



## COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS: AN APPROACH TO THE SITUATION IN SPAIN

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La explotación sexual comercial infantil y adolescente (ESCIA) es un problema especialmente frecuente en niños, niñas y adolescentes con medidas jurídicas de protección. Esta forma de victimización sexual, que recoge otras múltiples formas de violencia, no sólo está presente en países en vías de desarrollo. En España, únicamente contamos con los datos obtenidos por la Comisión de Expertos de Mallorca en 2020. Se presentan las respuestas de 67 adolescentes, entre 13 y 18 años, en centros residenciales del sistema de protección, sobre sus conocimientos y experiencias respecto a la ESCIA. Los resultados indican que se trata de un problema conocido y ante el cual demandan más educación y protección. Aluden a motivos diversos para implicarse en él, pero todos ellos pueden situarse dentro de la pirámide del sexo por supervivencia. El uso de las TIC aparece como un importante factor de riesgo a tener en cuenta en programas de prevención.

**Palabras clave:** Explotación sexual, Adolescencia, Centros residenciales, España, ESCIA.

Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is a problem that is highly prevalent in children and adolescents under legal protection. However, this form of sexual victimization, which includes multiple other forms of violence, is not only present in developing countries. In Spain we only have the data obtained by the Expert Commission from Mallorca in 2020. The responses of a sample of 67 adolescents between 13 and 18 years old from residential centers in Mallorca about their knowledge and experiences regarding CSEC are presented. The results indicate that CSEC is a known problem. Also, these adolescents demand more education and protection. They allude to various reasons for engaging in this type of behavior, although all of them can be placed in the pyramid of survival sex. The use of ICT appears as an important risk factor to take into account in prevention programs.

**Key words:** Sexual exploitation, Adolescence, Residential centers, Spain, CSEC.

**C**ommercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents (CSEC) has been defined as “sexual abuse committed by an adult involving payment in money or in kind for the child or adolescent or for third parties” in the First World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (1996), and it is one of the most serious and least known forms of sexual victimization in our country.

Several definitions have been developed to delimit this social problem—in which the child or adolescent is not only used as a sexual object but also as a commercial object—that has become a contemporary form of slavery (see Beddoe, 2015). The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography (May 25, 2000) defines CSEC as “the use of a child or adolescent under the age of 18 in sexual activities for payment in money or in kind.” Each case of CSEC involves maximum profits for the exploiter and the abrogation of the exploited child’s basic rights to dignity, autonomy, and physical and mental health.

In turn, according to the conception contained in the Instrument of Ratification of the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, created in Lanzarote on October 25, 2007 (BOE 274, of 12/11/2010), it is

specified that “the term ‘sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children’ shall include the behaviour as referred to in Articles 18 to 23 of this Convention” (art. 3 b), which includes a) sexual abuse (art. 18); b) child prostitution (art. 19); c) child pornography (art. 20); d) participation of children in pornographic performances (art. 21); e) corruption of children (art. 22); f) solicitation of children for sexual purposes (art. 23).

CSEC has recently been recognized as a form of victimization and a serious public health problem (Greenbaum, 2020). It is a universal phenomenon that encompasses different forms of victimization against children and adolescents, from physical abuse to multiple types of sexual violence. Traditionally, this form of exploitation has been perceived as a hidden phenomenon—linked to organized crime—that occurs in developing countries involving vulnerable children and adolescents who are exploited within their own country and/or transported to developed countries to be sexually exploited there. However, this limited approach has been superseded by contemporary research, which has already begun to recognize and address this phenomenon from a multilevel perspective. Thus, it is now recognized that child and adolescent sexual exploitation can take place within or across any region or country with different levels of organization (Greenbaum, 2018).

While it can affect children and adolescents in any context, the research conducted to date agrees that most victims of CSEC have maintained contact with the protection system (Gibbs et al., 2018) due, in part, to their experiences of victimization, particularly sexual victimization, in their families of origin (Nixon et al., 2002; Tyler et al., 2001). These children and adolescents have many difficulties in

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identifying different forms of abuse, including CSEC, and they do not have the strategies or resources to deal with them, so they need to be protected with special measures once they are already within the protection system (Stativa, 2000).

