PROTECTION AND VICTIM SERVICES COMMITTEE

The Protection and Victim Services Committee was assigned the following studies:

- Section 1 of House Bill 1410 (2025) directed a study of state laws related to criminal conduct against children, child sexual abuse, child physical abuse, child neglect, and human trafficking of children. The study required a review of the terminology used in North Dakota Century Code Chapter 12.1-27.2 to describe child sexual abuse material, laws addressing the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in crimes involving child sexual abuse material, and other laws intended to protect children and facilitate the investigation and prosecution of crimes involving child victims.
- House Concurrent Resolution 3028 (2025) directed a study of human trafficking victim service and re-entry programs. The study required an assessment of current human trafficking victim re-entry services, including services to protect victims from predatory offenders, policies, and practices, and data and resource allocation with the goal of identifying opportunities to implement services to help victims effectively re-enter society.
- Senate Concurrent Resolution 4017 (2025) directed a study of the detrimental impacts of pornography. The study required an assessment of current efforts for education, prevention, and research related to the consequences of pornography, an examination of potential policy changes, and consideration of input from relevant state agencies and other stakeholders.

The Legislative Management assigned the committee the responsibility to receive three reports:

- A report from the Attorney General on the status and results of the Human Trafficking Victims Grant Program, pursuant to Section 7 of House Bill 1003 (2025).
- An annual report from the Task Force on Missing Indigenous Persons regarding the activities, findings, and recommendations of the task force, pursuant to Section 54-12-36.
- A biennial report from the Office of Guardianship and Conservatorship regarding the operations of the office, pursuant to Section 54-68-02.

Committee members were Representatives Bernie Satrom (Chairman), TJ Brown, Jason Dockter, Lawrence R. Klemin, Mary Schneider, and Lori VanWinkle and Senators Keith Boehm, Ryan Braunberger, David A. Clemens, Dick Dever, and Diane Larson.

CRIMINAL CONDUCT AGAINST CHILDREN STUDY

Section 1 of House Bill 1410 (2025) directed a study of state laws related to criminal conduct against children, child sexual abuse, child physical abuse, child neglect, and human trafficking of children. The study required a review of the terminology used in Chapter 12.1-27.2 to describe child sexual abuse material, laws addressing the use of AI in crimes involving child sexual abuse material, and other laws intended to protect children and facilitate the investigation and prosecution of crimes involving child victims.

Background

Child abuse and neglect include action or inaction by a parent, caregiver, or another individual in a custodial role causing, threatening, or creating the potential for harm to a child under age 18. Common forms of child abuse and neglect include physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. Physical abuse involves the intentional use of physical force that can result in bodily injury. Emotional abuse includes behaviors that harm a child's self-worth or emotional well-being. Sexual abuse includes a sexual act or sexual contact with a child by an individual. Neglect involves failing to provide for a child's basic physical and emotional needs. At least one in seven children in the United States experienced abuse or neglect in the preceding year. In North Dakota, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) identified 5,511 children as suspected victims of child abuse and neglect in 2024.

Child Abuse and Neglect

Section 50-25.1-02 defines "abused child" as an individual under age 18 suffering from abuse, as defined under Section 14-09-22, caused by a person responsible for their welfare. Under Section 14-09-22, a parent, guardian, custodian, or adult family or household member who inflicts, or allows to be inflicted, mental injury, bodily injury, substantial bodily injury, or serious bodily injury upon the child is guilty of a felony. The specific felony level offense for child abuse is dependent upon the age of the child and the severity of injury.

Section 14-09-22.1 establishes the crime of child neglect, which occurs when a parent, guardian, custodian, or adult family or household member willfully fails to provide required care, control, subsistence, or education; permits a child to remain in certain harmful environments or associate with individuals engaged in harmful behavior; or permits or fails to reasonably prevent a child from engaging in illegal or harmful work. Child neglect is a Class C felony. The statutory definition of a neglected child also addresses circumstances involving inadequate care, certain substance exposures, abandonment, illegal placement for care or adoption, and human trafficking.

Child Sexual Abuse

North Dakota law establishes several offenses involving sexual conduct with minors. Sections 12.1-20-01 through 12.1-20-07 and related provisions establish offenses involving sexual conduct and contact with minors, corruption or solicitation of minors, luring minors by electronic means, sexual assault, indecent exposure, and surreptitious intrusion. The classification of an offense depends on factors such as the age of the child, the age and relationship of the alleged offender, the conduct involved, and the circumstances surrounding the offense.

Sexual Performances by Minors and Child Sexual Abuse Material

Chapter 12.1-27.2 addresses sexual performances by minors and visual representations of sexual conduct by minors. The chapter establishes criminal offenses involving the production, direction, promotion, and possession of prohibited material. Possession of a visual representation of sexual conduct by a minor constitutes a Class C felony, with enhanced penalties in specified circumstances, including when the material involves 20 or more visual representations, depicts violence or bestiality, depicts a prepubescent minor or a minor under age 12, or involves an individual previously convicted of a registerable offense. The federal government, victim service organizations, and other states commonly use the term "child sexual abuse material" rather than "sexual performance by a minor" or "child pornography." "Child sexual abuse material" more accurately describes the depiction of sexual abuse or exploitation of a child, as consent cannot be obtained by a minor. House Bill 1410 (2025) directs the committee to review terminology used in Chapter 12.1-27.2, including the term "sexual performance by a minor."

