a calm non-judgmental conversation with their parents and ask for help. Children need to know that their parents will always believe in them, advocate for them, and put their health and safety first. Having ongoing and regular conversations about safety with kids and teens will help them feel supported, can provide reassurance, and increase their likelihood to ask for help.



As a parent, if a child does make a mistake and report that something happened to them, remain calm, and don't take quick action like deleting images or messages. These may be important to effectively report an incident and get help. Contact your local police department or local Children's Advocacy Center for guidance. If you see or suspect child sexual abuse material online or on social media, you can report it to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children through their Cyber Tipline.

In some cases, children have been threatened to stay compliant with the demands of an offender. It may be difficult for a child to come to a caregiver for help if they are fearful of threats. Staying calm and knowing how to act is crucial in helping a child who is a victim of online exploitation. The more parents and caregivers engage in their child's online life; while discussing the risks of online sexual exploitation, the more likely children will confide in their parents when issues arise.

*Please, make sure to thank children for coming to you for help.*

### **Get the Education you Need**

We recommend parents understand the privacy settings of online and social media applications to increase the safety barrier between children and potential exploitation. Have conversations about body safety, online safety, and identifying trusted adults they can ask for help.

### **Action Steps**

We will not be able to stem the tide of sexual exploitation in our community without your help. We need you to:

- Ask your children's schools, recreational programs/centers, summer camps, and other youth serving organizations to work with your local CAC for training in recognizing and responding to abuse.
- Reach out to your local CAC to ask how you can learn more about the issue, request or organize training for your local community, school, non-profit organization, or business.

- If you are concerned that a child is being exploited, report it right away! You can report suspicious behaviors to your local Children's Advocacy Center, law enforcement agency or file a report with the Department of Children and Families.
- There are numerous online resources for online exploitation of children. Visit the website for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children to learn more about these resources, including their Take It Down resource at <https://takeitdown.ncmec.org/>.

## What We Are Doing

Through our regional partnerships with fellow Children's Advocacy Centers, and with support from the Massachusetts Children's Alliance (the membership organization of the 12 Children's Advocacy Centers in Massachusetts), we will continue to coordinate the investigative and support response for children who are victims of sexual exploitation throughout the commonwealth. In the last year collectively, our centers provided hundreds of hours to multidisciplinary professionals, law enforcement, prosecution and the community about recognizing, responding to, and the investigation of sexual exploitation of children. In addition to the training our staff provided, we offered a range of in-depth workshops, punctuated by powerful local and national speakers from the National Criminal Justice Training Center, the Zero Abuse Project, Internet Crimes Against Children investigators, federal and local prosecutors, judges, survivor speakers and victim advocates.

Regionally there have been concentrated efforts with law enforcement, The Department of Children and Families and our partner centers to enact the multidisciplinary response to children who may be missing or absent from care. Because of the high risk of exploitation, often in less than 24 hours of children going missing from home or placement, this regional response focusing on safety has become a priority initiative. This multidisciplinary response ensures that children receive the support they need, with an emphasis on health and safety, while also being able to respond to investigations promptly if the child is ready and able to engage in that process.

With the changing demographics and housing crisis in Massachusetts over the last year, our regional programs, in association with the Massachusetts Children's Alliance, provided

training for housing and emergency shelter staff throughout the region on how to recognize and respond to and signs of exploitation and trafficking.

With dedicated child exploitation response programs, as well as education and training of staff members, our ability to provide impact to our community and multidisciplinary partners is growing to stem the tide of sexual exploitation of children in our region.

## We Are Your Local Resource

Sexual exploitation in our community and the risk to our children is increasing. If you want to learn more about how we are making an impact, would like to request training for your school or organization, or would like to learn how you can join us in tackling this issue, please contact us.

Children's Cove | 508.375.0410 | [www.childrencove.org](http://www.childrencove.org)

Bristol County | 508.674.6111 | [www.cacofbc.org](http://www.cacofbc.org)

Plymouth County | 508.580.3383 | [www.cac.plymouthda.com](http://www.cac.plymouthda.com)