Commercial sexual exploitation of children: Parents’ knowledge, beliefs, and protective actions

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While commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is widespread, little research has been conducted regarding parents’ knowledge of, beliefs about, and protective actions against CSEC. Using Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model as a lens and a quantitative survey, this study explored four questions: how knowledgeable of CSEC are parents in Mississippi and the surrounding states; what beliefs do parents have toward CSEC; how are parents taking protective actions against CSEC; and how are parents’ knowledge, beliefs, and protective actions correlated? Results from 13 participants were examined for frequencies and correlations. Findings indicated that parents have a basic knowledge of CSEC, beliefs favorable to CSEC prevention and intervention, and parents take protective actions. However, gaps and inconsistencies existed. In future, practitioners should target parents and church staff for CSEC prevention and intervention education and training.

Keywords: commercial sexual exploitation of children, sex trafficking, parents, prevention, and intervention
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this study to Mississippi’s survivors of CSEC as well as to children at an increased risk of experiencing CSEC. It was for you that this study was completed. May we provide you with a better, safer world.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge those who have made this study possible: Dr. Alisha Hardman for guiding me through this process, remaining patient as progress inched by, and offering encouragement along the way. Drs. Donna Peterson and Tommy Phillips for serving on my committee and for providing vital feedback and guidance through the process as well. My fellow graduate students for comradesy, feedback, and encouragement. Dr. Jamille Harrell-Sims for permission to adapt the AASTK Tool for my own research. My friends for their deep understanding and patience as I generally dropped off the planet during the final months of writing. My family for cheering me on, understanding, and being there. I especially want to thank my husband, Andy, for his patience as I worked late nights and through the weekends; for his daily, practical help; as well as for believing in me even on days that were discouraging—I couldn’t have a better person in my corner. I’d also like to acknowledge my Creator and all those who work to prevent human trafficking and exploitation for the sake of Justice and Mercy.

Do justice,
Love mercy,
Walk humbly with your God.

(Paraphrased from Micah 6:8)
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Trafficking of minors can occur in large metropolitan cities like New York City or deep in the valleys of the Himalayan Mountains—no place is safe from the crime of trafficking, and the state of Mississippi is no different. Recently, the fight against human trafficking has received more exposure as faith-based events such as the Passion Conference have begun raising awareness on the issue; billboards with trafficking hotline phone numbers are noticeable along interstate highways; and documentaries highlighting the nature of human trafficking have made their way through popular movie streaming services. Contrary to some Hollywood portrayals in movies like Taken, most sex-trafficked girls in the U.S. are not abducted by a stranger and kept in a locked room. Many of these girls still attend school, walk to the corner store, spend time with friends, have medical examinations, and are arrested for petty crimes (Beautiful Ones Ministries, Inc. & Belhaven University, 2015; Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Williamson & Prior, 2009). The number of victims might also be more prevalent than one might think with the International Labor Office (2017) reporting that there were 4.8 million victims of sexual exploitation in 2016.

Sex trafficking is a type of human trafficking which is described by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security as “involve[ing] the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act” (n.d.). The U.S. government classifies sex trafficking as a “severe [form] of trafficking in persons…in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or
coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age” (U.S. Department of State, 2000). The U.S. government further defines sex trafficking as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act (U.S. Department of State, 2000), and a commercial sex act is defined as “any sex act on account of which anything of value is given to or received by any person” (U.S. Department of State, 2000). Because a minor has not yet reached the age of consent and based on the previously stated definitions, any minor involved in commercial sex is a victim of sex trafficking. There are two main terms used in the literature to describe a minor who is sexually exploited for commercial gain: one of the terms is domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST), and the other term is commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC; Gerassi, 2015). Both terms are used heavily in the literature and emphasize different aspects of the nature of trafficking and exploitation but are often used interchangeably (Gerassi, 2015). “CSEC” is the term used in this study, and unless otherwise specified, “sex trafficking” or “child trafficking” will be used in reference to CSEC rather than other forms of human trafficking.

Statement of the problem

Several risk factors for sex trafficking of domestic minors have been identified in the literature, including experiencing physical, emotional, or sexual abuse (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014); children who run away from home, who are kicked out of their home by parents or guardians, or children who are given up to foster care (Beautiful Ones Ministries, Inc. & Belhaven University, 2015; Williamson & Prior, 2009); having a parent with a drug or alcohol addiction (Beautiful Ones Ministries, Inc. & Belhaven University, 2015; Williamson & Prior, 2009); and living in a context (home or neighborhood) where prostitution and/or abuse is
normalized (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Hickle & Roe-Sepowitz, 2014). Families’ influences are often connected to these risk factors in some way, and being trafficked by family members is the primary means of initiation into sex trafficking, as documented on both a national and state level (Albanese, 2007; Beautiful Ones Ministries, Inc. & Belhaven University, 2015).

While the negative aspects of family involvement have been emphasized in the literature, some studies acknowledge that family therapy and counseling may be used as a means of sex trafficking recovery, and researchers and survivors alike have recognized family support as a means of recovery from trafficking (Gibbs, Hardiston, Lutnick, Miller, & Kluckman 2015; Hickle & Roe-Sepowitz, 2014; Tidball, Zheng, & Creswell, 2016); however, little research has been conducted regarding parental involvement in CSEC prevention. There is even little research regarding parents’ beliefs about sex trafficking of minors, what their knowledge levels of this crime might be, and whether they take any protective measures against CSEC.

**Background of the problem**

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act was authorized in 2000 and was reauthorized in 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013 and 2018 at a national level (Gerassi, 2015; Trafficking Victim Protection Act of 2017, 2018). In Mississippi, the Human Trafficking Act was amended in 2013 in order to help victims and to punish traffickers and other perpetrators for their crimes (Mississippi Human Trafficking Act of 2013, 2013). While there are estimates on sex trafficking, it is difficult to find hard numbers, and the hard numbers existing only reflect cases that have been confirmed. For example, the International Labor Office (2017) reported estimates of 4.8 million victims of sexual exploitation worldwide in 2016, but, according to the Department of State’s *Trafficking of Person’s Report 2015*, only 44,462 victims of human trafficking were
actually identified globally in 2014 and only 6,400 trafficking victims (excluding labor trafficking) were identified as victims in the entire Western Hemisphere in 2014 (U.S. Department of State, 2015). These numbers reflect the discrepancies between victims identified versus estimated victims. Richard J. Estes and Neil Alan Weiner are pioneer researchers on sex trafficking of minors and have estimated there to be 244,000 youth at risk of being trafficked in the United States (Estes & Weiner, 2002).

In Mississippi, these numbers are smaller and less defined with some research identifying approximately 90 victims of domestic minor sex trafficking identified in “recent years” (Beautiful Ones Ministries, Inc. & Belhaven University, 2015). The national human trafficking hotline indicates there have been 55 reports on human trafficking in Mississippi in 2019, and 30 of those cases involved minors (National Human Trafficking Hotline, 2019a), and in 2017, when research for this survey was conducted, 42 cases were reported and 15 of those involved minors (National Human Trafficking Hotline, 2019b). While these numbers only reflect cases reported to one hotline, it is evident that sex trafficking of minors occurs in Mississippi on a yearly basis.

Several risk factors have been associated with the sex trafficking of minors, with age being a primary risk factor. Clawson, Dutch, Solomon, and Grace (2009) recognize 11-14 years old as a high-risk age range. That range does seem to be trending younger as the assistant chief of the Pearl Mississippi Police Department, Dean Scott, indicated ages eight to 11 as the age-range by which most victims have performed a sex act (Jones, 2017). Experiencing abuse prior to being trafficked is also one of the most common risk factors. In a study by Cecchet and Thoburn (2014), 91% of trafficking survivors identified as having abusive families and absent fathers. Other risk factors identified were parents with drug or alcohol abuse problems, and an overwhelming majority of the girls also reported being having runaway, having been thrown out,
or having been given up to foster care (Beautiful Ones Ministries, Inc. & Belhaven University, 2015; Williamson & Prior, 2009). Frequently, girls who became trafficked were previously forced to take over adult responsibilities (called parentification) such as caring for younger siblings or providing basic needs for themselves and their families (Williamson & Prior, 2009). These risk factors highlight the neglect and abuse that many minors experience prior to being victimized by the crime of trafficking. Reviews of the sex trafficking literature recognize poverty as a key risk factor for trafficking (Gerassi & Nichols, 2018; Rafferty, 2013). In areas where poverty is a chronic problem such as inner cities and impoverished rural areas, poverty may cause a minor to feel forced into commercial sex for survival (Williamson & Prior, 2009). Estes and Weiner (2002) likewise acknowledged that poverty creates a context conducive to sexual exploitation.

Another risk factor identified by many young women who had been trafficked was the normalization of prostitution, abuse, and trafficking in their communities. Abuse was often normalized by parents or other relatives in the home (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Hickle & Roe-Sepowitz, 2014). Many of the girls also came from communities and neighborhoods where prostitution was common, and girls normalized the selling of sex at an early age (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014). Trafficking victims were also usually introduced to trafficking through a friend, friend of a friend, or relative and knew other girls who had been trafficked before they themselves were trafficked (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014). For many of these young people, the familiarization of abuse and the selling of sex through their family, friends, and community connected abuse and exploitation with close relationships (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014). Additionally, familial trafficking or the permission of family members for their children to be sexually exploited for the receipt of anything of value has been recognized nationally and in
Mississippi as the most common form of trafficking and as the most frequent method of first victimization (Albanese, 2007; Beautiful Ones Ministries, Inc. & Belhaven University, 2015).

Due to frequent abuse and neglect in the home, many girls identified seeking love and attention as one of their reasons for being trafficked (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014, Gibbs et al., 2015). Frequently, recruiters and pimps posed as boyfriends, bought the girls nice things, told the victims they were beautiful, and then gradually convinced the girls that having sex for profit was a way to return the pimp’s affection (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Williamson & Prior, 2009). These “boyfriends” exploit the vulnerability of and traffic young girls by preying on the girls’ need for unmet affection and care (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014). Thus, it is a lack of basic needs and affection that often exposes girls to the tactics of traffickers.

In addition to the many negative risk factors that precede trafficking, victims of trafficking experience a host of negative outcomes during and post trafficking, and some of these outcomes have been identified as threat to life, mental health problems (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014), higher rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), physical abuse, a history of violence with sex, higher drug and alcohol use, polydrug use, a history of running away from home, and prior involvement with both child services and the law enforcement (Hershberger et al., 2018; Varma et al., 2015). The abuses trafficking victims experience along with a host of additional negative outcomes provide both motivation for and responsibility to prevent CSEC whenever possible.

