

# **SCHOOL COUNSELORS' TRAINING: CHILD SEX-TRAFFICKING IN THE COMMUNITY AND THE IMPACT OF COVID-19**

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# OBJECTIVES

1

Increase awareness of sex trafficking among children and teenagers in school settings in Texas.

2

Discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and how school counselors can assist in their community (supported by empirical data).

3

Provide resources and information to aid school counselors in the identification and care of sex trafficking in school-aged children.



**LO1: INCREASE AWARENESS OF SEX  
TRAFFICKING AMONG CHILDREN AND  
TEENAGERS IN SCHOOL SETTINGS IN TEXAS.**

# CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING

- **Child sex trafficking refers to the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a minor for the purpose of a commercial sex act (Department of Justice, 2020).**
- **74% of child trafficking cases involved sex trafficking.**
- **The average age of child sex trafficking victims is 15, according to numbers of children reported missing to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.**
- **Many sex trafficking victims are runaway girls who were sexually abused as children. 1 in 7 runaways reported missing were likely sex trafficking victims, and of those, 88% were in the care of social services or foster care when they ran (Children's Rights, n.d.).**





# SEX TRAFFICKING IN TEXAS

- The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 defines sex trafficking, a type of human trafficking, as “a commercial sex act induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age” (Pub. L. No. 106-386).
- Sex trafficking is trading sex acts for anything of value (food, money, drugs, alcohol, gifts, place to stay, rent).
- In Texas, almost 79,000 minors and youth victims of sex trafficking were reported by the end of 2016 (Institute on Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault, [IDVSA], 2016).
- 20% of all Human trafficking cases come out of Texas
- 13 years old is the average age a child is first exploited through prostitution (IDVSA, 2016)
- Highly correlated with substance use, mental health diagnosis, physical conditions, and suicidal behavior (Cole et al., 2016; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Muftic & Finn, 2013; Ulloa et al., 2016).



**LET'S PLAY**



# REFRAMING COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

- ❖ CST does occur domestically.
- ❖ CST can but does not have to include some form of travel, transportation, or movement across state or national borders.
- ❖ CST can but does not always include elements of physical force, restraint, bondage, and/or violence.
- ❖ If a child solicits sex from an adult in exchange for money, food, or shelter, they are still a victim.
- ❖ If a child receives any kind of payment for sex, they can still be trafficked.
- ❖ Although an estimated 80% of victims are female, males are also trafficked.
- ❖ Child trafficking victims are not usually kidnapped.
- ❖ Child sex traffickers are not always easy to identify.
- ❖ A child who is trafficked will not always feel negatively toward the person(s) trafficking them.

# PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

## Purpose

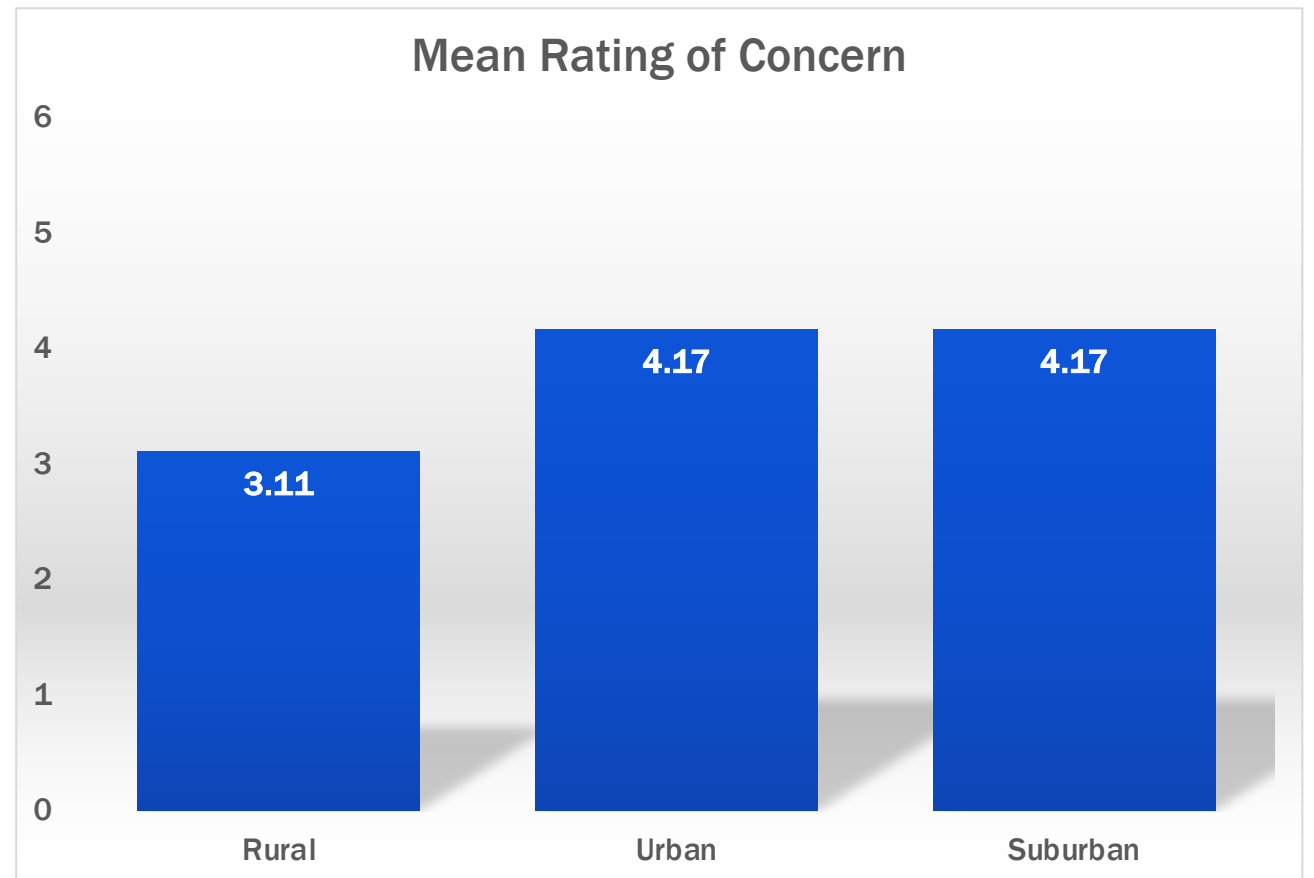
- To examine Texas PSCs' concern for CST in their community.
- To investigate school counselors' beliefs on the possible impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for vulnerable youth and a school counselors' ability to recognize and/or provide service and care to youth who may be at-risk for sex-trafficking.