Artificial Intelligence and Digitally Altered Images

Technological developments provide additional means for individuals to contact, manipulate, and sexually exploit children. Online platforms allow an individual to communicate with a child without physical interaction. Generative AI can create or modify images, video, audio, and text to produce sexually explicit material that depicts a fictional child or alter an image of a real child to create a sexually explicit depiction. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reported approximately 1.5 million cyber tips involving generative AI child sexual abuse material in 2025, compared with approximately 67,000 tips in 2024.

Modern digital technology and generative AI are used to create deepfakes and aid in the process of sextortion. A deepfake uses digital technology to alter or synthesize an image or video to create the appearance that an individual participated in conduct that did not occur. Sextortion involves coercion or extortion to obtain sexually explicit images, money, or other demands. An offender may threaten to distribute an actual or AI-generated sexually explicit image to obtain compliance from a victim. Sextortion can occur through online games, applications, messaging platforms, and websites.

Federal law addresses computer-generated, altered, and deepfake depictions of minors. Federal law includes certain computer-generated images and certain images that an individual creates, adapts, or modifies to appear to depict an identifiable minor engaged in sexually explicit conduct within the definition of prohibited child sexual abuse material.

The 2025 Legislative Assembly enacted House Bill 1386, which added a definition of "computer-generated image" and expanded the definition of "minor" for purposes of Chapter 12.1-27.2 to include a computer-generated visual representation of a minor. The legislation also expanded the possession offense to include specified computer-generated images of minors and increased the penalty for certain possession offenses. House Bill 1561 (2025) and Senate Bill 2380 (2025) created Section 51-07-32, which establishes civil liability for commercial entities that publish or distribute sexual material harmful to a minor.

Human Trafficking of Children

North Dakota adopted the Uniform Act on Prevention of and Remedies for Human Trafficking in 2015, codified as Chapter 12.1-41. The chapter addresses trafficking, forced labor, sexual servitude, patronizing a victim of sexual servitude, and patronizing a minor for commercial sexual activity. The chapter applies to labor trafficking and sex trafficking and establishes criminal liability in specified circumstances for business entities that knowingly participate in or ignore trafficking conducted by their employees. Trafficking of a minor, forced labor of a minor, and sexual servitude of a minor are Class AA felonies. Coercion, compulsion, or deception are not required for a human trafficking offense involving a minor. The chapter also establishes offenses for patronizing a minor for commercial sexual activity and for providing something of value in exchange for commercial sexual activity with a minor.

The Legislative Assembly enacted several measures in 2025 relating to the human trafficking of children. House Bill 1361 (2025) established mandatory minimum sentences for certain human trafficking offenses. Senate Bill 2330 (2025) required school boards to adopt policies addressing human trafficking and exploitation prevention and awareness education and established schoolwide education requirements for students in specified grades.

Grooming

Child sexual grooming describes conduct through which an adult establishes trust or an emotional connection with a child to facilitate sexual abuse or exploitation. Grooming may occur in person or through electronic communications. An individual may use grooming to introduce sexual content, establish secrecy, create a position of trust, or isolate a child. Grooming can occur before an individual commits a sexual offense.

North Dakota does not establish a specific grooming offense. Section 12.1-20-05 addresses corruption or solicitation of a minor and Section 12.1-20-05.1 addresses luring minors by electronic means. Under Section 12.1-20-05.1, an adult commits luring when, through electronic communication and while believing the person with whom the adult communicates is a minor, the adult discusses or depicts specified sexual content and invites or induces the person believed to be a minor to engage in a sexual performance or sexual conduct for the adult's benefit. Sexual grooming behavior is specifically criminalized in nine states, while all states have offenses involving solicitation, enticement, luring, or electronic communication. Some statutes apply to conduct occurring both in person and electronically, while others specifically address electronic communications. State statutes also differ in the conduct that constitutes grooming, the age of the child covered by the statute, the required age difference between the parties, and whether the offender must take a substantial step toward completing a sexual offense.

Child Sex Dolls

A child sex doll generally refers to an anatomically correct doll with childlike characteristics that an individual uses for sexual purposes. A sex robot has similar physical characteristics to a sex doll while incorporating movement, speech, or AI features. Federal law does not specifically regulate child sex dolls. Various conduct involving child sex dolls is prohibited in 11 states, including possession, manufacture, distribution, sale, transportation, or advertising. North Dakota does not regulate child sex dolls.

Testimony

The committee received testimony from representatives of child abuse prevention organizations, children's advocacy centers, crisis intervention organizations, public health faculty, and the Bureau of Criminal Investigation (BCI). Testimony addressed the prevalence and impacts of child abuse and exploitation, prevention and intervention efforts, investigative challenges, and potential legislative responses.

Testimony identified child abuse and exploitation as issues requiring coordinated prevention efforts, early intervention, victim support, effective investigation, and appropriate criminal sanctions. Testimony emphasized the importance of educating children and adults to recognize abuse and grooming behaviors, supporting families before problems escalate, and ensuring children who experience abuse can access trauma-informed services. Recommendations included expanding evidence-based prevention programs, increasing access to family home visiting and school-based prevention education, maintaining support for crisis centers and children's advocacy centers, strengthening coordination among service providers and law enforcement agencies, and evaluating whether existing laws adequately address emerging forms of child exploitation, including AI-generated sexual imagery, online coercion, sextortion, and other forms of technology-facilitated abuse.

