**Incidence and Correlates of the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism in Colombia**

**Introduction**

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a serious global problem with meta-analytic data highlight that 18% of girls and 8% of boys are impacted worldwide (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). Although CSA is a problem that leaves no region untouched, it is well known that rates of CSA vary globally. For example, the prevalence of CSA was 13.4% for girls and 13.8% for boys in South America compared with 11.3% for girls and 4.1% for boys in Asia. Further, for boys the rates of CSA are higher in low-resource countries (14%) compared with high resource countries (6.8%), where the rates are more equivalent for girls (Stolenborgh et al., 2011). Despite high prevalence rates, research on CSA has been more limited in certain regions in the world, such as lower- and middle-income countries (Veenema et al., 2015). For example, a meta-analysis found that there were only five studies of CSA prevalence in countries in South America compared with 177 studies in the United States and Canada and that there was a significant need for further research (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011).

CSA can manifest in several different ways with one manifestation involving the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC). CSEC involves the exchange of money or other forms of renumeration to a child or third party for sexual contact with a child (Blackburn et al., 2010; Fredette, 2009; Wen et al., 2020). CSEC encompasses several related concepts including but not limited to, early forced marriage, sexual performances, sex trafficking, survival sex, and sex tourism (e.g., Benavente et al., 2022; Barnert et al., 2017). Thus, a closely related phenomenon is the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism (SECTT) in which an adult traveller or tourist sexually offends against a child under the age of 18 in another region or country. SECTT has traditionally been viewed as a problem associated with international travel but is increasingly viewed as an inter-regional crime (Hawkes & Raphael, 2016; Koning & Rijksen-Van Dijke, 2017). Although CSEC can explain some instances of SECTT (e.g., Koning & Dijke, 2016), there are other manifestations of SECTT that do not involve CSEC, though the way it is studied has often focused on CSEC.

Overall, there has been a significant increase in research on CSEC and SECTT (e.g., Benavente et al., 2022; Hounmenou & Her, 2018). Despite this increase, a significant gap in research on both CSEC and SECTT persists with very limited knowledge of its prevalence (e.g., Benavente et al., 2022; Barnert et al., 2017; Finkelhor et al., 2008; Hawkes & Raphael, 2016; Hounmenou & Her, 2018). In a systematic review of studies in Europe, it was found that 1 to 2.5% reported CSEC victimization; however, it was identified that there is a need for systematic studies on prevalence (Benavente et al., 2022). In a systematic review of transactional sex among the general population of youth, rates were found to be higher in low-income countries than high income countries (Kirsch et al., 2019). The present study focuses on the incidence and correlates CSEC and SECTT in Colombia in a cross-sectional nationally representative sample of Colombian adolescents and young adults.

**The Colombian Context and its Relationship to CSEC and SECTT**

The contextual factors in Colombia are important to understand as they serve as an important background to understand CSEC and SECTT. Colombia is a middle-income country in South America with a population in 2024 of 51.68 million people, 27% of whom are children under the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2023). Although a detailed analysis of the country is beyond the scope of the present paper, there are a few important contextual considerations. First, despite positive economic development (UN Data, 2024), there is significant income inequality and poverty in Colombia with poverty rates being the highest in Latin America (UNICEF, 2024; World Bank Group, 2023). Children are significantly impacted by poverty with Colombia ranking at the bottom of 39 middle- and high-income countries for child poverty. In Colombia an estimated 52.3% of children experience poverty (17.9% in extreme poverty) and this rate has remained relatively stable between 2019-2021 (UNICEF, 2024).