## Research Questions

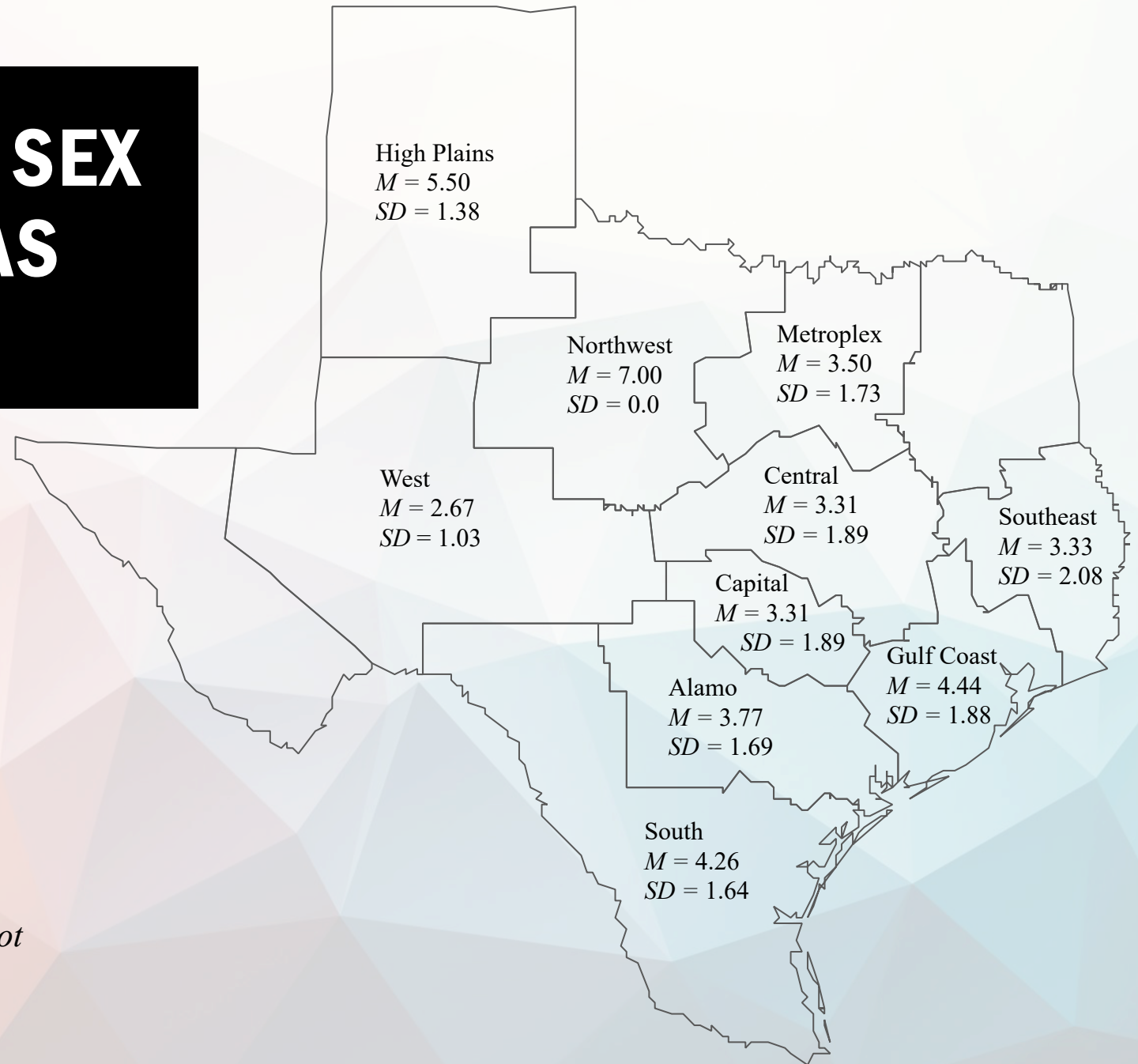
- How do Texas professional school counselors' perception of community concern for sex trafficking differ based on school setting and Texas region?
- How do Texas professional school counselors report that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their concern for vulnerable youth and their ability to recognize and/or provide service and care to youth at risk for sex trafficking?

# COMMUNITY CONCERN FOR CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING

**\*In comparison to rural areas, school counselors reported higher ratings for community concern for CST in urban and suburban communities.**




# CONCERN FOR CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING BY TEXAS ECONOMIC REGION



Mean and standard deviation by region for item “In my community, I believe child sex trafficking is a serious problem” measured on a 7-point scale (1= *not a problem* to 7 = *serious problem*).