Families Flourish ND

Testimony from a representative of Families Flourish ND provided an overview of programs designed to prevent child abuse and neglect, strengthen families, and promote child safety awareness. Prevention programs in North Dakota include training mandated reporters to recognize and report suspected abuse, educating caregivers regarding infant crying and safe caregiving practices, supporting families through home visiting services, and providing public awareness and educational resources during Child Abuse Prevention Month annually. Training also is provided to personnel at approved Baby Safe Haven locations to ensure compliance with procedural and legal requirements for the safe surrender of an unharmed infant under 1 year of age.

The testimony reported approximately 1 in 10 North Dakota children will experience child sexual abuse before reaching age 18 and emphasized prevention education, family support, and early intervention as strategies to reduce abuse and neglect. The importance of continued collaboration among public agencies, community organizations, and professionals serving children and families also was recognized.

Children's Advocacy Centers of North Dakota

A representative of the Children's Advocacy Centers of North Dakota described the trauma-informed, multidisciplinary services available to children who have experienced abuse. The state's 4 centers operate through 12 locations and serve all 53 counties and 5 tribal nations. In 2024, the centers served 1,921 children, conducted 1,109 forensic interviews, provided 7,458 mental health sessions, facilitated 362 medical examinations, and delivered 27,401 victim advocacy services. The centers coordinate with law enforcement, prosecutors, human service agencies, medical professionals, mental health providers, and other partners to support child victims and assist investigations and prosecutions.

School-based child sexual abuse prevention education can improve a child's understanding of sexual abuse, increase a child's ability to recognize unsafe situations, and encourage help-seeking behavior. Testimony indicated more than 2,000 children in North Dakota experience child sexual abuse each year and estimated that 55 to 69 percent of adults who experienced sexual abuse as children never disclose the abuse. A 2022 environmental scan found that although most respondents considered prevention education important, fewer than half provided age-appropriate prevention instruction. Respondents identified the absence of established curricula, limited instructional time, inadequate funding, and insufficient resources as barriers to implementation. Children who receive prevention education were found to retain the knowledge over time and school personnel reported suspected abuse more frequently after receiving prevention education.

Public Health and Academic Representatives

A representative of the public health faculty at North Dakota State University discussed the long-term effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. North Dakota Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System data collected between 2019 and 2022 indicated 35.9 percent of adults experienced emotional abuse during childhood, 22.2 percent experienced physical abuse, and 11.3 percent experienced sexual abuse. Other reported experiences included household substance abuse, parental separation or divorce, and domestic violence. Approximately 17 percent of adults reported experiencing four or more ACEs.

Increased exposure to childhood adversity is associated with elevated risks of chronic disease, mental health disorders, substance use disorders, and other adverse health and social outcomes. The testimony indicated ACEs also may affect brain development, stress responses, emotional regulation, memory, learning, and decisionmaking. The representative of the public health faculty indicated children and youth with special needs face an increased risk of abuse, neglect, and serious injury. Financial hardship, household mental illness or substance use, domestic violence, parental separation or death, and exposure to community violence or discrimination also are factors associated with increased adversity.

The testimony recommended preventing adverse experiences, reducing additional exposure to adversity, and strengthening protective factors. To protect against the negative impacts of high ACEs, recommended evidence-based approaches include strengthening family economic supports, promoting positive parenting practices, expanding access to quality early childhood care and education, connecting youth with supportive adults, and providing therapy and family-centered substance use treatment. The testimony also emphasized continued data collection and monitoring related to childhood adversity and human trafficking, evaluation of prevention strategies, support for families raising children with special needs, and adoption of trauma-informed policies and practices.

The economic consequences of childhood adversity also were addressed, linking higher levels of ACEs exposure to increased health care utilization, greater involvement with child welfare and justice systems, reduced workforce participation, disability, and diminished productivity. Although researchers can estimate these impacts, the testimony noted the effects often occur over a lifetime and interact with numerous contributing factors, making precise calculations difficult. The testimony highlighted evidence-based interventions, including family home visiting programs, as strategies to reduce risk and strengthen protective factors.

Evidence-Based Family Home Visiting

A representative of USpireND described voluntary services available during pregnancy and early childhood. Trained professionals provide parenting education, developmental and maternal mental health screenings, safety assessments, and referrals to community resources. Four evidence-based models operate in North Dakota: Early Head Start, Healthy Families America, Nurse-Family Partnership, and Parents as Teachers. Although services are available in all 53 counties, the testimony indicated only a small percentage of eligible families receive services. The representative of USpireND recommended using available federal matching funds through the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program to expand access and strengthen early prevention efforts.

Crisis Intervention and Advocacy Organizations

A representative of Sollera, formerly the Rape and Abuse Crisis Center, described services available to individuals affected by sexual assault, domestic violence, child sexual abuse, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and related forms of victimization. Services include crisis response, victim advocacy, counseling, prevention education, service coordination, supervised parenting-time services, and domestic violence offender programming.

The testimony emphasized the importance of child sexual abuse prevention efforts that educate children and adults regarding grooming, manipulation, isolation, secrecy, and other tactics offenders use. Sollera provides the child sexual abuse prevention curricula known as the Red Flag Green Flag Program to schools in the eastern half of the state. The testimony included an overview of the Red Flag Green Flag Program, demonstrating its evidence-based, age-appropriate nature. The testimony contended that expanding resources and access to prevention education may help address increasing concern related to grooming, computer-generated child sexually abusive material, sextortion,

and human trafficking. The testimony recommended maintaining funding for domestic violence and sexual assault crisis centers, expanding school-based prevention education, and providing clearer legislative direction to school districts. The testimony also cautioned that inaccurate or sensationalized messaging regarding human trafficking may detract from effective prevention efforts and emphasized the overlap between trafficking and child sexual abuse.

