

Implications of a Review of the Internet Child Exploitation (ICE) Counselling Program in Ontario, Canada

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Objective

In 2021-22, we conducted an evaluation of a well-established government funded program that provides immediate short-term counselling to victims of online child sexual exploitation (CSE) and their immediate non-offending family members (IFMs). The purpose of the evaluation was to determine what worked well for clients and to identify areas for improvement, should a program of this type be established elsewhere.

Method

- Telephone/Zoom interviews: three former clients (one youth and two adults); four IFMs; ten counsellors; and three administrators.
- Interviews consensually audio recorded, then transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis.
- Analysis was inductive and focused on development of themes according to the constant comparison method.
- Findings were analyzed via an iterative and reflexive process to define and redefine codes and themes as they emerged from the data.

Interview Guide

Interviews were loosely structured by five questions asking about:

- the value of the Program;
- challenges, including those presented by the COVID-19 pandemic;
- suitability of the approaches to counselling the Program provided to victims and their IFMs, along with any best practices or guidelines for counselling, training and supervision used or recommended by counsellors;
- improvements that could be made to the administration of the program;
- aspects of the Program that may be worthy of replication in other locations.

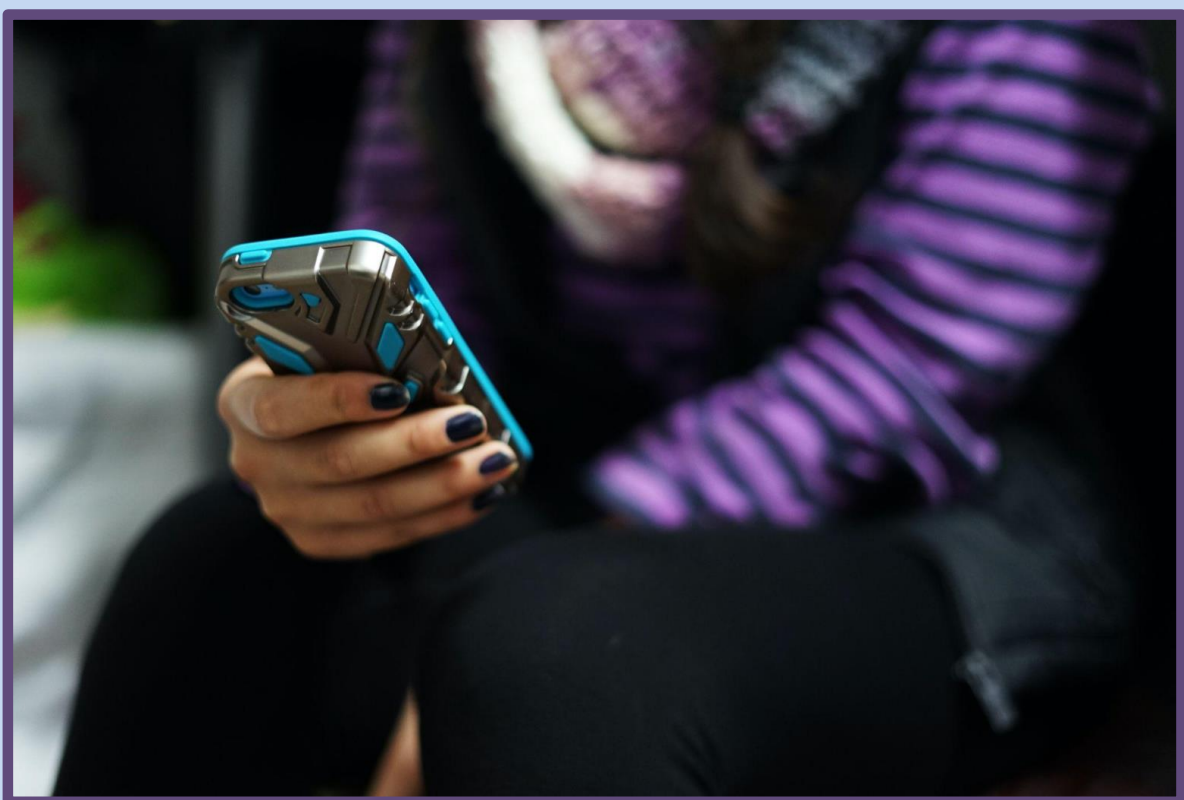


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Findings and Recommendations

Value:

- Overwhelming support for the Program among all participants – considerable value to be able to address the unique harms experienced because of online CSE; minimal wait time between referral and connection to a counsellor as compared to other mental health services; funding and counselling services for caregivers and other members of a victim’s family validates the significant impact that online CSE can have on the family unit.

Practice-oriented Suggestions for Improvement/Expansion from Participants:

- Requiring counsellors to work within a trauma-informed framework;
- Providing specialized clinical training and supervision specific to trauma-focused, short-term counselling for victims of online CSE and their IFMs;
- Providing optional psychoeducation and orientation to new clients and their IFMs;
- Enhancing access and bridging to longer term counselling for victims and families who need it;
- Providing a choice of virtual or in-person counselling
- Enhancing administrative infrastructure to better support intake process

Varied Views on Best Approaches to Counselling Victims of Online CSE and their IFMs:

- Most participants indicated that clinical experience in trauma was essential.
- Many counsellors suggested that Program counsellors should receive additional specialized training and guidance about how to conduct short-term counselling that effectively responds to specific trauma associated with online CSE.
- Some counsellors suggested better access to specialized clinical supervision and peer support:
 - one suggested a peer network of trauma-specialized clinicians;
 - one suggested that supervisors should have additional crisis-intervention training; and
 - one stated that it would be important to receive clinical supervision from supervisors who had specialized knowledge, training and experience working with victims of online CSE.



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Conclusions

We conclude that investing in professional development and clinical supervision for Program counsellors is an important means to achieve the best possible outcomes for victims of online CSE and their IFMs. This would facilitate the development of a specialized community of practice able to provide specific trauma counselling and treatment to victims of online CSE. Such a community could foster the further development of an evidence base, currently lacking in both the academic and clinical literature regarding online CSE, that would lead to establishing and confirming best practices. A strong specialized professional support network could further serve as a means to recruit and retain counsellors to this challenging area of practice.

A summary of our report appears in the Victims of Crime Research Digest No. 15, Department of Justice Canada:
https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cj-jp/victim/rd15-rr15/docs/rsd_vcrd2022-eng.pdf