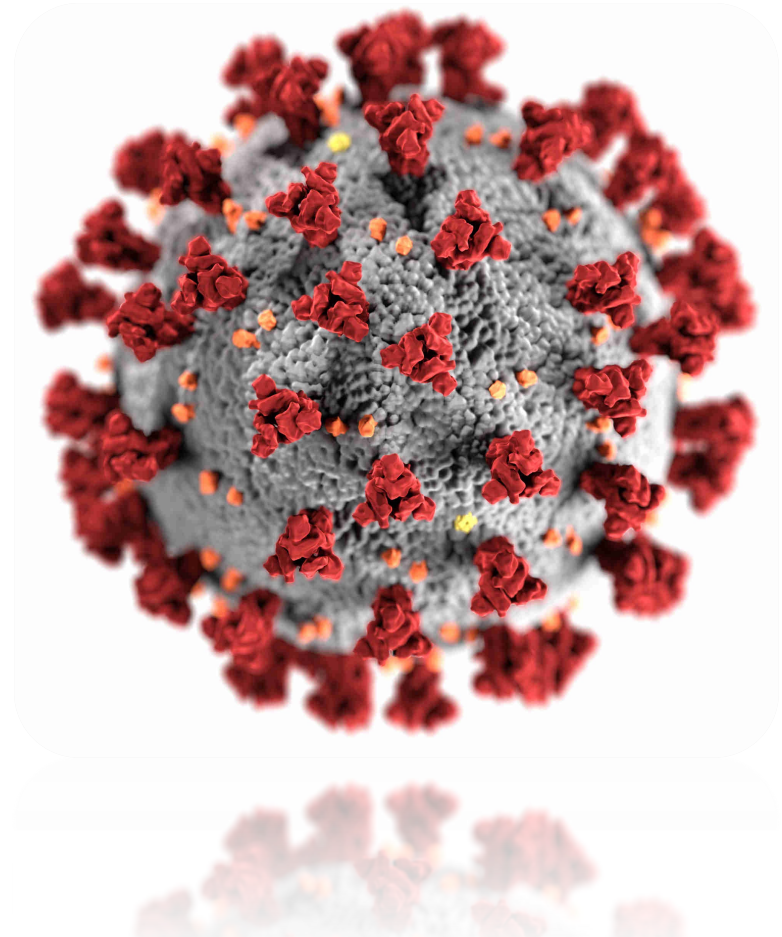
**L02: DISCUSS, SUPPORTED BY EMPIRICAL DATA, THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND HOW SCHOOL COUNSELORS CAN ASSIST IN THEIR COMMUNITY.**



# CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In 2020, COVID-19 threatened to exacerbate health disparities faced by vulnerable populations (Armitage & Nellums, 2020):

- Increasing job insecurity and unemployment, food and housing insecurity, poverty, and healthcare access.
- Unregulated and unsafe working environments, over-crowded living conditions, malnutrition, and substance use.
- Reduction in the availability of face-to-face services created barriers for detection.
- Online services to sex trafficked youth may be impossible due to economic or geographical restraints, or may impede privacy for the victim (e.g., living with trafficker).
- Limited confidential access to healthcare and/or opportunities for healthcare professionals to screen, identify, and disrupt CST activity.





# IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

1

*Increased risk for child sex trafficking*

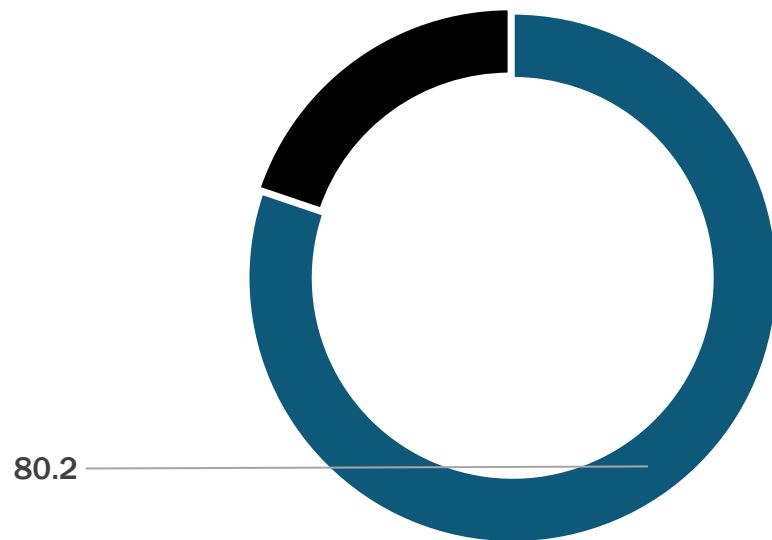
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*Increased barriers for identification and care*