Bureau of Criminal Investigation

A representative of BCI described the increasing use of digital technology to facilitate child exploitation, human trafficking, sextortion, online grooming, coercion, and related offenses. According to the testimony, offenders frequently use social media platforms, messaging applications, and online gaming environments to contact children, establish relationships, manipulate victims, and threaten distribution of explicit images. The bureau reported significant growth in cyber tips involving suspected child exploitation, creating additional demands on investigative resources.

The representative of BCI explained that digital forensic capabilities allow investigators to examine encrypted devices, applications, cloud-based data, and cryptocurrency transactions; identify victims; reconstruct grooming and coercive conduct; and support execution of search warrants and arrests. The testimony also indicated investigators sometimes identify indicators of human trafficking during cyber crime investigations before conduct meets statutory trafficking definitions. The representative of BCI stated integration of the Human Trafficking Task Force with the Cyber Crime Unit improved coordination, training, outreach, and investigative consistency.

The testimony further emphasized the role of victim services within criminal investigations. Victim services specialists provide crisis intervention, technology-informed safety planning, communication with families and partner agencies, and support for victim stabilization. The testimony indicated integrating these services within the Cyber Crime Unit improved continuity of care, reduced trauma, and enhanced investigative outcomes. The testimony emphasized the importance of continued investment in specialized forensic tools, training, staffing, and victim services to address evolving digital threats.

A representative of BCI also addressed the growing use of AI to create sexually explicit images of minors, impersonate individuals, and facilitate sextortion and harassment. The testimony described cases in which offenders used ordinary photographs of children to create fabricated nude images and distribute them among peers. According to the testimony, these incidents caused emotional harm, disrupted victims' lives, and, in some cases, led victims to seek therapy or victim services or transfer schools. The testimony noted fabricated images may spread rapidly online, reappear years later, and cause lasting harm to victims and their families.

The representative of BCI explained AI-generated child sexual abusive material can complicate investigations because investigators may have difficulty distinguishing fabricated images from images depicting actual abuse. The volume of material also increases the time and resources required to review evidence. The representative of BCI recommended aligning laws governing AI-generated child sexually abusive material with laws addressing material depicting actual abuse, including provisions related to production, possession, and distribution. The representative of BCI also recommended considering sentencing standards and continuing to invest in investigative capabilities, specialized training, and public awareness efforts.

Recommendations

A representative of Children's Advocacy Centers of North Dakota recommended reviewing and updating state laws governing child sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect, and human trafficking and recommended replacing the term "sexual performance by a minor" in Chapter 12.1-27.2 with "child sexually abusive material" or comparable terminology to more accurately describe the conduct prohibited by law.

The testimony also addressed House Bill 1386 (2025), which expanded the definition of child sexually abusive material to include computer-generated, virtual, and morphed images of minors and increased penalties for certain aggravating circumstances. The representative of the Children's Advocacy Centers recommended evaluating implementation of the law with input from state's attorneys and law enforcement agencies and considering appropriate interventions for juveniles who create AI-generated sexually explicit or abusive images.

The testimony also discussed sextortion, sadistic online exploitation, criminalizing child grooming, school personnel screening and hiring practices, protections for children in homeschool settings, the use of nondisclosure agreements in child sexual abuse cases, child sex dolls, and the merits of maintaining separate juvenile and adult criminal codes. The testimony emphasized the need for state laws to address evolving forms of exploitation while supporting effective investigations and prosecutions.

Standardization of child sexual abuse prevention education was recommended as another policy consideration, including establishing minimum curriculum standards and providing flexibility for selection of programs and providers. Prevention education was recommended to be provided in tandem with local prevention efforts and appropriate support for a child when abuse is disclosed.

Committee Considerations

The committee considered a bill draft relating to funding the federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program. The bill draft appropriates $500,000 in general funds and $1.5 million in federal and special funds to DHHS to provide grants for evidence-based home visiting programs, accessing a 3 to 1 federal to state dollar match. The committee was supportive of funding for home visiting and proposed increasing the appropriation to $1 million of General Funds and $3 million of federal and special funds to maximize federal funds for the biennium.

The committee considered a bill draft relating to continuing education requirements for attorney bar licensure renewal. The bill draft would have required attorneys to complete mandatory training related to the victim impacts of AI-associated crimes. Testimony against the bill draft raised concern related to the structure of continuing education for attorneys and rules falling outside the scope of statutory provisions. The committee opted not to proceed with the bill draft because testimony indicated AI-related training is already provided, and attorney training requirements are better addressed through existing rulemaking procedures.

The committee considered a bill draft relating to updating references to child sexual abuse material. The bill draft would remove the term "sexual performances by minors" and related terminology from the Century Code and replace the language with terms in alignment with "child sexual abuse material." The committee considered a revised version of the bill draft to correct an additional cross-reference requiring a presentence investigation for a crime involving child sexual abuse. Testimony in support of the bill draft indicated the terminology update more accurately reflects the nature of the material as sexual abuse and removes the connotation that a child is a consenting participant. Committee members noted the importance of the distinction in terminology.