Concerning research pertaining to positive family influence, family counseling is briefly mentioned as a means to recovery in Tidball, Zheng, and Creswell’s (2016) study. Support of safe family members and family reunification and counseling is recognized by Gibbs et al. (2015) as leading to survival and stabilization of survivors, as well as healing and thriving in the long-term. Cecchet and Thoburn (2014) recognized family support as part of the support system
and new environment that was crucial to the escape and recovery of trafficked women in their study.

Mississippi contains a large at-risk youth population with approximately 190,000 minors living in poverty (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019), low education quality, and high levels of violence reported in the Jackson area (Beautiful Ones Ministries, Inc. & Belhaven University, 2015). The states surrounding Mississippi also contain large populations of children in poverty with the Annie E. Casey Foundation reporting that Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee rank between 32nd and 50th on child economic well-being across the nation (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019). Very little research to date has been conducted concerning CSEC in Mississippi; however, Beautiful Ones Ministries, Inc. and Belhaven University conducted a rapid assessment in four counties in central Mississippi in late 2014 and published results through Shared Hope International (Beautiful Ones Ministries, Inc. & Belhaven University, 2015). Findings from this initial assessment support findings from previous studies with the interviewees identifying risk factors in Mississippi that match risk factors identified in previous studies conducted in other areas of the United States. One finding was that the majority of CSEC cases that have been charged in the state are familial sex trafficking cases, indicating the great need our state has for family education and holistic family prevention and intervention programs (Beautiful Ones Ministries, Inc. & Belhaven University, 2015). The study also identified a lack of preparedness and education regarding trafficking among service providers and law enforcement in Mississippi (Beautiful Ones Ministries, Inc. & Belhaven University, 2015). With a large population of at-risk youth, lack of awareness among the community, and prevalence of familial trafficking in Mississippi, intervention and prevention strategies must be examined and evaluated for implementation or improvement.
Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the beliefs, knowledge, and protective actions of parents of middle school and high school students regarding commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) in Mississippi and the surrounding states in order to inform intervention and prevention efforts. The four guiding research questions of this study were:

1. How knowledgeable are parents of middle school and high school youth living in Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee about CSEC?
2. What beliefs do parents of middle school and high school youth in Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee have toward CSEC and its relevance to their own families?
3. How are parents of middle school and high school youth in these five states taking actions which could protect against the risk of CSEC?
4. How are parents’ knowledge of CSEC, beliefs about CSEC, and protective actions against CSEC correlated?

Significance

Considering the role that family often plays in either increasing risk factors for CSEC or in actively trafficking children, learning more about knowledge, beliefs, and protective actions that parents have concerning sex trafficking can provide background for further research. Such research currently delves into an unexplored area and can provide family therapists and educators with more knowledge for how to engage parents in the recovery or prevention process, respectively, and to provide researchers and therapists with more tools for closing the gap between what parental behaviors toward their children ought to be and what they are. This
research can also inform service workers on awareness of parental beliefs that may expose children to trafficking. Research on parental knowledge, beliefs, and protective actions can also inform service workers on how to structure parental education on trafficking and may help with developing intake assessments for social service organizations, as well as developing policies to provide parental education on trafficking and to support and assist children at risk of being trafficked.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Theories that have been used in the literature for examining CSEC include feminist theory (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014), socioeconomic theory (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014), general strain theory (Reid, 2011), life course perspective (Reid, 2012), and Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Harper, Kruger, Varjas, & Meyers, 2019). Cecchet and Thoburn (2014) recognized feminist theory and socioeconomic theory as the most commonly employed theories in CSEC research; however, they chose Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory for their framework in order to encourage more cultural awareness of child sex trafficking survivors and to place those survivors within a context of systems. Cecchet and Thoburn (2014) discussed how the various ecological systems either created more vulnerability to CSEC in the lives of the survivors or supported escape and resilience. Harper et al. (2019) present an ecological organizational consultation model to strengthen school-based prevention programs and advocate that school personnel, families, and students should all receive CSEC prevention training.

Theoretical framework

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory served as the theoretical framework to guide this study. In its current form, the theory is known as the Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 2001) and is referred to as the PPCT (Process, Person, Context, Time) model. Whereas the
original model is known as a contextual model of development, the newer iteration places equal emphasis on how personal characteristics and proximal processes contribute to development. Consistent with previous studies of CSEC that have used Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, this study utilized the older version of the theory.

The ecological systems model places each individual in the context of several systems: the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). These systems frame an individual inside various environments in a way that Bronfenbrenner (1994) described as “nested structures…like a set of Russian dolls” (p. 39). The microsystem is described as “a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 39). According to Bronfenbrenner, it is within the microsystem that development is “produce[d] and sustain[ed]” (2014, p. 39). The mesosystem links two or more settings of the microsystem, and is, therefore, “a system of microsystems” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 40). The exosystem takes another step out from the mesosystem and links systems that are not in direct contact with the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), and the macrosystem refers to even broader characteristics or patterns that define cultures and subcultures (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The chronosystem consists of the time context surrounding a person and changes that may or may not take place in the life of a person, either individually or within their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

It was this model that Cecchet and Thoburn (2014) employed in their qualitative study of sex trafficking survivors, though their discussion focused on the micro, meso, and macro levels of the model. An ecological systems theory was also employed by McIntyre (2014) in her examination of CSEC survivors in Cambodia, though McIntyre appears to have used an
adaptation of the theory specifically purposed for social work. McIntyre examined the Cambodian survivor in terms of the child’s environment and context, particularly family and community (McIntyre, 2014). McIntyre’s use of the ecological systems theory provided an example of using ecological systems theory to place an individual who had been sex trafficked within the context of his/her environment and demonstrated how such a theory can be applied in the task of a social worker in the field (McIntyre, 2014).

Both Cecchet and Thoburn (2014) and McIntyre (2014) demonstrated the use of ecological systems theory in their examinations of CSEC. They build a case from the theoretical and applicable perspective that ecological systems theory is useful in looking at CSEC and how an individual’s environment may increase or decrease their likelihood to be sexually exploited. Such a theory is important for providing a lens for prevention and intervention efforts aimed at protecting vulnerable populations such as children exposed to CSEC and for assessing the knowledge and beliefs surrounding these children.

Knowledge and beliefs

Several studies have been conducted to assess the knowledge and awareness of those involved in intervention and prevention efforts for anti-CSEC. A study conducted by Wells, Mitchell, and Ji (2012) aimed to examine characteristics of internet use in cases of child prostitution, specifically cases that involved a third-party exploiter. In this study, law enforcement officers across the nation were surveyed regarding demographic and characteristics of internet use in prostitution. The officers were surveyed as to whether the juvenile was treated as a victim or a delinquent in cases of internet or no internet use. Findings from this study showed that, for this sample, internet use increased the likelihood of a third-party exploiter (both
pimps and family members/acquaintances) and that juveniles involved in internet prostitution were more likely to be treated as a victim rather than a delinquent by police officers (Wells et al., 2012). Wells and her colleagues suggested that law enforcement may be more likely to view juveniles involved in internet prostitution as victims because the technology provides law enforcement with more evidence linking cases with third-party exploiters.

Other studies have focused on the awareness of human services professionals on human trafficking. A study conducted by Hounmenou (2012) examined human services professionals’ levels of awareness of human trafficking as a problem, federal and state policies on human trafficking, as well as ability to identify and respond to human trafficking cases and challenges identified for implementing policies on human trafficking in the state of Illinois. An 18-item survey was used to assess awareness of human trafficking, awareness of policies, and ability to identify and respond. While approximately 27-40% of respondents reported that they perceived human trafficking as a severe problem, only about 5% reported having expert knowledge on human trafficking policies and 20-44% reported only a moderate level of knowledge on various items (Hounmenou, 2012). Hounmenou attributed low levels of knowledge to lack of training on human trafficking and recommended increasing awareness of human trafficking among human services professionals. A study conducted by Cole and Sprang (2015) combined a mixed-method approach to examine the awareness of CSEC among human service professionals in rural, micropolitan, and metropolitan communities across one state. Cole and Sprang found that participants in metropolitan areas were more likely to view CSEC as a fairly serious or severely serious problem, to have had training on human trafficking, and to have worked with a victim or suspected victim of CSEC compared to participants from rural or micropolitan communities.
These studies have demonstrated a lack of awareness of CSEC among those who will most likely be providing services to victims of CSEC.

A study conducted by Ferguson, Soydan, Lee, Yamanaka, Freer, and Xie (2009) examined knowledge, skills, and attitudes of NGO representatives, law enforcement officials, and prosecutors in five U.S. cities. This study evaluated CSEC Community Intervention Project (CCIP) in Chicago, Atlantic City, Denver, Washington, D.C., and San Diego using convenience sampling to select the cities and to select the 230 participants (Ferguson et al., 2009). The study was conducted during a three-day training in which a pretest was administered prior to training and posttests were administered after the completion of each module (Ferguson et al., 2009). Results from the study indicated participants’ knowledge, skills, and attitudes of CSEC increased significantly between pre- and posttest which suggests that even though knowledge levels among first responders, prosecutors and service professionals may be inadequate, training can be an effective way to mitigate this problem.

**Family influence**

Family has been found to be influential in CSEC in many negative ways, but studies have also hinted and suggested ways that families may be of positive influence in the intervention and prevention process. While families may actively or inadvertently increase a child’s risk of CSEC through abuse, neglect, poor support, and maltreatment (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Reid, 2011), victims of trafficking have also reported that family formed a new support system (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014), and family counseling in high risk areas has been recommended by some researchers (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014).
Joan Reid has conducted studies focused on family involvement in CSEC. Reid (2011) examined the role of caregiver strain, child maltreatment, and vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation. Reid’s study only partially supported her hypotheses that caregiver strain was connected with child maltreatment; that child maltreatment was connected to increases in runaway behavior, earlier drug and alcohol use, and levels of sexual denigration; and that runaway behavior, earlier drug and alcohol use, and increased levels of sexual denigration are predictive of CSEC. Sexual denigration was the only variable that was statistically significantly related to being prostituted as a minor, and the study revealed a chain of relations that indicated caregiver strain could increase risk for CSEC: caregivers who reported higher levels of caregiver strain also reported increased levels of child maltreatment, and girls who were maltreated were more likely to have had increased rates of sexual denigration (though these levels were not significant). While these results only partially supported Reid’s hypotheses, the study demonstrated application of a theoretical framework in examining CSEC (which is not always observed in the literature), and employed a more elaborate form of analysis than is often used in CSEC research—that of structural equation modeling. Reid provided an early effort in examining how parents and caregivers may increase the likelihood that their children will be involved in CSEC.