### EPIDEMIOLOGY OF CSEC

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2012), it is estimated that sexual exploitation affects one million children and adolescents in the world every year. It is assumed, however, that this figure is much higher given the secret, criminal, and marginal nature of the phenomenon. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to establish precisely the number of CSEC victims, as most of them are “invisible” to society due to being immersed in contexts that are inaccessible to most of the population (Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2017). Thus, the majority of cases of CSEC never come to the attention of official authorities, as they are neither detected nor reported.

Given this difficulty, several studies in our immediate European cultural context have attempted to establish the prevalence of CSEC, warning that it is a social problem that also occurs in developed countries (see the review on CSEC in Europe by Benavente et al., 2021). Thus, it is necessary to carry out studies in different cultural contexts since, as has been noted, experiences of exploitation must be analyzed within the social and cultural reality of the victims (Mai, 2011). However, the real extent of CSEC in Spain is currently unknown since no studies have been carried out with the general population to determine its prevalence. Some authors stress that it is easier to determine the extent of CSEC in international victims than the problem in one’s own country (Brayley & Cockbain, 2014).

European approaches to this complex social problem show that between 1 and 2.5% of girls and between 1 and 2.1% of boys who are underage and enrolled in school in Sweden, Norway, and Switzerland report, using the terminology of these studies, “having traded sex”.

In Sweden, for example, Svedin and Priebe (2007) conducted a study with adolescents in schools and found that 1.4% of the participants had traded sex (1.0% of girls and 1.8% of boys), mainly in exchange for money. Similarly, Fredlund et al. (2013, 2018) found a prevalence of commercial sex in Swedish high school adolescents of between 0.9% and 1.5%, with no significant gender differences. In Norway, Pedersen and Hegnab (2003) conducted a study with adolescents in public and private schools, aged 14-17 years, and found that 1.4% of the participants (0.6% of girls and 2.1% of boys) reported having traded sex. The recent study by Averdijk et al. (2020) with a sample of young people in Switzerland finds that 2.5% of girls and 1.5% of boys report having engaged in commercial sex between the ages of 15 and 17.

If we focus on the sexual exploitation of boys and girls under protective measures, there are few studies on the subject. One study that analyzed the prevalence of what is known as “survival sex” among runaway and sheltered youth aged 12-21 years in North America shows that 28% of runaways and 10% of individuals living in shelters have been involved in sexual exploitation (Greene et al., 1999). Running away and homelessness are two of the most frequent risk factors for CSEC. The study by Kral et al. (1997) shows that 14% of homeless adolescent girls and 23% of homeless American adolescent boys have been sexually exploited.

According to the results of these studies we are, therefore, faced with a phenomenon that affects a significant number of boys and girls in the general population and, especially, at-risk populations, and one that can lead to significant consequences for their physical and mental health (Krisch et al., 2019).

### MOTIVATIONS AND RISK FACTORS IN YOUNG EUROPEANS

Self-injurious behaviors, physical and sexual abuse, and mental health problems are linked to involvement in CSEC (Fredlund et al., 2013). Conduct problems and alcohol and drug use are also considerable (Pedersen & Hegnab, 2003). Not to be overlooked, however, are the emotional factors put forward by young people such as ‘feeling appreciated’, ‘seeking closeness’, ‘reducing anxiety’, ‘not feeling well emotionally’, and ‘the buyer talked me into it’ (Fredlund et al., 2018).

Regarding the motivation that can lead an adolescent to engage in behaviors of this type, and apart from the motives linked to money and obtaining material rewards, when surveyed, young people state that they participate in commercial sex for ‘fun/excitement’, ‘liking sex’, ‘being influenced by peers’, or ‘affected by alcohol or drugs’ (Fredlund et al., 2018). Thus, there are authors who have questioned that consent is restricted to a chronological age and allude to the fact that adolescents can make decisions about their sexuality, taking into account other variables such as the degree of development or maturity to give valid consent. It is thus argued that, although the age of the subjects should be taken as one of the considerations in assessing the requirements of consent and avoiding prevalence, it cannot be the determining factor (González Agudelo, 2020).

