APSAC ALERT

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Special Points of Interest:

- *Preliminary evidence suggests the pandemic is having an effect on intrafamilial and online sexual exploitation and abuse of children.*
- *Stress, social isolation, and boredom may increase risk to coresiding children, especially with more people at home for extended periods of time, leading to more opportunity.*
- *There is also more opportunity for online child sexual exploitation and abuse, with both children and adults online more for work, school, and recreation.*
- *To respond to these concerns, we have developed lists of vetted resources for family members who want to keep children safe and for persons concerned about their own sexual thoughts or behaviors involving children.*
- *We need proactive responses to prevent child sexual exploitation and abuse, including help for people who are concerned about their sexual thoughts or behaviors involving children.*

Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Michael C. Seto, PhD
Cynthia Gutierrez-White, MS
Kailey Roche, MSc candidate
Elizabeth Letourneau, PhD

There were more than 50,000 reports of child sexual abuse to child protection agencies in the United States in 2017 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2019). Many more cases of child sexual abuse go unreported, with a recent national survey suggesting 26.6% of girls and 5.1% of boys have experienced some form of child sexual exploitation or abuse by the age of 18 (Finkelhor et al., 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates the risk of child sexual abuse in several ways. People are spending much more time at home, where stress, social isolation, and boredom may increase risk to coresiding children. With both children and adults online more for work, school, and recreation, there is more opportunity for online child sexual exploitation and abuse in the forms of production or distribution of child sexual exploitation material (CSEM, legally referred to as child pornography), grooming, and sextortion. Moreover, children have fewer opportunities to disclose abuse from household members because they are not in contact with teachers, extended family members, or other adults they trust.

Early data belie concerns that the pandemic is having an impact on child sexual abuse (Kamenetz, 2020). In March 2020, the National Sexual Assault Hotline (operated by the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network) reported that—for the first time ever—more than half their calls were from children. Calls from children rose 22% in March, and among those callers, 79% were living with the perpetrator and 67% reported the perpetrator was a family member. Further, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children has reported that the number of CyberTipline reports of online child sexual exploitation doubled from March 2019 to March 2020, with the

total number of reports exceeding 2 million in March 2020 and 4 million in April 2020 (Brewster, 2020). We also see some evidence of increased help seeking. Stop It Now! in the United States reported increased online traffic to their pages offering advice to people concerned about their own sexual thoughts and behaviors.

To respond to increased concerns about risk and increased help seeking, we developed lists of vetted resources for family members who want to keep children safe and for persons concerned about their own sexual thoughts or behaviors involving children. We selected the listed resources because they are provided by credible sources, provide concrete and up-to-date advice, are readily accessible by phone or online, are free or very low cost, and (for some resources) are available in languages other than English. Resources include confidential helplines, self-help sites, and peer support forums. The Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse maintains these pages. In addition, the Moore Center fast-tracked the launch of a new self-help course, Help Wanted, for adolescents and young adults who are concerned about their sexual thoughts or behaviors involving children.

We need more proactive responses to prevent child sexual exploitation and abuse, including help for people who are concerned about their sexual thoughts or behaviors involving children. Help Wanted and the self-help resource page are part of our long-term commitment to identify, evaluate, and implement effective perpetration prevention resources to complement the resources already in place through law enforcement, child protection, victim services, and perpetrator treatment (Assini-Meytin et al., 2020).

References

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How can we help support you through these trying times?

APSAC continues to develop new resources to meet the needs that have been expressed by some members. As we plan to do even more, we need to hear from you! Please take a moment to complete this survey - you'll be entered into a drawing for a free annual membership!

Take the Survey

About the Authors

Michael Seto, PhD, is a clinical and forensic psychologist and researcher at the Royal Ottawa Health Care Group and is cross-appointed to the University of Ottawa, Carleton University, Ryerson University, and University of Toronto. He has over 25 years of experience working to prevent child sexual abuse. His most recent book is a new edition of *Pedophilia and Sexual Offending Against Children* (2018, American Psychological Association).

Cynthia Gutierrez-White, MS, is a PR and Communications Strategist and serves as Director of Communications for Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse. With over twenty years' experience under her belt, she has worked with a variety of noteworthy organizations, including Telemundo Network; Nicklaus Children's Hospital in Miami; the American Red Cross in Washington, DC; and Johns Hopkins Medicine in Baltimore.

Kailey Roche, MSc candidate, is a current MSc student at Saint Mary's University and an incoming PhD student in Forensic Psychology at Carleton University. Her research interests include childhood sexual abuse prevention, atypical sexual interests, and community reintegration of those who have committed sexual offenses.

Elizabeth Letourneau, PhD, is Professor, Department of Mental Health, and Director, Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. She has more than 30 years of experience working to prevent child sexual abuse. She is coeditor of the forthcoming *What Works with Sexual Offenders: Contemporary Perspectives in Theory, Assessment, Treatment, and Prevention* (2020, Wiley Blackwell).

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1706 E. Broad St. | Columbus, OH 43203
(p) 847-402-7722 | (f) 614.251.6005
info@apsac.org | apsac.org

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