Concerning familial factors increasing vulnerability to CSEC, another study conducted by Reid (2012) consisted of a review of research focusing on vulnerability factors of victims of sex trafficking. Some family-related factors Reid identified were child maltreatment, family dysfunction, family or peer involved in sex work or trafficking, family violence, being a runaway or throwaway, foster care, and desire for love and belonging. These factors reveal gaps in family involvement or failure to provide basic needs for children. A study by Cole and Sprang (2015)
found that nearly 50% of the CSEC victims that participating service professionals had been in contact with were trafficked by a parent or guardian. A study conducted by Wells and colleagues (2012) found that 26% of internet juvenile prostitution cases involved a family member or acquaintance while only 5% of cases without internet involved a family member or acquaintance. These researchers recommended including the topic of commercial sexual exploitation online in sexual abuse prevention messages (Wells et al., 2012).

The study conducted by Williamson and Prior (2009) consisted of 13 interviews with female participants between the ages of 12 and 17 who had been involved with juvenile justice in some way. Findings from this study concerning family revealed that sexual and physical abuse and neglect were common experiences. The participants reported high levels of stress, and most of the girls interviewed reported running away at least once to avoid what they believed were situations they could not endure any longer (Williamson & Prior, 2009). The participants reported that juvenile court and social services did not reduce the stressors in their lives and actually created more stress (Williamson & Prior, 2009), revealing that interventions and preventions should address family-related issues.

The studies previously mentioned demonstrate a need for more awareness of CSEC and also suggest that family has the potential to be both a risk factor and a protective factor for CSEC. A recent qualitative study by Jennifer E. O’Brien (2018) found that survivors of CSEC often reported positive interpersonal relationships as a protective factor against CSEC. Despite the need for greater awareness of the intimate role that family plays, family-focused prevention efforts are few and far between. Kruger, Harper, Zabek, Collins, Perkins, and Meyers (2016) conducted a study that examined a school-based CSEC prevention program. Kruger et al. employed the participatory culture-specific intervention model (PC-SIM), consisting of 11
phases. The research in this study was qualitative and relied heavily on forming partnerships in the community (Kruger et al., 2016). While this study did not include parental involvement in the program or analysis, the authors recognized that schools are the most in touch with families of CSEC victims or those at risk for CSEC. The study focused on community-based prevention, and it also pulled from a population of girls who were at risk for being commercially sexually exploited rather than those who have been confirmed as such in their efforts to focus on prevention rather than intervention (Kruger et al., 2016).

Another study related to trafficking took a small step in the direction of family involvement and consisted of a qualitative psychoeducational intervention for victims of CSEC (Hickle & Roe-Sepowitz, 2014). This study provided an assessment of group intervention in a pilot study that provided support to victims as well as their families who were on the road to recovery and empowerment (Hickle & Roe-Sepowitz, 2014). The study did not include family therapy as part of the intervention; however, the researchers acknowledged that CSEC affects families, and not just individuals, and asserted that the intervention provided support for CSEC victims in a situation in which families lacked the knowledge and resources to provide that support themselves (Hickle & Roe-Sepowitz, 2014). While the study did not work directly with families, similarly to Kruger et al.’s school-based prevention program, it provided an initial step towards family-based prevention.

Gibbs, Walters, Lutnik, Miller, and Kluckman (2015) conducted a study that evaluated three government-funded programs that offered support services to victims of CSEC. The researchers conducted qualitative interviews to gather their data. Their assessment of three organizations concluded that the youth served included those who had run away or been thrown out, who had left due to abuse or were thrown out due to sexual orientation/identity, behavior, or
parents’ unwillingness to care for them. Two of the three programs identified family reunification and family counseling as high needs for young people (Gibbs et al., 2015). The authors also recognized barriers that family involvement may cause, including family members collecting monetary assistance on behalf of the youth, refusal of permission for a minor to receive mental health services, and involvement of family members who do not protect their children (Gibbs et al., 2015). Nevertheless, Gibbs et al. (2015) recognized the importance of family in long-term recovery and recommended family reunification support as a gap in services and programs.

**Parent influence on risk-taking behaviors**

Studies regarding risk-taking behaviors such as runaway behavior, risky sexual behavior, and violent behavior have found that family and parental involvement may increase or decrease the likelihood that a child will participate in risky behavior, depending on the parental involvement and the messages the parent communicated. Studies in CSEC have previously identified the importance of family involvement in CSEC prevention, but do not focus research directly on parental awareness of CSEC and parental involvement in CSEC prevention or intervention. However, studies in other topic areas suggest that parents are crucial in protecting their children. One aspect of prevention that involved family was that of runaway behavior therapy targeting a family unit. Since runaway behavior is a risk factor for CSEC (Estes & Weiner, 2002), it is important to help prevent runaway behavior in youth. A study by Coco and Courtney (2003), examined a family involved in runaway prevention therapy. The study employed the family systems approach. The intervention attempted to create more cohesion and adaptability according to Olson’s circumplex model, and the family therapy was found to be
effective in preventing further runaway behavior (Coco & Courtney, 2003), suggesting that family therapy should be increased as an avenue of prevention services.

Concerning parental involvement in preventing risky sexual behavior, Aspy, Vesely, Oman, Rodine, Marshall, and McLeroy (2007) conducted a study of “Parental Communication and Youth Sexual Behavior” which examined parent-youth dyads concerning youth sexual behavior and how parents had communicated with the children about sexual behavior. The study revealed that parents in this sample had a strong influence over their children’s sexual decision-making, particularly, youth whose parents taught them to say no to sex were less likely to have had sexual intercourse, and youth whose parents had taught them about birth control were more likely to have had sexual intercourse at the time of the interview (Aspy et al., 2007). While this study did not address CSEC, it did demonstrate the influence parents have over their children’s sexual decision-making. CSEC does not fall under the umbrella of sexual decision-making since it involves minors and sexual coercion, but many times initiation into CSEC is through deception with traffickers preying upon young girls, posing as boyfriends, and providing the illusion of decision-making (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Williamson & Prior, 2009). Aspy et al.’s (2007) study suggests that parents should be aware of their ability to talk to their children about sexual topics and educate their children about potential sexual dangers.

In a study conducted by Lindstrom Johnson, Finigan, Bradshaw, Haynie, and Cheng (2012), parent-youth dyads were interviewed in order to examine parental communication about violence. Results from the study revealed that parents in this sample generally supported nonviolent behavior and encouraged nonviolence in their children through various parenting strategies; however, many parents sent mixed messages about violence to their children, and the researchers concluded that parents may unintentionally encourage their children to engage in
violent behavior by modeling violent behavior at home or by telling their children that in some situations violence may be necessary in order to end conflict (Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2012). Similarly to Aspy et al.’s study, Lindstrom Johnson et al.’s study relates to parental involvement in CSEC prevention by suggesting that parental communication on potentially dangerous issues can influence children’s views on risky behavior and may serve as a protective factor or increase the risk of exposure to danger and also that parents should be more aware of the messages they are sending to their children (Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2012). While these studies emphasize the importance of parent involvement in the prevention and intervention of risky behaviors, examining parents’ awareness of and attitudes toward CSEC can help inform future research on how parents can be involved in prevention efforts for CSEC and how parents may be able to increase efforts to protect children from exposure to CSEC.

Parents’ knowledge of, beliefs about, and protective actions against risky behaviors and CSEC

Concerning knowledge and beliefs toward risky sexual behaviors, a study conducted in Thailand by Fongkaew et al. (2012) compared the knowledge and attitudes of Thai parents concerning adolescents’ sexual risk-taking behaviors with adolescents’ knowledge and attitudes concerning sexual risk-taking behaviors. The parents and adolescents were not parent-child dyads. This qualitative study revealed that adolescents in Bangkok believed their parents were not aware of their sexual activities and that parents should be more involved in their children’s lives. Parents, on the other hand, believed that Thai adolescents were sexually active at an early age, but they did not believe that their own children were sexually active. The adolescents also believed sexual activity began at an early age for Thai adolescents in general but believed that
such acts were hidden from parents. This study revealed a gap between what risky behaviors parents believe applies to adolescents in general and what they believe applies to their own children. The study also revealed that parents wanted to know more about teens’ risky sexual behaviors and how to prevent them and that teens desired more parental involvement in avoiding risky behaviors (Fongkaew et al., 2012).

A study by Thompson, Montgomery, and Bender (2014) examined parent and youth perspectives on alcohol use risk factors among adolescents. While overt behaviors such as running away and use of other substances were reported by parents and adolescents, covert behaviors were not reported by parents. For example, adolescents in this study reported sexual activity as a predictor of alcohol use, but parents did not and, instead, reported less social support as a predictor of alcohol use. Despite these differences, the researchers concluded that parents’ perspectives were effective in gathering additional information on adolescent alcohol use which could be useful in developing interventions (Thompson et al., 2014). The studies by Fongkaew et al. (2012) and Thompson et al. (2014) indicate that while parents may play an important role in preventing risk-taking behaviors in adolescents, there is often a gap in knowledge and beliefs between parents and adolescents, which ultimately limits the effectiveness of parents in providing support for their children.

Concerning parents’ knowledge of, beliefs about, and protective actions against CSEC, a dissertation research project by Harrell (2015) studied African American parents’ attitudes and knowledge of CSEC. Harrell’s study results found that parents in more affluent environments may believe their environment protects their children from risks, and parents viewed monitoring of internet use and their children’s whereabouts as protective measures against CSEC; however, parents often did not know how to access their children’s social media accounts and were often
not acquainted with their child’s friends. There was also minimal knowledge of other minors acting as recruiters or minors who exploit themselves for socioeconomic reasons. Parents reported that they would seek law enforcement assistance if they thought their child was involved in trafficking, but they were often not aware of other community resources for sex trafficking. All parents agreed that abuse was a major risk factor for exploitation (Harrell, 2015). Harrell highlighted the need for providing more information to parents concerning CSEC (Harrell, 2015).

While the studies by Fongkaew et al. (2012) and Thompson et al. (2014) reveal that lack of knowledge can limit parents’ ability to support their children through an age when risk factors are heightened, Harrell’s (2015) study revealed that African American parents at two churches in two separate locations in Southern California lacked accurate knowledge on CSEC. Additional research on parental knowledge of and attitudes toward CSEC needs to be conducted among other populations in the U.S. in order to provide a complete picture on parents’ knowledge and attitudes concerning CSEC and how that might affect their ability to support and protect their children.
CHAPTER III
METHOD

The purpose of this study was to explore the knowledge, beliefs, and protective actions of parents of middle school and high school students regarding commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) in Mississippi and the surrounding states. The four, guiding research questions of this study were:

1. How knowledgeable are parents of middle school and high school youth living in Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee about CSEC?
2. What beliefs do parents of middle school and high school youth in Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee have toward CSEC and its relevance to their own families?
3. How are parents of middle school and high school youth in these five states taking actions which could protect against the risk of CSEC?
4. How are parents’ knowledge of CSEC, beliefs about CSEC, and protective actions against CSEC correlated?