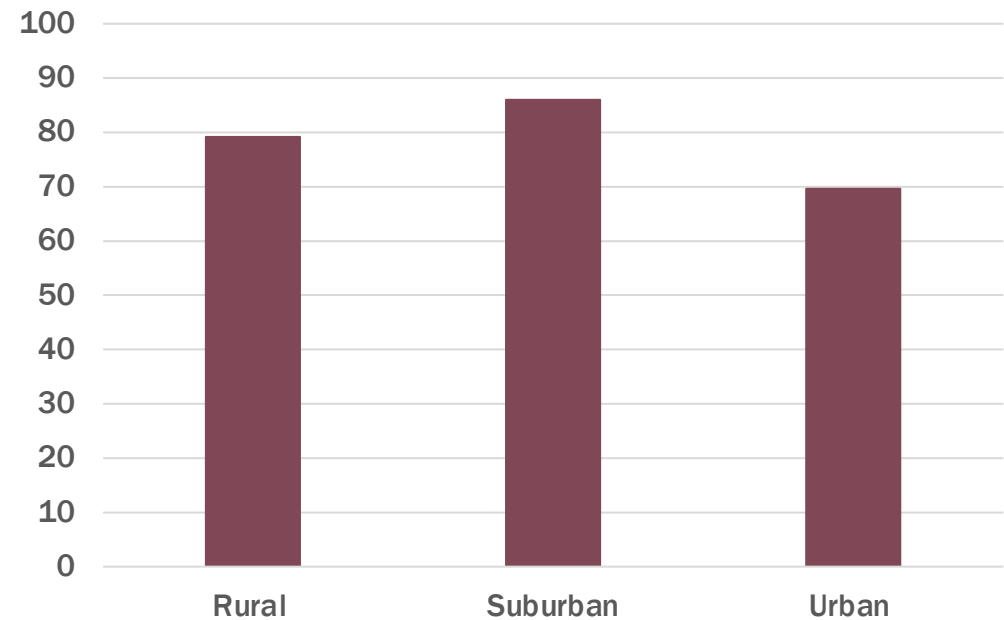
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# Increased Risk For Child Sex Trafficking

PSCs' Reported Concern for Increased Risk of CST (%)



PSCs' Reported Concern for Increased Risk of CST by Setting (%)




1

## *Increased Risk For Child Sex Trafficking*

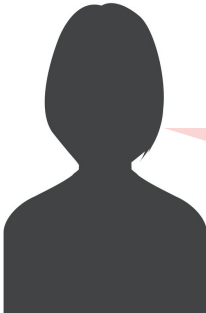


"It's already hard without COVID-19."

PSCs stated that parent's income reduction or financial instability, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, led to higher incidents of food and shelter insecurity and could therefore increase youth's presence "on the streets."



"The reduction in income and the forced quarantining has opened up the opportunity for children to fall in the cracks."



Financial instability could lead youth to engage in "illegal behaviors that lead to sex trafficking for profit" to "help their family out."

**PSCs also illustrated that social distancing required during the COVID-19 pandemic escalated youth's isolation and vulnerability to CST yet reduced opportunities to escape harmful situations.**

**"The lack of socialization and contact with the outside world, friends, peers and teachers can place children at a higher risk for predators who may offer 'attention' to lure a child." "The feeling of extreme loneliness opens the door to children seeking friendships through electronic means."**

**Social distancing increased use of internet, social media, and electronic devices seen as opportunities for predators "to lure [youth] online either while gaming or doing other online activities."**

**"Children on devices for longer amounts of time with less monitoring" increased risk for grooming and for "predators to seek/find children looking for social connections online."**

**Besides increased risk for grooming and victimization, PSCs recognized that many children live with their perpetrators and that home is far from a safe place. In these circumstances, home schooling prevented children from escaping their perpetrators and "their situations."**

