

District of Columbia

Estimates of the scale and scope of child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE) in the United States (U.S.) are deeply concerning. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), at least one-in-four girls and one-in-20 boys will experience sexual abuse during childhood.¹ Beyond the human toll, the financial impacts of CSAE are also substantial: the total economic burden of child sexual abuse in the U.S. was estimated to exceed \$9 billion in 2015, including costs related to health care, child welfare services and lost productivity.²

Yet progress is possible. Evidence-based interventions can prevent sexual violence and reduce harm to survivors and their families when it does occur.^{3,4,5} The United States Out of the Shadows Index (the index)—developed by Economist Impact with support from World Childhood Foundation USA—was created to spotlight state action, and inaction, to tackle CSAE. Drawing on more than 170 metrics, the index assesses how effectively states are adopting essential prevention and response measures and where urgent improvements are still needed.

Score	Rank
60.6/100	5/51

Demographics	
Population (m)	0.7
Median household income (\$)	108,210
Poverty rate (% below poverty level)	14.0
Educational attainment, bachelor's degree or higher (%)	54.7
Investment in education per pupil (\$)	27,425

Overview

The District of Columbia has taken several important steps to address CSAE, ranking fifth overall in the index. However, critical gaps persist. In particular, action is needed to strengthen prevention efforts and ensure survivors have access to justice and trauma-informed systems.

State spotlights

- All sexual assault victims aged 13 to 17 are guaranteed the right to have a youth victim advocate present before any forensic medical, evidentiary or physical examination, and must be informed of their other legal rights.⁶
- All public schools must provide students with age-appropriate, evidence-based instruction on recognizing and reporting abuse, setting boundaries, disclosing concerns and understanding consent as part of the K–12 health curriculum. Parents and school staff must also receive regular training and information on child sexual abuse.⁷

Priority areas for future focus

Strengthen the legal framework protecting children from sexual violence by:

- Eliminating marital exceptions or defenses to age-based sex offense laws; and
- Ensuring that anti-grooming legislation explicitly criminalizes engaging in a pattern of behavior intended to facilitate or lead to the sexual abuse of a child, and that it covers both offline and online forms of grooming.

Boost prevention capacity through

the development of a statewide CSAE prevention plan or strategy, encompassing both in-person and online abuse and exploitation. Actions should include:

- Requiring school-based online safety education for students that includes instruction on identifying, avoiding, and reporting online sexual harms, including the risks of producing and sharing explicit self-generated content; and
- Mandating regular training on child sexual abuse for employees of other youth-serving organizations beyond school to help them recognize and respond to abuse.⁸

Ensure children have access to services of the highest standards by ensuring adequate funding for for Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs)⁹ to meet service standards and demand.

Support survivors' access to justice and compensation by:

- Eliminating both the criminal statute of limitations and the civil statute of limitations for all CSAE crimes;
- Adopting measures to prevent the retraumatization of victims during legal proceedings, applicable to all children up to the age of 18.¹⁰