Second, crime rates and social unrest remain significant challenges (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, n.d.). Colombia has experienced six decades of internal armed conflict primarily driven by significant structural inequality and related social challenges (e.g., Berry, 2017; LeGrand, 2003). Approximately 20% of the population has ben impacted by the internal armed conflict with 450,000 homicides between 1990 and 2018, over 110,000 forced disappearances, the recruitment of 30,000 child soldiers under the age of 15, and 8 million who fled the conflict (Comision de la Verdad, 2022). Although a peace agreement was signed in 2016 between the government and one of the largest guerilla groups (the FARC), several different armed groups and publicly funded security forces remain that commit grave injustices against the population. Those who speak out against the violence and advocate for human rights are at heightened risk of violence and there have been more than 1,000 homicides of human rights activists since the peace agreement was signed (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Lastly, despite these challenges tourism is in on the rise in Colombia. The increase in tourism is consistent with the observation that conflict zones frequently located in biodiverse regions that have not been encroached upon by humans making the area attractive for development in tourism (especially ecotourism) over extactiviism for economic recovery (Winton & Ocampo-Penuela, 2018). Thus, it is no surprise that Colombia has seen a 36% increase in tourists visiting the country since 2010. In 2021, Colombia welcomed 3.9 million visitors in 2021 (UN Tourism, 2022). Colombia is one of the most travelled to destinations in South America with tourists often coming from other areas of North America. Colombia is increasingly seen as a tourist destination with the percentage of individuals travelling for personal reasons as opposed to business increasing over time (UN Tourism, 2022).

Although tourism is an important driver of economic development, it has occurred within the context of significant structural risk factors for CSEC and SECTT. Colombia is a well known destination country for sex tourism and the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism The Colombian government has tried to address this serious issue through legislation. For example, Law 679 (2001) directly addresses sexual exploitation of children through pornography, sex tourism, and other forms of sexual abuse (children defined as being under the age of 18). Law 679 explicitly addresses sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism (e.g., tourist agencies can be fined for advertising sex tourism that involves minors). Law 1336 strengthened this earlier law through strict guidelines to the tourism industry about their responsibilities (e.g., tourism sector must disseminate information about sexual exploitation of children in their establishment) and increasing penalties if they do not abide. Despite this legal response, sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism continues to be a significant problem. The issue has become so prominent that in January of 2024 the mayor of Medellin, Colombia enacted a curfew that prohibited children from being in certain tourist zones due to the risk of sexual exploitation (Decreto 0082 de 2024).

**CSEC and SECTT in Latin America**

Overall, there is more limited empirical research on CSEC outside of the Global North or Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Benavente et al., 2022; Hounmenou & Her, 2018; Kirsch et al., 2019;).

Hounmenou & Her, 2018). For example, in a global review of transactional sex there were no studies located that involved samples from Latin America (Kirsh et al., 2019). With that said, there have been several reports commissioned by ECPAT that have focused on CSEC in Latin America and in Colombia in particular. Moreno and Abreu (2016) conducted a review of CSEC and SECTT in Latin America that considered a wide range of documents (e.g., reports from NGOs, academic articles, information from law enforcement) from 14 countries. Moreno and Abreu reported that though prevalence was difficult to determine, there was significant concern about CSEC and SECTT in Latin America. The report highlighted that several factors contribute to the problem, including the significant growth of tourism, corruption, traditional gender norms that favour men, and significant structural issues related to income inequality and poverty, significant migration of children in the absence of adults, and the breakdown of the family unit. These structural issues are associated with social inequality that makes children more vulnerable CSEC and SECTT (e.g., poverty increases the likelihood that children have to seek employment outside of the home increasing their risk of victimization).

As part of the Latin America report, there was a special report prepared explicitly on CSEC in Colombia. Quiñones and Rivera (2016) conducted ethnographic field work in three diverse areas in Colombia: Cartagena, Letica, and Acacias. The report documented that CSEC occurs across all these regions and is arguably normalized and accepted and is in part facilitated by large tourist projects or extractive industries that attract foreign workers. Quiñones and Rivera conducted interviews with 26 victims (22 females, 4 males) as part of their report report. Of those who reported the age that they first engaged in CSEC, eight were between the ages of 14 and 15, 2 were 16 or 17, and 2 were as young as 12 and 13. Most victims indicated that they used the money to address their personal expenses.