The committee considered a bill draft related to the prohibition of child sex dolls. The bill draft criminalizes the use, possession, sale, and manufacture of a child sex doll. Testimony in support of the bill draft indicated the criminalization of child sex dolls would be a proactive step in preventing the normalization of child sexual abuse. The committee was supportive of the criminalization of conduct related to child sex dolls and had meaningful discussion related to the appropriate penalty. The committee revised the bill draft to clarify the prohibited acts and terminology related to deviant sexual acts.

The committee considered a bill draft related to the criminalization of child sexual grooming. The bill draft defines grooming and provides a penalty for an individual who engages in grooming as a course of conduct, with an enhanced penalty for a victim under 16 years of age. Testimony provided in support of the bill draft illustrated common grooming red flags and emphasized the importance of preventing child sexual abuse before it happens.

The committee recognized preventing criminal conduct against children requires a coordinated prevention effort, early intervention, victim support, and appropriate criminal penalties. The committee emphasized a desire to proactively prevent child abuse.

Recommendations

The committee recommends the following bill drafts:

- A bill draft [27.0303.02000] relating to federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program funding.
- A bill draft [27.0102.02000] relating to updating references to child sexual abuse material.
- A bill draft [27.0252.02000] relating to the prohibition of child sex dolls.
- A bill draft [27.0145.03000] related to the criminalization of child sexual grooming.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING VICTIM SERVICE AND RE-ENTRY PROGRAMS STUDY

House Concurrent Resolution 3028 (2025) directed a study of human trafficking victim service and re-entry programs. The study required an assessment of current human trafficking victim re-entry services, including services to protect victims from predatory offenders, policies, and practices, and data and resource allocation with the goal of identifying opportunities to implement services to help victims effectively re-enter society.

Background

Human trafficking involves the recruitment or exploitation of individuals through force, fraud, or coercion for labor or commercial sex. Trafficking occurs in urban and rural communities and affects individuals of all ages and backgrounds. Factors that may increase the risk of victimization include homelessness, substance use, mental health concerns, recent relocation or migration, and involvement in the child welfare system. Modern traffickers use social media and other online platforms to recruit and exploit victims.

Federal Action

Federal law establishes protections and provides services for trafficking victims, including the authorization of grants for victim assistance and law enforcement. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 established a federal framework for prevention, prosecution, and victim protection. Subsequent legislation expanded victim services, restitution, and criminal penalties. The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 requires states to identify children in foster care who experience or face a risk of sex trafficking and determine appropriate services. The Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act of 2015 expanded criminal liability and strengthened victim restitution and service eligibility.

North Dakota Action

Chapter 12.1-41 establishes offenses and penalties for human trafficking, forced labor, and sexual servitude. The chapter also provides victim protections, including restitution, civil remedies, and certain defenses and protections for a minor who commits a criminal offense as a direct result of trafficking. Section 54-12-33 requires the Attorney General to establish a Human Trafficking Commission to collect and evaluate data and promote education, awareness, and training. The North Dakota Human Trafficking Task Force coordinates law enforcement, prosecutors, and service providers through multidisciplinary teams in nine communities.

The 2023 annual report from the North Dakota Human Trafficking Task Force identified 36 new law enforcement investigations during calendar year 2023, including 24 sex trafficking investigations, 8 labor trafficking investigations, and 4 investigations involving both forms of trafficking. Law enforcement identified 17 victims through these investigations, and service providers reported serving 325 victims, including 131 individuals identified as new victims.

The 2015 Legislative Assembly established funding for human trafficking prevention and victim treatment services through Senate Bill 2199. The Legislative Assembly continued to appropriate funding in subsequent bienniums. House Bill 1003 (2025) appropriated $2,452,514 for the 2025-27 biennium, including $2,346,022 for grants and $106,492 for program administration. During the 2023-25 biennium, grant recipients expended $942,722 of awarded funds, and the Attorney General's office expended $99,200 of the $110,540 allocated for program administration. The office returned $63,483 in unexpended grant funds to the General Fund. The 2023 Legislative Assembly passed Senate Bill 2341, which directed DHHS to study and implement a framework for services for children affected or potentially affected by human trafficking, including residential treatment options. A stakeholder group identified the need for consistent data collection, additional training, evidence-based community services, and clearly defined responsibilities among organizations. The group did not reach agreement on creating a new level of long-term residential placement for children who experience trafficking.

The 2025 Legislative Assembly enacted additional measures addressing human trafficking prevention, education, and penalties. House Bill 1308 (2025) expanded the Human Trafficking Commission's membership and duties related to professional training and student education. House Bill 1361 (2025) established mandatory minimum sentences for specified human trafficking offenses. Senate Bill 2330 (2025) required school boards to adopt a policy addressing human trafficking and exploitation prevention and awareness. The bill also required annual developmentally appropriate, culturally sensitive education based on best practices for students in grades 6, 10, and 12 and for the provision of optional workshops or materials on personal safety and grooming education for parents and legal guardians.

Testimony

Testimony from service providers described programs and services to prevent human trafficking, support survivors, and address the demand for commercial sex in North Dakota. A representative from Youthworks reported its Anti-Trafficking Program served 134 youth victims of human trafficking, ages 12 to 24, in 2025. Of those served, 72 percent experienced sex trafficking, 20 percent experienced both sex and labor trafficking, and 8 percent experienced labor trafficking. All individuals served by the program resided in North Dakota or the Moorhead, Minnesota area. The provider delivered 400 hours of clinical services, 1,800 hours of crisis intervention, and 3,196 nights of housing support. Youthworks also provides service navigation, multidisciplinary response teams, training, public awareness, and education.