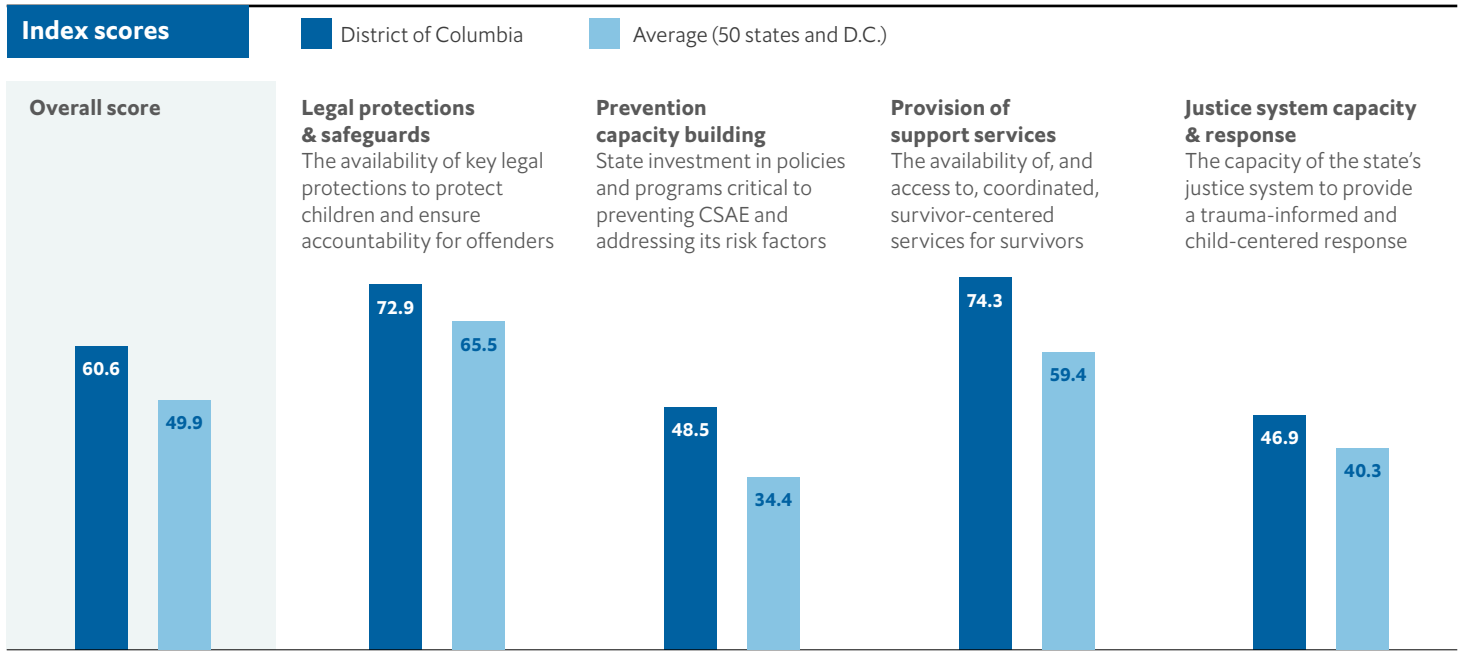
What leaders on the ground are saying

For leaders of the CAC movement in the District of Columbia, fostering a citywide culture of child safety and well-being is essential. Michele Booth Cole, Executive Director of Safe Shores–The DC Children's Advocacy Center, lays out key steps to achieve this: Every adult who works with children, especially in schools and public agencies, should be required to complete training in an evidence-informed prevention curriculum and child development. Schools must be safe zones, with full implementation of the School Safety Act, actively enforced codes of conduct and uniform child-abuse reporting standards. The independent, community-based CAC model should be preserved and reliably funded. DC also needs to create and maintain a comprehensive, up-to-date inventory of resources for children and youth, expand therapeutic services for children with problematic sexual behaviors, and strengthen support for parents and caregivers. Together, these measures would build the foundation for a DC where every child grows up safer and supported.

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The United States Out of the Shadows Index: District of Columbia



Issue spotlights

○ No ◐ Partially ● Yes

Legal protections & safeguards		Provision of support services	
Statutory definition of sexual consent*	●	Survivors' right to know about the status of their rape kit [†]	●
Minimum legal age for marriage set at 18 without exception**	●	Survivors' right to an advocate during medical examinations [†]	●
No marital exception or defense permitted under statutory rape laws	○	Minors' authority to consent to medical care following sexual violence [†]	●
Anti-grooming legislation describes a pattern of behavior to facilitate child sexual abuse [‡]	○	Statute designating CACs as the preferred response to allegations of CSA [†]	●
Online grooming of a child for sexual abuse is criminalized	○	State funding for CACs	●
Computer- and/or AI-generated child sexual abuse material criminalized	○	Extended period for CSA survivors to apply for Crime Victim Compensation ^{†,§}	◐
Building prevention capacity		Justice system capacity & response	
Statewide child sexual abuse prevention plan	○	Alternatives to police report to access Crime Victim Compensation ^{†,§}	●
Sex education or HIV/STI instruction required to cover consent (if provided) [§]	●	Mandated training for law enforcement: sexual assault [†]	○
Mandated child sexual abuse (CSA) prevention and awareness education (students) [†]	●	Mandated training for law enforcement: trauma-informed practice [†]	○
Mandated education on online CSA and/or the risks of sharing explicit self-generated content (students) [†]	○	Criminal statute of limitations: full elimination for all CSA crimes [‡]	○
Mandated training on recognizing and responding to CSA (school employees) [†]	●	Civil statute of limitations: full elimination for all CSA claims against all defendants [‡]	○
Mandated training on recognizing and responding to CSA (youth organization employees) [†]	○	Permanently opened revival window for all claims against all types of perpetrators [‡]	○
Required screening of school employees to prevent educator sexual misconduct [¶]	●	Minors up to age 18 permitted to testify via alternative means (e.g., CCTV) in criminal proceedings involving CSA [†]	○
Educator code of conduct with clear teacher/student boundaries outlined	○		

The findings reflect the most recent available data at the time the research was conducted. Research for the pilot states was completed in 2022/23, for the second iteration states in 2023/24, and for the remaining states and the District of Columbia in 2024/25. For more details, see the methodology report.

