

Tennessee

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

55.1/100

Rank

14/51

Demographics

Population (m)	6.9
Median household income (\$)	67,631
Poverty rate (% below poverty level)	14
Educational attainment, bachelor's degree or higher (%)	30.5
Investment in education per pupil (\$)	11,317

Overview

Tennessee has taken important steps to address CSAE, ranking 14th on the index overall. Nonetheless, further progress is needed to strengthen legal protections, improve survivor support services and enhance data collection to inform policy.

State spotlights

- The Joint Task Force on Children's Justice and Child Sexual Abuse is responsible for producing biennial Child Sexual Abuse State Plans—most recently in 2025—outlining priorities to improve the investigation, prevention, intervention, treatment, prosecution and judicial handling of child sexual abuse and severe abuse.⁶
- Tennessee mandates age-appropriate family life education in schools, including instruction on the detection, intervention and prevention of child sexual abuse, human trafficking and internet crimes against children, such as sexting, sextortion and exploitation.⁷

Priority areas for future focus

Strengthen the legal framework against sexual violence by:

- Raising the minimum legal age of marriage to 18 without exceptions;
- Adopting a clear statutory definition of sexual consent; 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.

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; and
- Reforming the state's eligibility requirements for Crime Victim Compensation to ensure children and survivors of sexual crimes are not excluded or penalized due to age, reporting delays or other barriers.⁸

Strengthen oversight and evidence-based policymaking by:

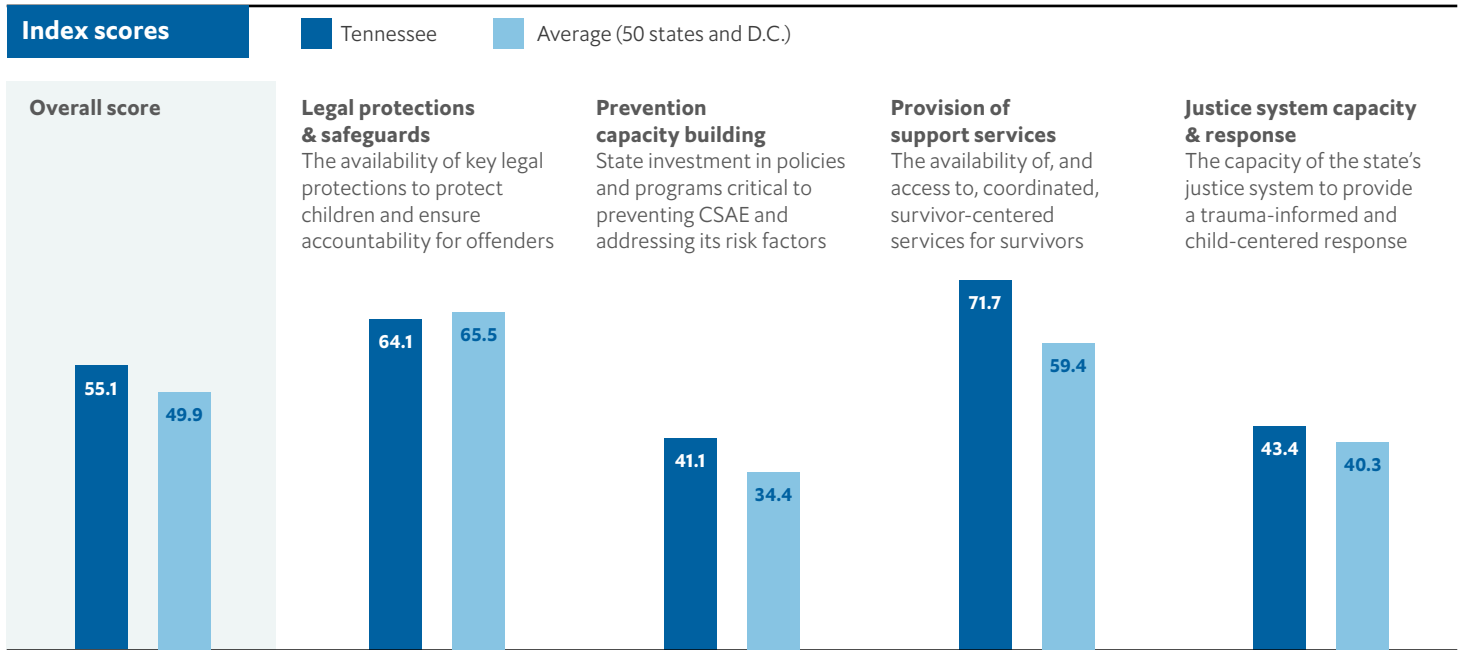
- Conducting a comprehensive study to assess the scale and scope of online and in person CSAE; and
- Collecting and publishing prosecution data on CSAE, including the number of cases prosecuted, trial outcomes and convictions involving forensic interviews.

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

SUPPORTED BY



The United States Out of the Shadows Index: Tennessee



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) [†]	●	Mandated training for prosecutors: sexual assault [†]	○
Mandated training on recognizing and responding to CSA (school employees) [†]	●	Mandated training for prosecutors: trauma-informed practice [†]	○
Mandated training on recognizing and responding to CSA (youth organization employees) [†]	○	Criminal statute of limitations: full elimination for all CSA crimes [†]	○
Required screening of school employees to prevent educator sexual misconduct [¶]	○	Civil statute of limitations: full elimination for all CSA claims against all defendants [†]	○
Educator code of conduct with clear teacher/student boundaries outlined	○	Permanently opened revival window for all claims against all types of perpetrators [†]	○
		Minors up to age 18 permitted to testify via alternative means (e.g., CCTV) in criminal proceedings involving CSA [†]	●

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. The Tennessee Joint Task Force on Children’s Justice and Child Sexual Abuse. 2025. *Child Sex Abuse Plan*. <https://children.sworpswebapp.sworps.utk.edu/jtf/child-sex-abuse-plan/>
7. TN Code Ann. §§ 49-6-1302 and 49-6-1304
8. 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.
9. Children’s Advocacy Centers (CACs) are organizations located throughout the US that help facilitate a multidisciplinary and child centered response to CSAE. These centers bring together several of the key actors—law enforcement, child protective services investigators, medical and mental health professionals, forensic interviewers, victim advocates and more—under one roof, helping to minimize the number of times a child has to be interviewed and offering critical therapeutic and other support to children and their families.

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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