A representative of the 31:8 Project provided an overview of programs, including human trafficking education, support for individuals affected by trafficking, survivor mentorship, and demand reduction. The provider offers services in six core areas: mental and behavioral health, housing and basic needs, life skills and education, employment and financial support, legal assistance, and health care. The demand reduction program provides education to individuals charged with purchasing sex as part of sentencing or diversion. The program addresses the effects of prostitution and human trafficking on survivors, families, and communities and identifies services available in participants' communities. Participants pay $500 to attend the program. Testimony indicated participants ranged in age from 20 to 67 and approximately 75 percent of those who completed the program came from rural communities. The testimony noted no participant who completed the program had reoffended. Participant feedback indicated the program increased awareness of the harms associated with purchasing sex and human trafficking, encouraged reflection on personal behavior, and provided opportunities to hear from survivors and law enforcement.

Testimony addressed North Dakota's legal framework for human trafficking and the challenges youth victims may face when seeking assistance. Chapter 12.1-41 prohibits human trafficking for forced labor or sexual servitude and classifies trafficking an adult as a Class A felony and trafficking a minor as a Class AA felony. State law also provides immunity from criminal liability for a minor who commits an offense as a direct result of being a trafficking victim. Testimony emphasized that minors involved in commercial sexual activity are trafficking victims regardless of apparent consent. Potential indicators of youth trafficking include grooming by older adults, recruitment or exploitation by peers, online exploitation and sextortion, repeated runaways, prior sexual abuse, and involvement with unrelated adults. Youth victims may not recognize their exploitation and may distrust law enforcement or service providers. Other barriers to assistance include limited access to safe housing and treatment, restrictions on federal housing assistance for individuals with felony convictions, and limited access to culturally appropriate mental health and substance abuse services. Trauma-related behaviors also may interfere with participation in treatment and housing programs and contribute to the loss of services.

Human Trafficking Student Curriculum

Testimony from representatives of Youthworks and the 31:8 Project described the development of human trafficking education curricula for students in grades 6, 10, and 12 as required by Senate Bill 2330 (2025). The curriculum development team included education and outreach personnel, a therapist, antitrafficking program staff, a representative from the Department of Public Instruction, and members of the 31:8 Project's Survivor Advisory Committee.

The Youthworks and 31:8 Project representatives designed the curricula to help students recognize unsafe situations, understand human trafficking and online exploitation, develop personal safety skills, and identify ways to seek assistance. The 6th grade curriculum uses an animated character, Grizzly, to reinforce safety concepts and help younger students engage with difficult subject matter in an emotionally manageable way. The 10th grade curriculum addresses unsafe situations in person and online, human trafficking, sextortion, manipulative behavior, trauma responses, the characteristics of safe adults, and ways to access help. The 12th grade curriculum builds on those topics and provides more detailed information about force, fraud, and coercion; healthy and unhealthy relationships; nonconsensual sharing of intimate images; and safety considerations after high school, including evaluating job offers, protecting personal information, and identifying safe living arrangements. The testimony indicated 10th and 12th grade curricula use calming visuals, inclusive illustrations, and culturally appropriate Native American themes.

The organizations piloted the curricula in 38 schools during the spring of 2026. Preliminary exit-ticket results measured students' understanding of human trafficking and safety concepts. The presentation included student feedback indicating the education helped students understand the material well enough to assist others. During the pilot, four students disclosed suspected human trafficking. The representatives identified the need for a more consistent response across agencies when students disclose trafficking or other unsafe situations and recommended developing a more consistent and comprehensive protocol for responding to youth disclosures. The organizations plan to develop and distribute posters, cards, and other materials that identify next steps in obtaining services for students who may disclose to connect students to assistance and appropriate resources.

Recommendations from Stakeholders

Testimony included recommendations to strengthen prevention, intervention, survivor support, and statewide coordination. Recommended supports for youth victims include safe housing, timely access to mental health care, peer support, substance abuse treatment, trauma-focused therapy, legal assistance, and employment services. Testimony also emphasized education, prevention, interagency coordination, and continued development of policies and practices to improve the response to human trafficking.

To address demand for commercial sex, recommendations included increasing penalties for purchasing sex, raising fines to $1,500, and directing fine revenue to demand reduction education programs and a restitution fund for human trafficking survivors. Additional recommendations included expanding human trafficking education requirements for professionals in hospitality, labor inspection, and other fields. Testimony also recommended establishing a centralized statewide data reporting system to identify trends, barriers to services, resource gaps, and the number of individuals served through state-funded antitrafficking efforts.

Committee Considerations

The committee recognized the value of community partners providing services to human trafficking victims and the importance of funding through the Human Trafficking Victims Grant Program. The committee also emphasized recent legislative efforts to expand human trafficking awareness, including the recent development of education curricula for students in grades 6, 10, and 12.

Conclusion

The committee makes no recommendation regarding its study of human trafficking victim service and re-entry programs.

DETRIMENTAL IMPACTS OF PORNOGRAPHY STUDY

Senate Concurrent Resolution 4017 (2025) directed a study of the detrimental impacts of pornography. The study required an assessment of current efforts for education, prevention, and research related to the consequences of pornography, an examination of potential policy changes, and consideration of input from relevant state agencies and other stakeholders.