The Issue Spotlights figure features a limited sample of the data included in the index. For the full set of indicators and a detailed explanation of the scoring, sources and weightings, please see the project's methodology report and interactive model.

Endnotes

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "About Child Sexual Abuse," accessed July 24, 2025, <https://www.cdc.gov/child-abuse-neglect/about/about-child-sexual-abuse.html>
2. Elizabeth J. Letourneau et al., "The Economic Burden of Child Sexual Abuse in the United States," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 79 (May 2018): 413–22, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.02.020>
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect: A Technical Package for Policy, Norm, and Programmatic Activities*. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016. https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/CAN-Prevention-Resource_508.pdf.
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Preventing Sexual Violence: A Technical Package of Policies, Programs, and Practices*. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016. https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/SV-Prevention-Resource_508.pdf.
5. Together for Girls. *What Works to Prevent Sexual Violence Against Children: Evidence Review*. Together for Girls, 2021. <https://www.togetherforgirls.org/en/resources/what-works-to-prevent-sexual-violence-against-children-evidence-review>.
6. DC Code § 23–1909
7. DC Code §§ 38–824.02 and 38–951.02
8. While DC requires training for school staff on sexual abuse and sexual assault awareness and prevention (D.C. Code § 38–951.02), no similar requirement exists for employees of youth-serving organizations beyond schools.
9. Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) operate across the U.S. to coordinate a multidisciplinary, child-centered response to CSAE. By co-locating law enforcement, child protection, medical and mental health professionals, and victim advocates, CACs reduce repeated interviews and provide essential therapeutic and support services to affected children and families.
10. Testimonial aids are designed to protect children who have experienced sexual abuse from further trauma during judicial proceedings. These measures may include allowing child survivors to provide testimony through alternative means—such as closed-circuit television or prerecorded statements—instead of live, in-court testimony. Additionally, many jurisdictions recognize a child sexual abuse–specific hearsay exception, which permits the admission of non-testimonial out-of-court statements, provided the statements meet established standards of reliability and admissibility under applicable evidentiary rules.
11. Key barriers to accessing victim compensation include short timeframes for when an application can be filed and/or requiring a police report as a condition for eligibility.

Symbols

- † This reflects whether the state has a statute explicitly mandating this requirement.
- ‡ This data, which is integrated into the index, was sourced from CHILD USA.
- * This reflects whether the state has established a clear statutory definition of "sexual consent" that includes reference to consent being "freely" or "voluntarily" given.
- ** This reflects whether the state has established a statutory minimum legal age for marriage of 18, without exceptions such as parental consent, judicial approval, or pregnancy-related allowances.
- § This reflects whether the state has an anti-grooming law that explicitly defines or describes grooming (or a similar term) as a pattern of behaviors intended to build trust with a child to facilitate sexual abuse. Laws that solely address isolated acts such as luring or enticing a minor—without recognizing the broader behavioral pattern—were not considered. To meet the criterion, laws must explicitly cover in-person grooming, not just online interactions.
- §§ This reflects whether sex education is required by law or through state standards that have the force of law. This data, which is integrated into the index, was sourced from SIECUS.
- ¶ This data, which is integrated into the index, was sourced from Enough Abuse and is current as of October 2024.
- # "No" refers to states whose statutes establishing eligibility criteria for Crime Victim Compensation impose a strict deadline to apply, based solely on the date of the crime or its report to law enforcement, with no explicit exceptions for children or victims of sexual abuse. "Partially" applies to states with vague or discretionary exceptions (e.g., "good cause") or that allow minor victims a fixed time beyond age 18 to apply (e.g., until 21 or 25). "Fully" applies to states that impose no time limit on applications from victims who were minors at the time of the crime and/or were victims of sexual abuse.
- ## "No" refers to states whose statutes establishing eligibility criteria for Crime Victim Compensation require victims to report the crime to law enforcement, with no exceptions for children or victims of sexual assault. "Partially" applies to states that allow some exemptions to the law enforcement reporting requirement for minors or victims of sexual assault, but those exemptions are time-bound, narrow, or vaguely defined (e.g., based on "good cause" without clear standards). "Fully" applies to states that provide various, clearly defined alternatives to reporting to law enforcement — or impose no reporting requirement at all — for minors or victims of sexual assault.

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