Meinhart et al. (2022) conducted a secondary analysis of data collected in Colombia as part of the 2018 Violence Against Children and Youth Survey. The study focused on transactional sex among Colombian adolescents and young adults (13-24). The rate of lifetime transactional sex was 2% for males and older age was associated with a history of transactional sex. There was significant overlap between a lifetime history of transactional sex and other forms of violence, particularly intimate partner violence, emotional violence from caregivers, and witnessing violence within and outside of the home. The researchers were careful to not assume causality as the study was cross-sectional. These efindings highlight that there is strong overlap between different forms of violence against children in Colombia (see also results from the Government of Colombia, 2019 VACS survey; Vahedi et al., 2024). This finding is consistent with a systematic review that found increased incidence of childhood maltreatment, particularly child sexual abuse and the suggestion that exposure to violence may promote the internalization of wider norms that (Franchino-Olsen, 2019, 2022).

**Correlates of CSEC and SECTT**

Despite more limited research on the correlates of CSEC and SECTT in Colombia, there is a relatively robust literature on the correlates of CSEC (e.g., Franchino-Olsen, 2021; Kirsch et al., 2019) with many of the studies focused on research from the Global North where incidence is lower (e.g., .XXX ). In a review of theoretical models, Franchino-Olsen (2021) highlighted that there are several theoretical models that have been developed to organize CSEC factor with multisystemic models highlighted as particularly promising in better understanding the drivers for involvement in the commercial sex industry. In particular, the ecological model is the theoretical framework that influenced the development of the present study. The ecological model takes a holistic approach to better appreciate the interaction between individual and environmental factors and how they drive behaviour (Edwards & Mika, 2017; Franchino-Olsen, 2019). The ecological model focuses on a range of factors across different systems that interact together to served as drivers (Edwards & Mika, 2017). In their review, Franchino-Olsen (2021) further elucidated on these different systems which include individual level factors (e.g., victimization), relational factors (e.g., family impact), community factors (norms, peers) and societal impacts (e.g., poverty).

The wider empirical literature on CSEC generally supports that there are a range of factors that fall into these broad domains. Systematic reviews have highlighted that research has been more mixed on the association of impact of various demographic factors with CSEC and SECTT (e.g., Franchino-Olsen, 2019; Kirsch et al., 2019). More consistent findings have emerged across other domains. In systematic reviews of the literature on CSEC, a wide range of individual level risk factors inclusive of mental health problems, substance use, early sexual initiation and other sexual risk taking, and victimization history were salient (e.g., Benavente et al., 2022; Franchino-Olsen, 2019, 2022; Kirsch et al., 2019).

Demographic and individual level risk factors are not the only important contributor to this problem. Family level factors that have been found to impact CSEC include the dissolution of the family unit or strain within the relationship and compromised parenting (Kirsch et al., 2019). It is also known that sometimes family members can serve as intermediaries into SECTT (study in the Guld). These family factors are significant as they could impact parental guardianship or safeguarding that is important for reducing risk of violence, including SECTT (e.g., Stephens et al., Aneke work). Further, community factors play a role and are particularly salient in Colombia where the intergenerational effects of exposure to internal armed conflict and high levels of violence in the community may be especially salient for some youth (REF). Franchino-Olsen (2019) reported that violence can become normalized and that victims of CSEC “may be more disempowered to leave or less shocked and less motivated to lave when suffering violence leading into or occurring throughout CSEC” (Franchino-Olsen, p. 10). Lastly, although there are several shared societal factors, poverty has been clearly linked as a risk factor for both CSEC and SECTT (e.g., Franchino-Olsen, 2019, 2022). Further, factors highlighted in the report by Moreno and Abreu (2016) may be particularly salient for some youth in Colombia and alongside poverty increase risk.