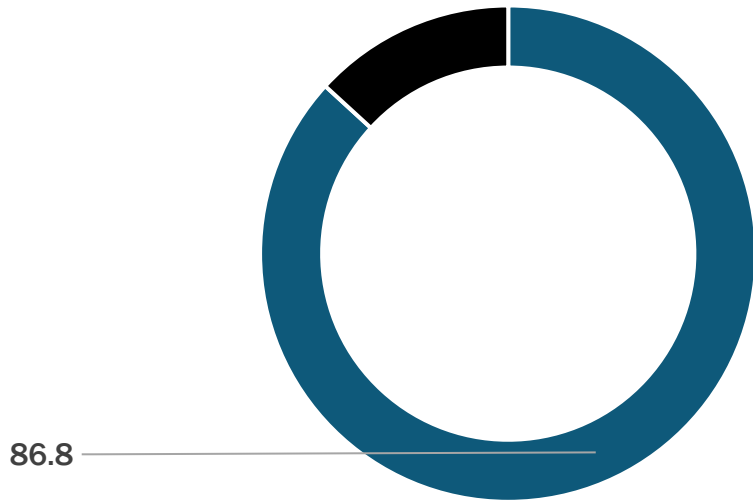
**1**

***Increased Risk For Child Sex Trafficking***

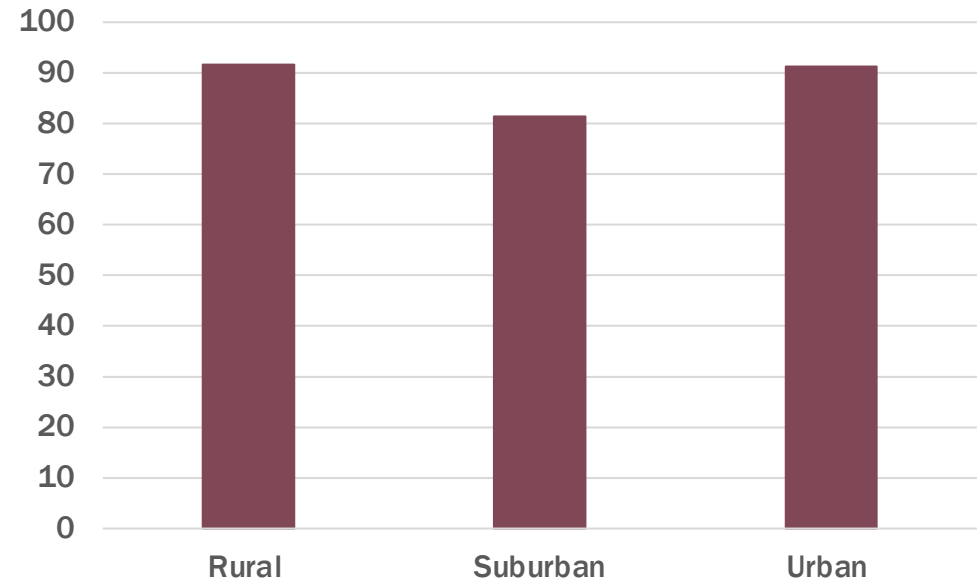
# 2

## Barriers For Identification And Care

PSCs' Reported Concern for Increased Barriers (%)



PSCs' Reported Concern for Increased Barriers by Setting (%)







2

## *Barriers For Identification And Care*

PSCs defined current barriers as “extreme” and “tremendous.”

Working remotely created “a barrier to equal access for all students,” particularly for those who were “closed off or in a poor situation”.

“The lack of face-to-face checking in on children has decreased the opportunity for adults and advocates to recognize the symptoms of trafficking.”

COVID-19 considerations made it more difficult to “identify, notice signs and... ‘read’ beyond the words of a student and/or be able to see the non-verbal cues and emotions of the child as he/she/they is speaking.”



## 2

# Barriers For Identification And Care

“If we have reason to suspect, we do not have the ability to speak with the students privately...as they are always being watched/listened to by whomever they are with.”

“I'm worried about asking probing questions and not knowing who may be listening in.”

“If I am able to speak with them, the student may not be alone and may not be able to speak freely.”

These barriers removed “the child from a trustworthy environment that they might be willing to ask for help” and impeded their ability to “form that bond with the students” that allowed youth to report events in which they are forced to participate.




## 2


### *Barriers for Identification and Care*

A common challenge for PSCs regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic, is time constraints and additional responsibilities that sometimes decrease their availability for one-on-one time with students.

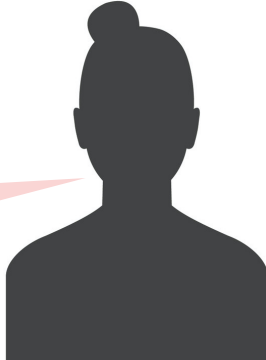
It seemed that with COVID-19 and the transition to online schooling, these complications worsened.



“The additional duties that are assigned to keep schools open has limited the amount of time I have to interact with our youth,”



“As a school counselor in a pandemic, my time is spent on tech support, changing schedules, and communicating with teachers about my students' lack of academic progress.”



“Overwhelming caseloads of kiddos who are experiencing high levels of stress” than “ever experienced before.”