Background

Pornography generally is defined as the depiction of erotic behavior intended to cause sexual stimulation. Pornography consumption is an addictive behavior associated with a host of negative outcomes across demographics. The increased availability of Internet-based pornography has made sexually explicit material more accessible to individuals of all ages. Internet access allows users to obtain such material with relative ease, affordability, and anonymity. The widespread availability of pornography has raised concerns regarding its potential effects on individual health, child development, interpersonal relationships, and public safety.

Research has identified associations between exposure to pornography and several adverse outcomes among children and adolescents. Early exposure has been associated with developmental concerns, earlier sexual activity, greater acceptance of sexual harassment, negative attitudes toward women, and sexual aggression. Studies also have identified associations between adolescent pornography use and depression, relationship difficulties, reduced family commitment, and lower levels of social integration. These findings have prompted concerns regarding the potential effects of early and repeated exposure on the development of healthy attitudes toward sexuality and relationships.

Research also has examined the potential effects of pornography consumption on adults, intimate relationships, and families. Studies have identified associations between pornography consumption and patterns of compulsive behavior, relationship dissatisfaction, and difficulties forming and maintaining healthy relationships. Certain research also has associated pornography exposure with increased aggression toward intimate partners and attitudes that minimize or justify sexual violence. The extent and nature of these effects may vary among individuals, and research findings do not establish that pornography exposure alone causes these outcomes.

Testimony

Therapists, clinicians, and children's advocates discussed research on the potential effects and social costs of pornography, including associations with compulsive sexual behavior, mental health, workplace productivity, intimate relationships, family stability, gender attitudes, sexual behavior, and relationship satisfaction. Testimony addressed the impacts of pornography exposure on youth, including brain development, behavior, emotional well-being, relationships, and academic performance, as well as potential connections to sexual aggression, exploitation, and human trafficking. Providers of therapeutic and clinical services indicated pornography-associated issues may have implications for individuals, families, and society.

Committee Considerations

The committee discussed the parallels between the study of the detrimental impacts of pornography and criminal conduct against children. The committee recognized upstream approaches to support children and families as important protective measures against the detrimental impacts of pornography.

Conclusion

The committee makes no recommendation regarding its study of the detrimental impacts of pornography.

REPORTS

Human Trafficking Victims Grant Program Report

The committee received a report from the Attorney General on the status and results of the Human Trafficking Victims Grant Program as directed by Section 7 of House Bill 1003 (2025). Under the grant program, the Drug and Violent Crime Policy Board reviews grant applications and makes a recommendation to the Attorney General, who approves the allocations. Grantees must document eligible expenditures and submit quarterly reports to the Attorney General's office to receive reimbursement. The report indicated the program awarded $2,452,514 for the 2025-27 biennium, including $685,000 for prevention education and $1,767,514 for victim services.

The prevention education grant supports school and community education activities. As of June 30, 2026, recipients expended $160,625 and provided training at 63 schools. The education activities reached 728 6th grade students, 988 10th grade students, 855 12th grade students, and 1,317 additional students.

The victim services grant provided funding to 11 organizations. As of June 30, 2026, recipients had expended $567,925 and reported serving 631 human trafficking victims. Recipients also reported 171 disclosures of human trafficking and 1,009 disclosures involving other forms of abuse. The report indicated grant funds support human trafficking counselors and advocates, clinical therapists, forensic interviewers, youth specialists, shelter space, legal assistance, service navigators, and other positions and services.

Missing Indigenous Persons Task Force Report

The committee received a report from the Missing Indigenous Persons Task Force on its activities, findings, and recommendations as required by Section 54-12-36. The report indicated the primary responsibilities of the task force are to identify jurisdictional barriers and factors contributing to missing and murdered Indigenous people, improve interagency communication and collaboration, administer the Missing Indigenous People Grant Fund, and consult on implementation of the federal Savanna's Act. The task force includes representatives from state agencies, federally recognized Indian nations, tribes, and bands in North Dakota, and the Legislative Assembly. The task force met three times during the reporting period and established a practice of holding meetings at tribal locations and in Bismarck.

As of July 29, 2026, nine Indigenous individuals remained listed as missing in North Dakota. During calendar year 2025, law enforcement agencies entered 388 missing-person reports involving Indigenous individuals into the National Crime Information Center. Fifteen Indigenous individuals remained listed as missing at the end of the 2025 reporting period. The task force addressed data quality, including consistent identification of tribal affiliation and photographs in missing-person records, and coordinated with federal and local law enforcement regarding notification procedures under Savanna's Act. Law enforcement activated two Feather Alert Notices during 2025. The task force also discussed the use of the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System as a tool for geographically targeted alerts and supported training for tribal community response plans.

The Missing Indigenous People Grant Fund received an initial transfer of $250,000 from the General Fund for the 2025-27 biennium. The task force established a process for federally recognized Indian nations, tribes, and bands to request grant funds for activities related to identifying, reporting, and locating missing Indigenous people. Requests must include the amount requested, supporting documentation, and a justification tied to statutory requirements. The task force must approve each request before the Attorney General's office reviews the submission for reasonableness and fund availability. No grant awards had been finalized as of the reporting date. The task force identified emergency operations capacity, tribal community response plans, immediate notification procedures, data quality, and continued review of the Feather Alert Notice system as areas for continued coordination and training.