This study provides a preliminary examination of these questions through a quantitative descriptive method using survey items that incorporate Likert-type scales. This chapter describes the research design of the study, the population and sample, the variables and instruments, and the data collection and analysis procedures.
Research design

This study employed a quantitative, exploratory (descriptive) survey-style research design. A cross-sectional survey was administered to parents of middle school and high school students in Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee through a Facebook post. This survey collected data needed to describe the sample’s demographic characteristics as well as parents’ knowledge of, beliefs about, and protective actions against CSEC. A quantitative approach was selected due to the lack of quantitative research on CSEC (Gozdziak & Bump, 2008), and a descriptive study was selected in order to provide baseline information for further research (Kelley, Clark, Brown, & Sitzia, 2003). Conducting a quantitative approach allows the researcher to summarize a large amount of numbered data which can be analyzed through statistical procedures (Creswell, 2009; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). A quantitative approach is also valuable as it provides a data set which can be reanalyzed in the future should theories be modified (Babbie, 1990). Finally, survey design was selected as the best means to collect information for descriptive purposes on the beliefs and knowledge of a large number of parents regarding CSEC (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Kelley et al., 2003). Descriptive research is an initial step towards more rigorous research informing prevention and intervention efforts.

Population and sample

The target population included parents of middle and high school aged students in Mississippi and the adjacent states of Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee. The accessible population were parents on Facebook who were able to view the shared Facebook recruitment post. Eligible participants on Facebook were those parents who resided in Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee as of Fall 2017 and were parents of a
middle school or high school aged student. Data collection began by distributing a link to a Qualtrics survey through the researcher’s personal Facebook page which could then be shared by Facebook contacts. Qualtrics is an online research survey software program that is frequently used by students and faculty to conduct research and evaluation surveys.

The state of Mississippi and surrounding states were selected because Mississippi is an area where CSEC is known to take place (Beautiful Ones Ministries & Belhaven University, 2015), and parents of middle school and high school aged students were selected in order to reach a population that may be at higher risk of CSEC due to the increased vulnerability of children between the ages of 11 and 14 (Clawson, Dutch, Solomon, & Grace, 2009). As displayed in Table 1, the population of these states is comprised predominantly of White people, followed by Black or African American people, and all other races making up less than 2% each of the population (United States Census Bureau, 2018). As Table 2 demonstrates, a majority of individuals in these states identifies as white alone and not Hispanic or Latino, and very few identified as Hispanic or Latino (United States Census Bureau, 2018). On average, the poverty level for this area is 18.22%, and the median household income is an average of $43,970 across these states (United States Census Bureau, 2018).

Table 1 Race demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black or African American</th>
<th>American Indian or Alaskan Native</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander</th>
<th>Two or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>79.3%</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>63.0%</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>59.2%</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>78.6%</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity demographic</td>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White alone (not Hispanic or Latino)</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>72.5</td>
<td>58.7</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>73.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Opportunity to participate in the study was offered through a Facebook post, and survey information was disseminated through a flyer attached to the post. The survey link was initially distributed to 682 Facebook contacts; however, it should be noted that those 682 contacts were not all parents of middle school or high school aged youth. The survey was posted to Facebook by the researcher a total of four times over a two-week period and was then shared by Facebook contacts a total of 26 times by at least 18 different individuals.

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants that met the following criteria: The participant was a parent of a middle school or high school aged student, and the responding parent resided in Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, or Tennessee. The first criterion was selected because previous research indicates that children in the middle school and high school years are the most at risk for becoming victims of CSEC (Clawson et al., 2009). The second criterion was selected because this study focused on CSEC in Mississippi and the adjacent states and on the beliefs, knowledge, and protective actions of parents in that geographic region. While purposive sampling was used to identify a target population, convenience sampling was implemented in the actual data collection process due to the nature of the survey distribution through Facebook to contacts willing to participate. Convenience sampling was
implemented after previous difficulties were encountered in reaching the target population through more purposive sampling methods.

The sample size was 13. While 19 respondents submitted surveys, only 13 were usable, due to incomplete surveys or not meeting the criteria. Respondents could choose more than one option on many of the questions. On race, all participants identified as white, one participant identified as Asian, and none of the participants identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino. Twelve participants identified as female and one identified as male. All respondents were married and seven of the 13 parents earned an income of above $100,000. All participants earned at least $50,000. All of the participants had received some college education and 10 parents had received a Bachelor’s degree or higher. A vast majority of the respondents reported living in more rural areas (11), and only two reported living in more urban areas. All participants were between ages 36 and 65 years with five parents between ages 36-45, seven between ages 46-55, and one participant between the 56-65 years of age. Ultimately, this sample was not representative of the general population within Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee.

**Variables and instruments**

This study employed a questionnaire-type survey instrument to measure demographic characteristics and outcome variables. Outcome variables in this study consisted of parental knowledge of CSEC, parental beliefs toward CSEC, parents’ protective actions, and demographics. The AASTK Tool Adapted was adapted by the researcher from an original survey titled the African American Sex Trafficking Knowledge (AASTK) Tool (Harrell, 2015) which was a qualitative tool developed by Dr. Jamille Harrell-Sims for a study on African American
parents’ knowledge of sex trafficking. Steps taken to validate the original instrument included a pretest panel which provided feedback and revision suggestions, as well as a review committee. Permission was given by Dr. Harrell-Sims to adapt the AASTK Tool for the purpose of this research, and a copy of Dr. Harrell-Sims’ permission can be found in Appendix A. Changes to the AASTK Tool included adapting items into a quantitative format, as well as altering wording to best suit the intended audience. These adaptations were submitted to a departmental committee for review and validation of content and appropriateness of questions.

The survey was comprised of a total of 37 questions, including informed consent and the inclusion criteria questions. The survey was estimated to take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. The outcome variables within this study included 11 questions regarding parental knowledge of CSEC, four questions regarding parental beliefs toward CSEC, one question regarding protective actions (“Protective Actions” here refer to actions that parents take to protect their children), and 15 demographic questions concerning general information such as age, race, income, type of school in which the child is enrolled, grade of child enrolled in school, and education level of parent. A full copy of the survey may be found in Appendix B. Minor adaptations were to made to fit the online format of the survey. The demographic characteristics were measured with a basic, multiple choice demographics questionnaire that followed the instrument measuring the outcome variables.

Outcome variables in this study were measured through questions presented on a five-point Likert-type scale with response categories from “Strongly Agree” (5) to “Strongly Disagree,” (1), “Very Important” (5) to “Not Important At All,” (1), and “Very Likely” (5) to “Not Likely” (1). Participants responded to items concerning parents’ basic knowledge of CSEC, such as “nationwide, sex trafficking is limited to the inner city on certain streets,” and their
beliefs toward CSEC, such as “in my community, sex trafficking is a concern, but does not affect my family.” These Likert-type responses were assigned a numeric value, and it was these assigned numbers which were used to score and analyze the responses. This process is described in detail in the following section.

**Data collection and analysis procedures**

The data collection and analysis procedures for this study were approved by Mississippi State University’s Institutional Review Board on September 21, 2017. The stamped IRB documents are included in Appendix C. Data were collected in October and November of 2017 over a two-week period. Information was distributed through a Facebook post on the researcher’s personal page. Initial notice of and instructions for the survey was distributed via Facebook post with additional posts after one week of availability and with three days and one day of availability remaining. Through these Facebook posts, parents were notified of the availability of the online survey to which they could respond at their own convenience. Screening questions were used at the beginning of the survey to eliminate responses from parents not residing in Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, or Tennessee or to eliminate persons who were not parents of a middle school or high school aged student. The survey and consent form were available online for two weeks. As an incentive to complete the survey, all parents who participated were given the option of entering a drawing for one of four $25 Walmart gift cards. All survey responses (data) were collected online through Qualtrics which is an online survey collection tool, frequently used by Mississippi State University faculty and students to conduct research and evaluation. After two weeks, the survey was closed.
Analysis

The data were analyzed through IBM’s Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 24. Survey responses were assigned numeric values, and those values were entered into the software analysis system. A descriptive data analysis composed of frequencies, mean and standard deviation for each item was conducted for the data entered, and results were examined. Frequencies were then presented in bar charts. Some items could be treated as a scale and Cronbach’s alpha was conducted on these items to assess the reliability of the scales. Cronbach’s alpha was conducted on all items relating to knowledge of CSEC, all items relating to beliefs about CSEC, and the item relating to actions that parents take to protect their children. Cronbach’s alpha was also conducted on the items “Knowledge of signs of sex trafficking” and “Knowledge of how youth prostitutes are recruited.” The items with high levels of reliability were then treated as scales, and correlations were conducted on those scales. Some items within the scales and subscales were reverse coded to maintain consistency in responses. The items were reverse coded so that high scores indicated more knowledge of CSEC, beliefs that are more supportive of prevention and intervention efforts for CSEC, and actions that protect against CSEC.

Correlations were conducted on the “Beliefs about CSEC” scale, “Protective Actions” scale, the “Knowledge of Signs of Sex Trafficking” subscale, the “Knowledge of how Youth Prostitutes are Recruited” subscale, and the “Beliefs about Daughters and Sons” subscale. The “Beliefs about CSEC” scale included response options ranging from “Strongly agree” to “Strongly disagree” and from “Very important” to “Not important at all.” The “Protective Actions” scale included response options ranging from “Strongly agree” to “Strongly disagree.” The “Knowledge of Signs of Sex Trafficking” subscale, the “Knowledge of how Youth
Prostitutes are Recruited” subscale, and the “Beliefs about Daughters and Sons” subscale included response options from “Strongly agree” to “Strongly disagree.” All of these response options were presented on a five-point, Likert-type scale.

A descriptive analysis was conducted on all of the survey items to observe frequencies, mean, range, and standard deviation. These descriptive results were used as a foundation for examining the data. In addition to running descriptive analyses, correlations were also conducted on survey items that could be collapsed into a scale. Correlations were conducted to observe if there were relationships between responses, the strength of the relationships, and whether those relationships were positive or negative.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

The purpose of this research was to investigate what parents know about CSEC, what parents’ beliefs are toward CSEC, what actions parents may take to protect their children from CSEC, and to explore whether there is a significant relationship between any of these categories. A combination of descriptive analysis and correlations were employed to investigate these research questions, and the results of the analyses are presented in this chapter.

