

# New report sets out principles to reduce child sexual assault risk in youth group settings

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A new report from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health researchers offers recommendations for youth organizations to bolster policies and practices aimed at preventing child sexual abuse.

To inform their guidance, the authors examined current strategies used by youth organizations and recommended potential improvements built around eight principles. Funded by the Bloomberg American Health Initiative, Preventing Child Sexual Abuse In The Context Of National Youth-Serving Organizations, was released today at the third annual Bloomberg American Health Summit, a convening of national innovators and experts to discuss ways to transform the nation's public health system.

"We hope leaders of youth-serving organizations will find this report helpful when they consider how to protect [children](#)," says the report's lead author, Elizabeth Letourneau, Ph.D., professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and director of the Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse, also at the Bloomberg School. "In particular, our report is designed to provide a guiding framework to help unify organizations' efforts to keep children as safe as possible."

Letourneau, who has spent three decades developing and evaluating effective ways to prevent [child](#) sexual abuse, emphasizes that youth organizations do an enormous amount of good for the children they serve, and many have well-crafted, thoughtfully implemented policies for the protection of millions of American children.

Yet overall, as many as one in four girls, and one in 10 boys, will experience some form of child sexual abuse during their childhood. Research indicates only one in three of child sexual assault incidents are reported to a parent or other adult, and only one in five are reported to police. This abuse often has long-term consequences, including serious emotional trauma.

In their report, the researchers recommend eight core principles that could help youth organizations protect children from sexual abuse. Among them are:

- Focus on children's well-being and safety, above all else.
- Increase monitoring of adult-child interactions. One strategy is to make adult-child interactions more visible by keeping meeting room doors ajar or placing windows in interior doors and walls. For one-on-one mentoring programs, this could mean regular contact between program staff and parents, youth, and mentors.
- Collaborate with children and parents, and involve them in key decisions.

In developing child sexual abuse policies and practices, many organizations focus on numerous specific and unsystematic rules, rather than overall principles. "This approach can be ineffective," Letourneau says. For instance, some organizations have a policy requiring two or more adults whenever children are present. In practice, this is often unworkable; many organizations are built around mentoring, which requires one-on-one contact. Instead of focusing on numbers, the authors recommend emphasizing the broad principle of improved monitoring, which can be achieved through a range of strategies.

In the U.S., there has been much less focus on preventing child sexual abuse and more attention on punishing those convicted of a crime. "This is understandable," says Letourneau. "But the emphasis on incarceration

does little to prevent [abuse](#): People with prior sex crimes convictions commit only about five percent of sex crimes, which means we are leaving 95 percent of the problem unaddressed."

She emphasizes that prevention efforts need support from federal and state governments. Every year, the U.S. spends about \$6 billion to imprison all sex offenders. In contrast, in FY2020 the federal government earmarked \$1 million for child [sexual abuse](#) prevention research. "Of course, adults who commit sex crimes against children should be held accountable," says Letourneau. "But prevention remains the goal."

**More information:** The report is available online: [americanhealth.jhu.edu/youth-serving-organizations](http://americanhealth.jhu.edu/youth-serving-organizations).

Provided by Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health

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