Office of Guardianship and Conservatorship Report

The committee received a report from the Office of Guardianship and Conservatorship on the operations of the office as required by Section 54-68-02. The Office of Guardianship and Conservatorship was created by the 69th Legislative Assembly to manage state guardianship funding programs, investigate and monitor guardianship and conservatorship services, provide education and training, and establish licensing requirements and standards of practice for professional and nonprofessional guardians and conservators. The office began operations on April 1, 2026, and employs six full-time staff.

The office received $12,228,258 in actual transfers from legislative appropriations during the 2025-27 biennium, compared with $16,562,833 in potential appropriations. The appropriations support guardianship services, guardianship grants, and agency operations. The office manages the Guardianship Establishment Funds Program, the Public Administrator Support Services Program, and the Developmental Disability Corporate Funding Program. The Guardianship Establishment Funds Program provides funding for certain costs associated with establishing a guardianship. The Public Administrator Support Services and Developmental Disability Corporate Funding Programs provide funding for ongoing guardianship services.

The office developed proposed administrative rules addressing agency administration, licensing requirements, qualifications for guardians and conservators, standards of practice and ethical principles, and grievance and disciplinary procedures. The office accepts referrals regarding guardianship and conservatorship matters from district courts, agencies, organizations, and members of the public. The office may request financial and other records needed for an investigation and may request records from other agencies. The office may refer matters involving suspected criminal activity to BCI.

During fiscal year 2025, the office received 38 referrals for investigation and referred 7 cases to BCI for further investigation of suspected criminal activity. During fiscal year 2026, the office received 27 referrals for investigation as of the date of the presentation. The office also reported approving funding for the establishment of more than 76 new guardianships since April 1, 2026. The Public Administrator Support Services Program and Developmental Disability Corporate Funding Program collectively support more than 1,000 guardianships.

Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Task Force Report

The committee received a report from the North Dakota Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Task Force on the findings and recommendations of the task force as required by Senate Bill 2257 (2023). The Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Task Force was established during the 2017 legislative session under Senate Bill 2342 to develop and implement a comprehensive statewide strategy to prevent child sexual abuse. The Legislative Assembly reauthorized the task force in 2019 and later provided funding for a dedicated director to coordinate prevention efforts. The task force initially pursued four goals: preventing child sexual abuse, strengthening intervention processes, expanding trauma-informed services, and improving programming for individuals who engage in sexually abusive behavior. In 2023, the task force refined its approach to prioritize primary prevention, which focuses on preventing abuse before it occurs.

In April 2022, the task force conducted a statewide environmental scan to assess child sexual abuse prevention practices among schools, child care providers, and other youth-serving organizations. The survey received 203 responses representing communities throughout North Dakota and four tribal nations. More than half of respondents indicated their institutions did not provide child sexual abuse prevention education to children, employees, or volunteers, and more than 80 percent did not provide such education to parents and caregivers. However, 64 to 95 percent of respondents, depending on the age group, considered prevention education for children to be very important. Additionally, 93 percent considered education for teachers and coaches to be very important, and 90 percent considered education for parents and caregivers to be very important. Respondents identified the lack of an established curriculum as the primary barrier to providing prevention education, with 60 percent identifying this barrier. The sensitive nature of the subject and the resulting social implications presented additional challenges.

In response to the environmental scan findings, the task force developed resources to help schools, child care providers, youth-serving organizations, and caregivers implement prevention education. In spring 2023, the task force launched the *North Dakota Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Resource Guide*, which includes child-focused prevention curricula, adult training resources, and recommendations for organizational policies and procedures to safeguard children. The task force developed the *North Dakota Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Guide for Caregivers* to address common misconceptions about child sexual abuse, healthy growth and development, strategies for protecting children, grooming behaviors, online safety, and additional resources. Prevention information was incorporated into the Growing Futures onboarding system for child care staff working in licensed centers. The task force further participated in efforts to provide prevention information through training for North Dakota court personnel.

The task force conducted a year-long prevention pilot project in Richland County in 2023, supported by a $130,000 grant. The project provided child sexual abuse prevention education to 387 children, primarily second grade students, with some communities including first grade students. In addition, 142 adults received training, including school staff, law enforcement personnel, committee members, and representatives of community organizations. Of the 304 children who completed both pre and posteducation surveys, 49.3 percent identified at least one additional safe adult in their personal safety networks by the end of the second session. Community surveys assessed residents' knowledge and beliefs about child sexual abuse. Initially, 25 percent of respondents did not believe child sexual abuse occurred in Richland County, compared with 20 percent in the final survey. The final survey continued to identify misconceptions, including beliefs that children bear responsibility for the abuse they experience. These findings demonstrated the continuing need for prevention education.

To guide its statewide prevention strategy, the task force identified six pillars: policy, advocacy, and legislation; education and awareness; collaboration; funding and growth; organizational policy and procedure; and prevention research. These pillars informed training, community outreach, organizational partnerships, and the development of prevention resources. As the task force concluded its work, it began transitioning prevention efforts to DHHS to support continued coordination of statewide activities.

The task force recommended maintaining funding for a child sexual abuse prevention coordinator to lead and coordinate prevention efforts statewide. The task force further recommended that DHHS establish opportunities to provide grants and technical assistance to nonprofit organizations, law enforcement agencies, children's advocacy centers, and other organizations involved in prevention. Additional recommendations included establishing a multidisciplinary statewide advisory committee, sustaining and expanding the six guiding pillars, prioritizing prevention efforts for populations disproportionately affected by child sexual abuse, and incorporating emerging research and evidence-based practices into prevention strategies. The task force also recommended considering an expansion of the prevention framework to address all forms of child abuse.