Descriptive statistics

In addition to the demographic information previously discussed in the Methods chapter, most respondents were parents of a child enrolled in public school (7), followed closely by parents who sent their child to private school (6), followed by parents who home schooled their children (3). Some parents enrolled their children in more than one type of school. Information was also collected on which middle school and high school grades each parent’s child or children were. Respondents had 17 children in 6-8 grade and 11 children in 9-12 grade. Due to the small sample size and exploratory nature of the study, the findings will be presented in two parts: Frequencies and Correlations.

Frequencies

The frequency portion of this study’s findings will be presented in order of research questions. The first research question explored the knowledge of parents of middle and high
school aged youth regarding commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) in Mississippi and the surrounding states. The second research question explored the beliefs of these parents toward CSEC. The third research question explored the ways in which parents protect their children against the risk of CSEC.

**Research question 1: Knowledge of CSEC**

Research question 1, “How knowledgeable are parents of middle school and high school youth living in Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee about CSEC?” included items that address parental knowledge of sex trafficking and such topics as what sex trafficking involves, where sex trafficking occurs, why youth become targets of sex traffickers, risk factors for children being sex trafficked, and why teens become prostitutes, among others.

![Figure 1](image_url)  
Figure 1   Knowledge of what sex trafficking is
Figure 1 represents parents’ knowledge of what sex trafficking is. Most parents “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with the statement that sex trafficking was “women who agree to sell their bodies for money or drugs”; however, parents were evenly split between “strongly agree/agree” and “strongly disagree” regarding a description of sex trafficking as “criminals and their women who agree to hustle and get money.” Most parents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with a description of sex trafficking as “pimps who force people to sell their bodies.”

Figure 2 depicts parents’ knowledge of the extent of sex trafficking as a problem in their city. Only two parents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that “sex trafficking is a huge problem” or
that “sex trafficking is kind of a problem” in their city. Most parents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement “I do not know of sex trafficking happening in my city.”

Figure 3  Knowledge of where sex trafficking occurs

Figure 3 depicts parents’ knowledge of where sex trafficking occurs. All parents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that “sex trafficking happens all over the world, anywhere, any time,” and parents mostly “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with the statement that “I don’t know about sex trafficking in the U.S.” and statements that limit sex trafficking to certain areas within a city or certain types of cities. Respondents reported being aware that sex trafficking occurs in the U.S.
Parents’ knowledge of how common child sex trafficking is in the U.S. is represented in Figure 4. Responses to this grouping were consistent across all three items. Most parents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that sex trafficking of young boys and girls in the U.S. is “common”; most “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” that sex trafficking of young boys and girls is “not common”; and responses were mixed on the prompt that it is “somewhat common.”
Figure 5  Knowledge of why youth become targets of sex traffickers

Figure 5 depicts parents’ knowledge of why youth become targets of sex traffickers. Most parents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that youth become targets of sex traffickers due to “lack of money,” “pimps,” “lack of parental guidance,” and “drug use.” While most parents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that “lack of money” and “lack of parental guidance” can cause youth to become targets of sex traffickers, there were more responses indicating “neutral,” “disagree,” or “strongly disagree” to these statements than to the statements regarding pimps and drug use.
Knowledge of what class or classes from which most prostitutes originate is represented in Figure 6. Almost all parents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that most prostitutes come from “all classes of homes.” Most parents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that most prostitutes come from “working class” and “middle class homes.” Responses were more mixed on whether most prostitutes come from “upper class homes.” While other items have moderately high numbers of “neutral” responses here and there throughout the results, the prompt represented by Figure 1.6 had moderately high numbers of “neutral” responses on almost every item.
Figure 7 depicts knowledge of risk factors for sex trafficking. Most parents “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that the following factors may add to a child’s risk of being sex trafficked: “sexual abuse,” “foster care,” “single parent home,” “dropping out of school,” “running away,” and “being homeless.” All parents either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that “drug use” and “low self-esteem” are risk factors to being sex trafficked. A few parents “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” that “foster care” or “single parent homes” may add to a child’s risk of being sex trafficked, but still most “agreed/strongly agreed” with those statements. Parents were evenly split between “strongly agree/agree” and “strongly disagree/disagree” with the statement that “identifying as homosexual or bisexual” may increase a child’s risk of being sex trafficked.
Knowledge of the signs of sex trafficking is represented by Figure 8. Parents gave mixed responses on whether “talking on a cell phone all the time,” “wearing inappropriate or revealing clothes,” and “new body tattoos” are signs that a child may be involved in sex trafficking, with responses tending more toward “disagree/strongly disagree.” Most parents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that “major changes in behavior,” “clothes the child doesn’t have money to buy,” and “older men or women talking to the child” were signs that a child may be involved in sex trafficking. All parents either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that “leaving home late at night or running away” was a sign that a child may be involved in sex trafficking.
Figure 9 depicts knowledge of how youth prostitutes are recruited. The majority of parents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” to all the prompts for ways that youth prostitutes are recruited. A couple of parents “disagreed” that youth prostitutes are recruited at “bus stops” and “train stations,” and nearly all “agreed” that youth prostitutes are recruited by “other youth” and by “the internet and social media sites.”
Figure 10 represents knowledge of why teens become prostitutes. Responses on why teens become prostitutes were, in general, mixed. Most parents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that teens are forced to become prostitutes by a pimp. Two thirds of parents “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” that the teens’ families cannot provide for their basic needs, and slightly less than half of parents “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” that “there is not a caring parent or guardian in the home.” Almost half of parents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they did not know why teens become prostitutes, while some remained “neutral” and a few “disagreed/strongly disagreed” with the statement.
If you think your child is being sex trafficked (prostituted), where will you find help?

Figure 11 depicts parents’ knowledge of where to find help if they think their child is being sex trafficked. Most parents indicated that they would be “very likely” or “likely” to find help with “the police,” “my church,” and “a sex trafficking hotline” if they thought their child was being sex trafficked. About half of the parents indicated they would be “likely” to “very likely” to find help with their family. About one third indicated they would be “likely” to “very likely” to find help at their child’s school, while a little more than one third responded “somewhat likely” to this item. More parents indicated that they were “not likely” to seek help from “a shelter” or to not know what to do than to the other items in this prompt. About half of the respondents indicated they would be “somewhat likely” to “likely” to find help through some other means, while the other half indicated “not likely.” Three parents wrote in “other” options.
for finding help, including “Private investigation,” “Google for support group or advocate,” and “Internet for options,” responding “likely,” “not likely,” and “likely,” respectively.

**Research question 2: Beliefs about CSEC**

Research question 2, “What beliefs do parents have toward CSEC and its relevance to their own families?” Items regarding parents’ beliefs about CSEC included whether teens should be arrested for prostitution, whether parents believed sex trafficking affected their family, beliefs on whether certain factors protect a child from sex trafficking, and beliefs on whether it is important to check a child’s social media accounts.

![Figure 12: Beliefs toward teens who sell sexual services](image)

Figure 12  Beliefs toward teens who sell sexual services

Figure 12 depicts parents’ beliefs regarding teens who sell sexual services. On this item parents are split nearly evenly between “agree/strongly agree” and “disagree/strongly disagree.”
with just over half of parents responding “disagree” to “strongly disagree” with the statement “If I saw a teen selling sexual services to an adult, I would think he/she should be arrested,” and only one parent responding “strongly disagree.”

**Figure 13  Sex Trafficking Beliefs**

Parents’ beliefs regarding some aspects of sex trafficking are represented in Figure 13. Most parents “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” that “most prostitutes are adults.” Most “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with “youth that use drugs may do it to get money.” All parents “agreed/strongly agreed” that “the number of young boys and girls being sex trafficked is growing.” Responses were mixed on whether parents believed sex trafficking affects their own family with equal numbers “agreeing/strongly agreeing,” remaining “neutral,” and “disagreeing/strongly disagreeing.”

45
Figure 14  Beliefs about daughters and sons.

Figure 14 depicts how strongly parents “agreed” or “disagreed” that certain factors would protect their child from sex trafficking. While the vast majority of parents “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” that any of these factors would protect their child from sex trafficking, three parents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with “my daughter/son can never be sex trafficked because I have taught her/him right from wrong,” and one parent “agreed” with “my daughter/son is safe from sex trafficking because we live in a nice area.”
Figure 15 portrays parents’ beliefs toward the importance of being able to check their child’s social media accounts. Nearly all of the parents responded that they thought it was “important” or “very important” to be able to check their child’s social media accounts, and one parent responded that it was “somewhat important.” No parents thought that this was “not important at all,” and no parents were “neutral.”

**Research question 3: Protective actions**

Research question 3 is “How are parents of middle school and high school youth in these five states taking actions which could protect against the risk of CSEC?” Actions that parents take to protect their child against being sex trafficked were captured through one scale which is represented in the figure below.
Figure 16 represents actions parents take to keep an eye on or protect their child or children against sex trafficking. All parents “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that they keep an eye on their child or children by always asking where they are going, who they are going with, and when they will be back. Most parents “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with the statements “I don’t ask, I trust my child,” “I am at work so I don’t know where they are,” and “I let my daughter/son have relationships with older boys or men / girls or women.” All parents “strongly disagreed” or “disagreed” with the statement “I let my child spend the night at anyone’s home without meeting the parents first.” Most parents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they keep an eye on their child while she or he is on the internet, though a few remained “neutral” and one parent “disagreed.” Most parents also “agreed/strongly agreed” that they know all their child’s friends and the parents of their child’s friends; however, a few “disagreed.” Responses for this item were slightly
lower than other items, but most parents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they know their daughter’s or son’s boyfriend or girlfriend, with a few responding “neutral.”

**Correlations**

**Cronbach’s alpha**

Cronbach’s alpha was conducted for each set of items to determine if internal consistency and reliability was sufficient to treat the items as scales and subscales. It was determined that a reliability score of at least .700 would be sufficient to collapse the grouped items into scales and subscales as applicable (Field, 2009). Cronbach’s alpha for the items categorized as “Knowledge of Signs of Sex Trafficking,” resulted in a reliability score of .824, allowing the question to be collapsed into a scale. Similarly, “Knowledge of How Youth Prostitutes are Recruited” had a reliability score of .813 and was collapsed into a scale. Conducting Cronbach’s alpha on items relating to parents’ beliefs toward CSEC resulted in a reliability score of .853, so these items were also collapsed into a scale titled “Beliefs toward CSEC.” Within the “Beliefs toward CSEC” scale, a subscale was identified with a reliability score of .954, and this subscale was titled “Beliefs about Daughters and Sons.” Finally, the items regarding actions parents take to protect or monitor their child had a reliability score of .765 and was collapsed into the “Protective Actions” scale. Conducting Cronbach’s alpha for grouped items resulted in the ability to form two scales and three subscales and allowed for investigating relationships between the scales and subscales.