**LO3: PROVIDE RESOURCES AND INFORMATION  
TO AID SCHOOL COUNSELORS IN THE  
IDENTIFICATION AND CARE OF SEX  
TRAFFICKING IN SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN.**

# IMPLICATIONS



- It is important for PSCs to obtain sex trafficking training to increase awareness of CST warning signs, risk factors, and triggers.
- PSCs can utilize classroom guidance and in-service training to educate other school personnel (i.e., teachers, nurses), youth, and the community to aid in the identification of CST.
- Systemic collaboration and interventions with schools, community, and families remains crucial when working with this population to protect all youth, but particularly those most vulnerable.
- PSCs must also acquire knowledge to assess CST, even with additional barriers created due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Consider covert forms of assessing such as texts, creative activities (e.g., drawings, sand tray, journaling, storytelling), and gestures that can help youth disclose information even when their privacy is compromised.
- School leadership efforts to protect PSCs' role as mental health practitioners in these settings can further facilitate PSCs' work with children.

# OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR'S INITIATIVE ON CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING

- Increased community awareness to improve protection and decrease overall numbers trafficked
- Early identification and connections to services to reduce trauma
- Recover via safe place and specialized services to stop victimization
- Heal by providing supports to allow survivors to thrive
- Justice via increase of case filings and convictions of both traffickers and buyers





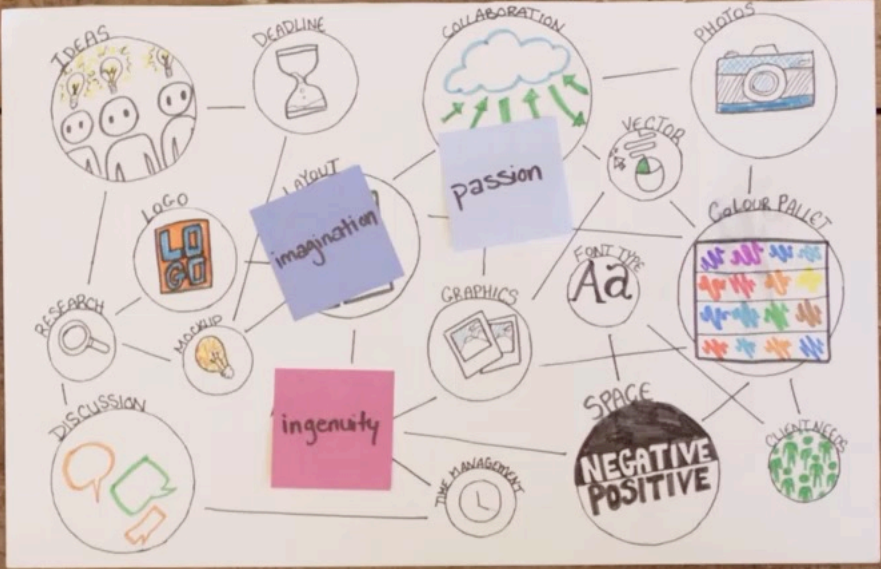
# RESOURCES

**VISIT OUR WEBSITE**



[www.castrl.com](http://www.castrl.com)





# ACTION PLAN

# Action Plan

**What is the problem?**

**Goal:**

<b>Action Steps</b> <i>What Will Be Done?</i>	<b>Responsibilities</b> <i>Who Will Do It?</i>	<b>Timeline</b> <i>By When?</i> <i>(Day/Month)</i>	<b>Resources</b> <i>A. Resources Available</i> <i>B. Resources Needed (financial, human, political &amp; other)</i>	<b>Potential Barriers</b> <i>A. What individuals or organizations might resist?</i> <i>B. How?</i>	<b>Communications Plan</b> <i>Who is involved?</i> <i>What methods?</i> <i>How often?</i>
			A.  B.	A.  B.	
			A.  B.	A.  B.	
			A.  B.	A.  B.	
			A.  B.	A.  B.	

**Evidence of Success** (*How will you know that you are making progress? What are your benchmarks?)*

**Evaluation Process** (*How will you determine that your goal has been reached? What are your measures?)*





**QUESTIONS?**

# THANK YOU!

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