



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

Charlotte Chisnell

Eastern Institute of Technology, New Zealand

Abstract

Within Aotearoa, New Zealand, there appears to be limited awareness among social workers of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and its impact on survivors. This appears to be due to the 'hidden' nature of abuse, barriers to disclosure, New Zealand's lack of data collection systems, non-specific legislation and policy, a lack of effective multi-agency protocols, the culture of denial, the impact of colonisation and negative professional attitudes toward survivors of CSE. These significant issues make it extremely hard to hear the voices of survivors of CSE, often resulting in an inconsistent response from professional agencies. The question of how best to tackle it remains a challenge, not only for social work professionals but for all practitioners across the children and young people's workforce.

This qualitative research aims to explore the views and experiences of child protection workers regarding Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) in Aotearoa, New Zealand, to identify gaps in knowledge and practices related to this form of abuse. The objectives include assessing awareness and understanding of CSE among child protection workers, identifying barriers to effective recognition intervention, and to propose recommendations for improving responses within the child protective system. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups, were undertaken with social workers in both Tairāwhiti and Hawkes Bay, in 2023.

We used purposive and snowball sampling and analysed the data using a thematic approach.

The majority of the participants highlighted a lack of awareness of CSE, barriers to effective recognition and intervention such as victim blame and shame and the need for training / education and a multiagency response.

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