**Research question 4: Correlations between scales**

Correlations were conducted between the scales and subscales in order to examine the strength of relationships between parents’ knowledge of CSEC, beliefs about CSEC, and
protective actions against CSEC. Knowledge, beliefs and protective actions are represented in
two scales (beliefs and protective actions), and three subscales (two knowledge and one beliefs).
The scales were correlated with each other, and all scales correlated were investigated using
Pearson’s $r$ ($r$). Two pairs of scales and subscales had relationships that were statistically
significant at the 0.05 and 0.001 levels. These correlations are presented in Table 1.

Table 3 Knowledge of, beliefs about, and protective actions against CSEC: Correlations and
descriptive statistics ($N = 13$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>1. Knowledge of Signs of Sex Trafficking $^b$</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Knowledge of How Youth Prostitutes are Recruited</td>
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<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Beliefs about Daughters and Sons $^a$</td>
<td>.110</td>
<td>.424</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Beliefs about CSEC $^b$</td>
<td>.088</td>
<td>.506</td>
<td>.923***</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Protective Actions $^c$</td>
<td>-.024</td>
<td>.277</td>
<td>.636</td>
<td>.763*</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$M$ 3.77 4.09 3.85 3.85 4.50
$SD$ .759 .733 .742 .601 .371
Range 1-5 1-5 1-5 1-5 1-5

Note. $^a = N$ of 12. $^b = N$ of 11. $^c = N$ of 9.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The scale “Beliefs about CSEC” have a very strong, positive relationship with the
subscale “Beliefs about Daughters and Sons” with significance at the 0.001 level ($r = .923***, p
< .001$) which is expected as “Beliefs about Daughters and Sons” is a subscale of “Beliefs about
CSEC.” The “Protective Actions” scale and the “Beliefs about CSEC” scale also have a strong,
positive relationship with significance at the 0.05 level ($r = .763*, p < .05$). This was the only
correlation with significance across scales.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

Overall, parents responded with considerable savvy, often providing responses consistent with the literature regarding knowledge of CSEC on where sex trafficking occurs. Beliefs were also mostly consistent with the literature and reflect a fair knowledge of CSEC. Both knowledge and beliefs were reflected in the “Protective Actions” scale, as most parents reported taking appropriate protective actions to guard their children against sex trafficking. That said, there are some gaps in parents’ knowledge and some inconsistencies within the answers that will be addressed and can be used to inform future research and practice. Findings within this study support the findings from the qualitative study conducted by Jamille Harrell-Sims which also provided the AASTK Tool upon which the survey in this study was based.

Knowledge

Parents responded that sex trafficking included pimps forcing people to sell their bodies, and responses, while mixed, were less supportive of the statements “women who agree to sell their bodies for money or drugs” and “criminals and their women who agree to hustle and get money” also constitute sex trafficking. Responses in this study (comprised of mostly female participants) resemble the findings the responses of female parents in Harrell’s (2015) study who were more likely to believe that pimps force or introduce children into sex trafficking than male parents were. On another survey item, more parents indicated that children become targets of sex
traffickers due to “pimps” and “drug use” rather than because of “lack of parental guidance” and “lack of money.” Parents were also more likely to agree that teens become prostitutes because “they are forced to by a pimp” than because “their families cannot provide for basic needs” or because “there is not a caring parent or guardian in the home.” These responses may indicate that parents have stereotypical views of sex trafficking and be unaware of other reasons youth become targets of sex traffickers or become prostitutes. Parents may also be unaware of more diverse situations that constitute sex trafficking such as gang-related sex trafficking, survival sex, or youth who also participate in criminal behavior (Beautiful Ones Ministries, Inc. & Belhaven University, 2015; Rafferty, 2016; Salisbury, Dabney & Russell, 2015). Parents may be unwilling to admit that unmet basic needs and lack of a caring parent or caregiver may drive a child or teens into trafficking themselves. The literature indicates survival sex is common in the U.S. (Bigelson, Vuotto, Addison, Trongone, & Tully, 2013; Estes & Weiner, 2002), and teens may traffic themselves to provide for their own needs or someone else’s (Estes & Weiner, 2002; Rafferty, 2016).

Concerning where sex trafficking occurs and the extent of the problem, parents gave incongruent responses. All parents indicated that “sex trafficking happens all over the world, anywhere, any time;” however, they also indicated they did not know of sex trafficking happening in their city. These responses were similar to the findings in Harrell’s (2015) study with all parents from one location indicating that sex trafficking was a global concern and over half of the parents from the other location in Harrell’s study was not aware of CSEC happening in their area. These responses indicate that while parents know sex trafficking is a global issue, they may be unwilling to admit that it can happen in their own city.
In Harrell’s (2015) research findings, parents identified multiple risk factors for sex trafficking with females in one group demonstrating more knowledge of risk factors than males. Parents in the study presented here largely agreed with all of the risk factors for CSEC except for the item indicating that identifying as homosexual or bisexual is a risk factor. Research indicates that identifying as LGBTQ+ does increase the risk of being trafficked, particularly for boys and also among homeless trafficking victims (Fedina, Williamson & Perdue, 2019; Greeson, Treglia, Wolfe, Wasch & Gelles, 2019; Marcias-Konstantopoulos, Munroe, Purcell, Tester & Burke, 2015; Rothman et al., 2019). Parents in this study were also slightly less likely to indicate that foster-system placement and coming from a single parent home are risk factors. Research indicates that being part of the foster-care system is a major risk factor to CSEC (Reid, 2012), and some research indicates that coming from a single-parent home, where one parent is mostly absent is also a risk factor (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014). Again, this may suggest that parents are less willing to recognize that sex trafficking could be a result of parenting practices or lack thereof. Parents’ mixed responses regarding homosexual or bisexual youth could result from the fact that LGBTQ+ identity is uncommon and often less accepted in Mississippi and Alabama. Parents in Mississippi and Alabama may have personal biases that result in being less willing to admit homosexual or bisexual youth are at an increased risk of victimization.

Most parents indicated that all classes of homes are vulnerable to CSEC; however, parents were less likely to agree that most prostitutes come from “upper class” homes. This section of questions also had the highest number of neutral responses consistently throughout, which could indicate parents’ uncertainty regarding which classes are most vulnerable to CSEC or could indicate that parents do not believe sex trafficking fits with a particular class. While the literature often acknowledges that poverty is a risk factor for CSEC (Estes & Weiner, 2002;
Gerassi & Nichols, 2018; Rafferty, 2013; Williamson & Prior, 2009), other research such as a qualitative study by Edberg, Cohen, Gies, and May-slater (2014) indicated that CSEC reaches far beyond socioeconomic status. Edberg et al. (2014) tracked four different trajectories for commercial sex exploitation of girls and women, and one of the trajectories included suburban females with family disruption appearing to be the primary risk factor rather than socioeconomic concerns. While parents’ responses may indicate some false sense of security in high economic status, responses were primarily consistent with the literature.

Concerning signs of sex trafficking, parents were most likely to indicate that “leaving home late at night or running away,” “major changes in behavior,” “clothes the child doesn’t have money to buy,” and “older men or women talking with the child” were potential signs of sex trafficking. These responses were consistent with the findings in Harrell’s (2015) study. Parents were less likely to indicate that behaviors commonly attributed to youth were potential signs of sex trafficking. These behaviors were “talking on the cellphone all the time,” “wearing inappropriate or revealing clothing,” and “new body tattoos.” While parents may believe new body tattoos fit into common youth behavior, they may not be aware that new tattoos are often used by gang-controlled or pimp-controlled sex trafficking to indicate ownership (Beautiful Ones Ministries, Inc. & Belhaven University, 2015; Gibbs et al., 2015). Parents were also slightly less likely to indicate that major changes in behavior are a sign of sex trafficking. It is important to note that while many of these behaviors may seem typical of youth, parents should use sound judgement, particularly when signs of sex trafficking are combined with major changes in behavior or when multiple signs occur together.

Responses also indicated that parents’ knowledge of where children are recruited accurately reflects what literature indicates. Parents were very likely to indicate that youth are
recruited at school, by other youth, and through the internet and social media which is consistent with prior research (Beautiful Ones Ministries, Inc. & Belhaven University, 2015; Wells, et al., 2012; Williamson & Prior, 2009). In Harrell’s (2015) study parents also overwhelmingly identified the internet as a major recruitment method. Parents were slightly less likely to indicate that youth could be recruited at bus stops and train stations, and many of the parents in Harrell’s (2015) study indicated that bus stops and train stations could be two of several recruitment locations. While lower responses on these items may indicate less familiarity with public transit systems (most respondents to this survey indicated they lived in rural areas), bus stops and train stations are often not explicitly mentioned in the literature as recruitment locations. Bus stops and train stations (along with other transportation services) are mentioned as transportation methods for trafficking (Roe-Sepowitz, 2019), and would be considered a street location where minors could be recruited (Williamson & Prior, 2009). Both this study and Harrell’s indicate parents have a basic understanding of where sex trafficking recruitment could occur.

Parents most prevalently indicated that they would find help with the police, their church, or a sex trafficking hotline. Participants in Harrell’s (2015) research also indicated they would be likely to seek police assistance if they believed their child was a target for traffickers. Several participants in Harrell’s study also indicated the church and some indicated family. Both studies indicate that many parents would not know what to do if their child was sex trafficked with Harrell’s research indicating 25 – 33% of parents not knowing where to find help, and results from the current study indicating that about half of parents would not know what to do.

Concerning these responses, while law enforcement and sex trafficking hotlines staff will likely be trained how to respond to such a situation, church staff may not be prepared to advise on this matter. To that point, I have not found literature indicating that church staff are routinely
trained in intervention strategies or how to access resources. This suggests that one of parents’ top three sources for support may not be equipped for such a task. This study indicates that parents would be unlikely to seek help at their child’s school or at a shelter; however, shelters are often frontline providers to sex trafficking victims (Bigelson et al., 2013). Elsewhere in the survey, all parents indicated that leaving home late at night or running away are potential signs of sex trafficking, yet they were not likely to contact a shelter for help if they believed their own child was being sex trafficked. These incongruent responses suggest that parents may be reluctant to think that their own child could run away. While parents indicated a high likelihood of seeking help with the police if they think their child is being trafficking, parent may be unaware that victims are often arrested for prostitution or charged with another crime such as selling or using drugs (Beautiful Ones Ministries, Inc. & Belhaven University, 2015; Salisbury et al., 2015) or may have experienced abuse from law enforcement officers (Hurst, 2019) which could cause sex trafficking victims to not seek help with the police. While that does not mean parents should not seek help from law enforcement, they do need to be aware of other sources of intervention for sex trafficking victims or potential victims.