**Present Study**

The present study relied on a secondary analysis of data from the 2018 VACS survey to establish the prevalence of CSEC and SECTT in Colombian adolescents. The second purpose is to examine demographic (XXXXX), individual (XXXXX), family (XXXXXX), community (XXXXXX), and social factors (XXXX) associated with CSEC and SECTT in a sample of youth 13 to 17 and adults who report CSEC or SECTT victimization during this period. In essence, the study provides important data on prevalence of CSEC and SECTT and a study of correlates identified in the literature that has mainly focused on the Global North and Sub-Saharan Africa are relevant, which is important for targeted prevention and intervention strategies. The present study extends upon the findings of XXX (previous VACS) by extending the analysis to females and looking at a much broader range of risk factors beyond violence exposure. Further, the study is unique in that it uses VACs data to establish prevalence of SECTT within the commercial sex industry in an area where this is a significant concern.

**Method**

**Participants and Procedure**

The present study used data from the 2018 Colombian VACS survey, which directly addressed issues related to CSEC and SECTT within the context of CSEC. The VACS survey was completed by male and female participants between the ages of 13-17 and 18-24 across Colombia (in both the general population and 170 high-priority areas impacted by the armed conflict). The present study only includes participants 13-17 and adults who report CSEC victimization during this period, as this most closely maps on to the definition of CSEC and SECTT (REF; Hawkes & Raphael, 2016).

The VACS data were previously collected via a nationally representative sample in Colombia. Researchers visited randomly selected households to conduct interviews with the head of the household to inform them about the study and see if there were eligible participants (youth between the ages of 13 and 24, fluent in Spanish). If there was more than one eligible participant, one participant was randomly selected to participate in the interview. Participants were not eligible if they resided in an institution or had a significant impairment that would have negatively impacted their ability to participate (e.g., hearing or speech impairment). Consent from the head of household was first gathered for those who were minors, and then a trained interviewer took the participant to a private location to complete the interview. Assent or consent was then gathered from participants before the interviewer read the questions and gathered the responses of the youth. Referrals were put in place for youth who felt unsafe or were impacted by violence.

In the VACS Colombia study, 8,206 households were deemed eligible out of a total of 14, 630 households that were visited. The study was completed by 1,406 females (out of a total of 6, 916 households) and 1,299 males (out of a total of 7,536 households). In the priority households (regions impacted by the conflict) 7, 661 householders were eligible (out of a total of 12, 166 households). The sample for the priority area was comprised of 1,302 females (out of 5,809 households with females) and 1,211 males (out of a total of 6, 256 males). The present study relied on the national data that included priority neighborhood (*n* = XXX).

**Measures**

Participants completed a structured questionnaire that focused on their experiences of violence over the past 12 months. Participants were canvassed about basic demographic and household factors, experiences of physical, sexual, and psychological violence over the past 12 months, and a range of health outcomes.

**CSEC and SECTT Victimization.** As part of the questions on sexual violence and sexual behaviour, all participants were asked “*Has anyone ever given you money, food, gifts, or any favors to have sexual intercourse or perform any other sexual acts with them*?” to assess lifetime CSEC victimization (yes/no). Those who answered yes to this question were follow-up questions, including one that asked about the relationship of the perpetrator to the youth, which included a response option for whether a male or female tourist or non-national was the perpetrator. These questions were used to group youth into those who have experienced SECTT (yes/no). Given that the question was broad, only youth who endorsed the SECTT question if they reported that the person was older by ten or more years to avoid instances where a tourist or non-national of similar age provided the renumeration.

Demographic Variables.

Individual Level Factors

Family Factors

Community Factors

Social factor

**Proposed Analysis**

The primary purpose of the analysis will involve a descriptive examination of the prevalence of CSEC and SECTT in males and females as well as its characteristics. A series of chi-square analyses to examine the association between SECTT victimization and demographic or household factors (age, ethnicity, access to education, food insecurity, employment, migration status, family disruption due to migration, relationship status, perceptions of community safety). The association between SECTT and other forms of violence will also be examined (sexual abuse – contact, sexual abuse -non-contact, intimate partner violence, peer violence, physical violence by parents or other adults, corporal punishment, or emotional violence). Analyses between SECTT and sexual risk-taking behaviour (age eat first sexual debut, pregnancy, number of sex partners, and STIs) as well as SECTT and mental health experiences (symptoms of distress, intentional self-harm, suicidal ideation, suicide attempt) will also be examined.

Results

Discussion

References

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