Beliefs

Parents in this study were not likely to believe in unreliable protective factors (such as that having a father in the home or going to church will keep a child from being trafficked). Similarly, Harrell’s (2015) research found that parents were somewhat likely to believe in false protective factors and found that men were more likely than women to believe that a father’s presence in the home would provide protection. Additionally, parents were not likely to believe that most prostitutes are adults and were likely to agree that there is a growing number of young
girls and boys being sex trafficked; however, parents’ responses were mixed on whether sex trafficking affected their own family. These responses support some of the findings in Harrell’s (2015) study as 30 – 40% of the parents from one of Harrell’s locations did not believe that sex trafficking had an effect on their family. Similarly to parents’ knowledge of where sex trafficking occurs versus their awareness of it happening in their own city, parents may have some beliefs recognizing the prevalence of CSEC while simultaneously denying that CSEC affects their own family. In this survey, most parents acknowledge believing that youth who use drugs may traffic themselves for money; however, we do not know from these responses whether parents know that drugs may be used as a coping mechanism for CSEC victims (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014) or whether drug use affects whether parents would view a youth who sold sexual services for drugs as victims or criminals.

**Protective actions**

In general, parents indicated they employ protective actions to keep their children safe by asking where their child is going, who they are going with and when they will return. Parents also indicated they take precautions regarding their child’s dating or romantic relationships as well as their child’s friendships. Fewer parents agreed to the statement “I know my daughter’s/son’s boyfriend or girlfriend” which is likely due to the fact that not all middle school and high school students date or parents may have age-restrictions on when their child can start dating. Nearly all parents indicated that they believe it is important to keep an eye on their child while she or he is on the internet; however, only two-thirds of parents indicated that they actually do keep an eye on their child while she or he is on the internet. Additionally, because this was a self-report survey, parents may not keep as close an eye on their children as they believe. Some
parents in Harrell’s (2015) study indicated they did not know how to check their child’s social media accounts, so there may be gaps between what parents indicate is important to do versus having the skills to put that belief into action. For example, there may also be more methods for sex traffickers to contact their children than parents are aware (Shared Hope International, n.d.). Due to the fast-paced world of technology, it is important for parents to stay educated and updated on how best to protect their children against predators. It is also relevant to note here that parents’ protective actions and beliefs about CSEC had a moderately strong relationship. It makes sense that these two categories would have a significant relationship since beliefs about CSEC may influence parents’ likelihood to take protective measures.

**Limitations and recommendations**

This study had several limitations that are important to consider. First of all, response rate to the survey was low with only 13 usable surveys. The researcher suspects this was in part due to the distribution method as survey distribution was widely dependent on the willingness of others to share the survey with Facebook users beyond the researcher’s personal connections. This method of distribution likely also contributed to the homogeneity in the demographics of respondents. In future, if the research budget allows, paying to promote an advertisement on Facebook may increase the audience and encourage demographic diversity. Distributing the survey on other social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter may help diversify and increase participation as well. Another possible factor in the low response rate for this survey is the sensitive nature of the topic. Parents who felt they did not know about sex trafficking or who were uncomfortable with the topic may have chosen to not respond. Additionally, parents who felt sex trafficking was not relevant to themselves or their child may have refrained from
participating in the survey. The limited number of responses also limited the complexity of analysis. Correlations were the most advanced analyses able to be performed. A larger sample size with more diverse demographics would increase analysis options.

I also recommend conducting a focus group or pretest panel with parents to test the survey and provide verbal feedback on meaning and clarity of the questions as Harrell conducted with the original, qualitative version of the AASTK Tool (Harrell, 2015, p. 45 - 46). While the survey was reviewed by a small committee, feedback from the target audience would increase the clarity of the survey. For example, parents’ responses might indicate that they believe youth who sell sexual services should be arrested as approximately half of the parents agreed with the statement “if I saw a teen selling sexual services to an adult, I would think he/she should be arrested” and approximately half disagreed with that statement. However, this is not conclusive as parents may have been confused regarding whether the statement indicated the teen should be arrested or the adult should be arrested. In the future, greater care should be taken to ensure only one meaning can be taken from a particular statement or question. Additionally, since this research was conducted, at least one more tool that measures knowledge, awareness, and attitudes has been created (Horner, Sherfield, & Tscholl, 2020), and this tool should be reviewed in comparison to the AASTK Tool Adapted survey.

Implications

Implications for research

There are many opportunities to expand research efforts concerning CSEC prevention and parents’ role in prevention. For reference, these recommendations will be placed into Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model. Based on gaps found in this research, it would be
beneficial to know if parents believe youth who sell sexual services to survive are trafficking victims or prostitutes of their own free will. To provide more clarification on how informed parents are on what constitutes sex trafficking, descriptions of more diverse sex trafficking situations should be introduced in future surveys. Both of these recommendations fall within the microsystem of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) and would deepen the research that has already been conducted on the parent-child microsystem, strengthening the intervention and prevention efforts immediately surrounding a minor at risk of CSEC. Research should also be conducted on whether church staff are prepared to support families who have experienced, or are at high risk of experiencing, CSEC. Such research should explore church staffers’ knowledge of CSEC, prevention, and intervention techniques; beliefs and attitudes about CSEC; as well as knowledge of available resources. This recommendation moves into the mesosystem of Bronfenbrenner’s model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) and would provide more knowledge on how to strengthen intervention and prevention efforts at an additional layer of environment surrounding at-risk minors.

Delving deeper into research regarding parents’ protective actions could indicate whether parents are providing protective measures they indicate providing. Similar to the method used by Lindstrom Johnson et al. (2012) in examining communication concerning violence, studies could be conducted with parent-child pairs to compare the protective actions parents report providing with the children’s responses on how effective those actions are. Additionally, while exploring the relationship between beliefs and protective actions relating to CSEC was minimal in this study, future research should investigate this relationship further. Again, this recommendation would strengthen research regarding the parent-child relationship at the microsystem level (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).
While there is growing research around CSEC, particularly regarding prevention, more research should be conducted around parents as preventers. Some anti-trafficking organizations recommend materials for parents to educate themselves (Shared Hope International, 2020; National Center of Sexual Exploitation, n.d.); however, research and programming on this area remains sparse. Finally, additional research on parents’ knowledge, beliefs, and protective actions regarding CSEC should be conducted to increase our understanding of parents’ role in CSEC prevention.

**Implications for practice**

Intervention and prevention educators should consider including parents as well as frontline intervention and prevention providers in educational programming on sex trafficking of children and how to access resources. While some intervention/prevention providers offer resources such as information sheets and flyers, I have not found educational programs directed toward parents the same way I have found programs for law enforcement officers, social workers, and youth themselves (Cole & Sprang, 2015; Hounmenou, 2012; Rothman et al., 2019). Including parents in prevention and intervention trainings and programs will close a gap at the microsystems level (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) in protecting minors who are victims of or at risk of CSEC. Clergy and church staff should also be a target audience of prevention and intervention training as results from this study show parents are likely to seek help through their churches, and churches may not be equipped to provide such guidance. Equipping church to provide such guidance will close an intervention and protection gap at the mesosystem level (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), allowing churches to provide resources to minors and families. Furthermore, this study has demonstrated that parents have a stereotypical understanding of CSEC. In response to this, materials and resources produced by anti-trafficking organizations and educators should provide
diverse representation of sex trafficking victims and scenarios in which sex trafficking can occur. Promoting diverse representation of sex trafficking victims in resources and materials will help shift the cultural perception of sex trafficking victims; thus, providing protection at the macrosystem level of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). While this study does not specifically address intervention and prevention efforts at the exosystem level, I, as the researcher, recognize that those efforts are ongoing and often include policy changes at the governmental and institutional levels.

**Conclusion**

As CSEC prevention and intervention efforts expand and advance, layers of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model (1994) are increasingly considered as vital to the process. However, in order for the entire system to work holistically for the protection of children and youth, it is vital that parent-child relationships are considered and incorporated into these same intervention and prevention efforts. Researchers and practitioners alike should consider parents as key partners in this process.

Parents demonstrated some knowledge of CSEC, such as what it is, where it occurs, risk factors, signs, and recruitment locations; however, there are notable gaps in parental knowledge of this crime. Similarly, parents demonstrated some beliefs favorable to CSEC recognition and prevention, but some beliefs were mixed or unclear, and parents may need more education to fully shape informed beliefs on the issue. Parents reported engaging in actions that will help protect their child against CSEC, and additional research can provide more insight into how accurately parents report their own protective actions. Also, a strong relationship was found between the “Beliefs about CSEC” scale and the “Protective Actions” scale, indicating that
beliefs favorable to preventing and intervening with CSEC are connected to parents’ protective actions. Due to a small sample size with rather homogeneous characteristics, more research is needed before being able to attribute any of the results from this study to parents outside of this sample. It is, however, reasonable to recommend that practitioners extend more training and resources to parents and church staff in order to increase prevention and encourage earlier, more informed intervention efforts.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A

INSTRUMENT PERMISSION
Letter Seeking Permission to Use and Adapt Survey Tool

3/14/17

Name: Grace E. Layton
Institution: Mississippi State University
Department: School of Human Sciences
Mailing Address: School of Human Science, P.O. Box 9745
City/State/Zip: Mississippi State, MS 39762

Dear Dr. Harrell-Sims:

I am a master’s student from Mississippi State University writing my thesis titled *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Mississippi*, under the direction of my thesis committee chaired by Dr. Alisha Hardman who can be reached at a.hardman@msstate.edu. The Mississippi State University Director of the Office of Research Compliance, Kacey Jones Strickland, can be contacted at 662-325-3294 or by email at kstrickland@orc.msstate.edu.

I am researching parents’ knowledge of and beliefs concerning commercial sexual exploitation of children in Jackson, MS. This study will survey parents of middle and high school students.

I would like your permission to use the African American Sex Trafficking Knowledge (AASTK) Tool as the survey instrument in my research study. I would like to adapt, use, and print your survey under the following conditions:

- I will use the surveys only for my research study and will not sell or use it with any compensated or curriculum development activities.
- I will adapt the qualitative study to a quantitative study.
- I will selectively eliminate or add items to better suit my research questions.
- I will adapt wording to suit the quantitative nature of the study and the target audience.
- I will cite the original instrument in my references.
- I will send a copy of my completed research study to your attention upon completion of the study.

If these are acceptable terms and conditions, please indicate so by replying to me by signing below and emailing a scanned copy of your agreement back to me.

Sincerely,

Grace E. Layton

I agree to the terms of adaptation, use, and printing listed above.

[Signature]

Date: 3-20-17
APPENDIX B

AFRICAN AMERICAN SEX TRAFFICKING KNOWLEDGE (AASTK) TOOL ADAPTED
AFRICAN AMERICAN SEX TRAFFICKING KNOWLEDGE (AASTK) TOOL ADAPTED*

Please mark the box that most accurately shows your level of agreement with each statement.

1. You may exit this survey at any time by closing the webpage without completing the survey.

2. Do you live in Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, or Tennessee? (Please circle one)

   Yes       No

3. Are you the parent or guardian of a middle school or high school student?

   Yes       No

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<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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</thead>
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<td>a. Women who agree to sell their bodies for money or drugs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Pimps who force people to sell their bodies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Criminals and their women who agree to hustle and get money.</td>
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<tr>
<th>5. In your city…</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>a. Sex trafficking is a huge problem.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
b. Sex trafficking is kind of a problem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>I do not know of sex trafficking happening in my city.</td>
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</table>

6. In the U.S.…. | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Sex trafficking is only in the inner city on certain streets.</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Sex trafficking happens in big cities but not in small towns.</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Sex trafficking happens all over the world, anywhere, any time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. I do not know about sex trafficking in the U.S.</td>
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</table>

7. Sex trafficking of young boys and girls in the U.S. is… | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Not common.</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Common.</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Somewhat common.</td>
<td></td>
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8. Youth become targets of sex traffickers due to… | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
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</table>

9. Most prostitutes come from...

- Working class homes.
- Middle class homes.
- Upper class homes.
- All classes of homes.

10. Things that may add to a child’s risk of being sex trafficked are...

- Sexual abuse.
- Drug use.
- Foster care.
- Single parent home.
- Low self-esteem.
- Dropping out of school.
76

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>g. Running away.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>h. Being homeless.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Identifying as homosexual or bisexual.</td>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11. Signs that a child may be involved in sex trafficking include:</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Talking on the cell phone all the time.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Wearing inappropriate or revealing clothes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Leaving home late at night or running away.</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. New body tattoos.</td>
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<tr>
<td>e. Major changes in behavior.</td>
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<tr>
<td>f. Clothes the child doesn’t have money to buy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>g. Older men or women talking with the child.</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12. Youth prostitutes are recruited at/by:</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Bus stops</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
b. Train stations  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

c. Middle and High schools  

d. Other youth  

e. Internet and social media sites (like Snapchat and Instagram)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
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</table>

13. Teens become prostitutes because:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

a. They are forced to by a pimp.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

b. Their families cannot provide for basic needs.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

c. There is not a caring parent or guardian in the home.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

d. I do not know why teens become prostitutes.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. If I saw a teen selling sexual services to an adult, I would think he/she should be arrested.</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. About sex trafficking, I believe…</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Most prostitutes are adults.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>e. Youth that use drugs may do it to get money.</td>
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<tr>
<td>f. The number of young girls and boys being sex trafficked is growing.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>g. Sex trafficking does not affect my family.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. About my daughter/son, I believe…</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. My daughter/son cannot be sex trafficked because there is a father in the home.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>b. My daughter/son is safe from sex trafficking because we live in a nice area.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>c. My child can never be sex trafficked because I have taught</td>
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her/him right from wrong.

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Not important at all</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Somewhat important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Very important</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>d.</td>
<td>If I keep my child in church, she/he will not be involved in prostitution.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

17. Do you think it is important to be able to check your child’s social media accounts like Snapchat and Instagram?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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</table>

18. How do you keep an eye on your child/children?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>I always ask where they are going.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>I always ask who they are going with.</td>
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<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>I always ask when they will be back.</td>
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<tr>
<td>d.</td>
<td>I don’t ask, I trust my child.</td>
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<tr>
<td>e.</td>
<td>I’m at work, so I don’t know where they are.</td>
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<tr>
<td>f.</td>
<td>I know my daughter’s/son’s boyfriend or girlfriend.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
g. I let my daughter/son have relationships with older boys or men/girls or women.

h. I keep an eye on my child when she/he is on the internet.

i. I know all my child’s friends and their parents.

j. I let my child spend the night at anyone’s home without meeting the parents first.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>19. If you think your child is being sex trafficked (prostituted), where will you find help?</th>
<th>Not likely</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Somewhat likely</th>
<th>Likely</th>
<th>Very likely</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. The police</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. My church</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. My family</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. My child’s school</td>
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<tr>
<td>e. A sex trafficking hotline</td>
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<tr>
<td>f. A shelter</td>
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</table>
Demographic questions

1. What state do you live in? _________________________________________________

2. Do you live in a more urban or more rural area?
   More urban       More rural

3. Your gender:   Male_   Female_   Other_

   Over 65

5. What is your race? Select all that apply.
   a. American Indian or Alaskan Native   b. Asian
   c. Black or African American   d. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   e. White

6. What is your ethnicity? Choose one.
   a. Hispanic or Latino   b. Not Hispanic or Latino

7. Your education level:   a. less than high school   b. H.S. Diploma
   c. Some college   d. BA/BS Degree   e. Graduate Degree

8. Your household income:   a. Under 15,000   b. 15,001-25,000
   c. 25,001-35,000   d. 35,001-50,000   e. 50,001-80,000
   f. 80,001-100,000   g. above 100,000
c. Married         d. Divorced         e. Widowed

10. Are you a parent?    Yes   No

11. Are you the parent of a child or children between 10 and 18 years old?    Yes   No

12. Are you a non-related legal guardian or foster parent of a child/children between 10 and 18 years old?    Yes   No

13. Are you a relative who is caring for a child/children between 10 and 18 years old?    Yes   No

14. How many of your children are between the ages of 10 and 18 years old?  __________

15. For your children between ages 10 and 18, what grade is the child in? (For more than one child, please mark all that apply.)
   a. Sixth         b. Seventh        c. Eighth
   k. Ninth         e. Tenth         f. Eleventh       g. Twelfth

16. What type of school does the child attend? (For more than one child, please mark all that apply.)
   a. Public school       b. Private school       c. Home school

*Please note: Minor edits were made to fit the online format of Qualtrics.
APPENDIX C

IRB CONSENT
Hello again parents,

Thank you for your interest in this survey. Here are some instructions before you begin:
In the following survey you will answer questions concerning general knowledge about as well as personal beliefs regarding child sex trafficking. There are also some questions on your beliefs and practices for monitoring your children. This survey will take about 10-15 minutes to complete. Please give responses that most closely show how you feel or how much you know about each item. All responses will be kept anonymous so that no one will know how you responded. At the end of the survey, you can provide contact information for participation in a gift card drawing for one of four $25 Wal-Mart gift cards. Again, your responses to the survey will be anonymous, and any contact information you provide for gift card drawings will be kept separate from survey responses. If you are a parent who is at least 18 years old and would like to participate in this survey, please carefully read the following consent form. (Consent form is on the next page).
Mississippi State University  
Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research

Title of Research Study: Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Mississippi and the Surrounding States: Parents' Knowledge and Beliefs

Study Site: Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee through Facebook

Researchers: Grace E. Layton, Mississippi State University, and Dr. Alisha Hardman, Mississippi State University

Purpose
The purpose of this research is to learn about parents' knowledge of commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) in Mississippi and the surrounding states and to learn what some of their beliefs are concerning CSEC.

Procedures
If you participate in this study, you will be asked to take a survey about commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC). This survey will take about 10-15 minutes to finish.

Risks or Discomforts
If you choose participate in this study, you may feel some discomfort or embarrassment because of the subject we are asking questions about. The survey could also cause stress or unpleasant memories. We do not think it is likely that you will experience these risks, but we want you to know that it could happen. If you do have any discomforts or unpleasant feelings while you are taking the survey, you may stop at any time. If those unpleasant feelings are intense or continue after you stop taking the survey, then we encourage you to call a community counseling service in your state. United Way can connect you with an appropriate counseling service for you. Mississippi: (601) 545-7141, Alabama: (205) 251-5131, Arkansas: (501) 376-4567, Louisiana: (318) 443-7205, and Tennessee: (615) 771-2312.

Benefits
Your participation in this study may not benefit you personally, but it may improve knowledge and awareness about CSEC. This study's results may also provide information to educate more people about CSEC. Results from this study may help reduce the number of CSEC victims and increase the likelihood that victims of CSEC will be identified.

Incentive to participate
If you choose to participate in this study, then you can also participate in a gift card drawing for one of four $25 Wal-Mart gift cards. At the end of the survey, you can give
us the contact information of your choice, and you will be entered in the drawing. Your responses to the survey will be anonymous, and any contact information you provide will be kept separate from your survey responses. Please note we will need contact information in order to notify the participants who will receive gift cards. If you do not provide any contact information, we will assume you do not wish to participate in the gift card drawing. Also, please note that if you choose to not participate in the study, then you will no longer be eligible for the gift card drawing.

Confidentiality

Your name and any contact information you provide will be kept separate from the survey responses, and we will not be able to connect your name or contact information to the surveys in any way. All information collected during this study will be stored in a locked office and on a password protected computer or in a password protected Qualtrics account. Only the researchers and committee members will have access to the data collected.

Please note that these records will be held by a state entity and therefore are subject to disclosure if required by law. Research information may be shared with the MSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and others who are responsible for ensuring compliance with laws and regulations related to research. The information from the research may be published for scientific purposes; however, your identity will not be given out.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in our research. Before you begin, please note that the data you provide may be collected and used by Qualtrics as per its privacy agreement. Additionally, this research is for residents of the United States over the age of 18; if you are not a resident of the United States and/or under the age of 18, please do not complete this survey.

Note that Qualtrics has specific privacy policies of their own. You should be aware that these web services may be able to link your responses to your ID in ways that are not bound by this consent form and the data confidentiality procedures used in this study. If you have concerns you should consult these services directly.

Questions
If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact Grace Layton at ge117@msstate.edu or Dr. Alisha Hardman at a.hardman@msstate.edu.

For questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or to discuss problems, express concerns or complaints, request information, or offer input, please feel free to contact the MSU Research Compliance Office by phone at 662-325-3994, by e-mail at irb@research.msstate.edu, or on the web at http://orc.msstate.edu/humansubjects/participant/.

Voluntary Participation
Please understand that your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.
Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.

If you decide to participate, then please click “Yes” below. By clicking “Yes” you certify that you are over 18 years of age and indicate that you would like to participate in the study.

Do you wish to continue on to the survey

Yes

No