Commercial sex in adolescents is not a uniform phenomenon, and it includes a wide range of situations that differ in terms of motivations, the presence or absence of coercion, or whether it is an occasional or more frequent behavior (van de Walle et al., 2012). For this reason, the phenomenon must be analyzed from an integrated biopsychosocial perspective of human behavior ranging from social cognition to development, adaptation, and behavioral change, conceiving personal influence as part of the causal structure within individual agency (Bandura, 2006). Understanding the motivations reported by adolescents for engaging in commercial sex—as well as the risk factors that are linked to this phenomenon—is a necessary condition in order to be able to act early and prevent situations of sexual exploitation and the adverse consequences of this form of victimization on development.

### THE EXPERIENCE OF THE COMMISSION OF EXPERTS OF MALLORCA

At the end of 2019, there were reports in the national media of several cases of CSEC in underage youth under legal protection in Mallorca. This led to the creation of a Commission of Experts, on February 27, 2020, by Agreement of the Consell Executiu del Consell de Mallorca (BOIB of March 7, 2020), which collected information and empirical evidence on this complex problem in residential care centers in Mallorca, with the aim of proposing effective measures for prevention, early identification, and adequate care for victims of CSEC.



This article presents data from one of these measures, which consisted of surveying young people under legal protection about their experiences and knowledge of CSEC, based on a child-centered approach (Toros et al., 2013).

## METHOD

A link to an online survey, with 12 closed and 2 open questions, created ad hoc for the objectives of the study, was provided to all boys and girls in residential centers of the Instituto Mallorquín de Asuntos Sociales (IMAS) in May 2020, to which approximately 49% of the total responded. Using a mixed quantitative and qualitative methodology, the total response percentages are presented, as well as differentiated by gender and some participant responses, coded with the letter A and a random number.

The sample consisted of 67 young people (50.7% ( $n=34$ ) female and 47.8% ( $n=32$ ) male). One person did not indicate their gender. All were between 13 and 18 years old ( $M=15.8$ ;  $SD=2.2$ ) at the time of responding to the survey. The youths had been in the current residential facility for 6 months to 1 year (23.9%;  $n=16$ ) or 1 to 5 years (37.3%;  $n=25$ ). At the extremes, 28.4% ( $n=19$ ) had been in the facility for less than 6 months and 9% ( $n=6$ ) had been in the facility for more than 5 years.

## RESULTS

The majority of the youths, 71.6% ( $n=48$ ) indicated that they knew what it meant to be involved in commercial sexual exploitation, while 23.9% ( $n=16$ ) did not know. Three minors did not respond. More than half of respondents (65.7%;  $n=44$ ) said that in the residential center they had been provided with some information or indications on how to prevent these situations or how to act when faced with them. A total of 28.4% ( $n=19$ ) did not receive this type of information from the center. Four children did not answer this item. They indicated the importance of "explaining the risks of falling into a CSEC network" (A37) and requested that the centers "help me to know what situations can put me at risk" (A37), and they considered that a good way to prevent this would be "to show real cases and statements from people who have lived through it" (A43). They also point out the need for psychoeducation on issues related to CSEC, such as "making us aware of the risks of the people we talk to on the Internet" (A8), as well as "informing us about the risks of running away" (A9), and it is important to hold "some workshops on sexuality" (A11). In turn, they deem that it is important that there be some control over them, and they consider it relevant to "control who we go around with" (A48) as well as "talking in depth with the child about their relationships with friends and partners, accepting that it is the child who chooses their relationships" (A65).

As for the motives that they believed individuals who become involved in this type of situation may have, we find those shown in Table 1, highlighting the obtaining of a monetary reward. Therefore, they state that a good strategy for the prevention of this problem would be "that we minors have money, clothes, and cell phones so that we do not have to go looking for them in the street" (A65); this could be effective through "weekly rewards" (A67). They value, in turn, the establishment of a link with the professionals of the centers "that conveys trust" (A1) and ask that they "give us a little more affection" (A21). They also raise the need to offer diverse activities,

and they propose "activities outside the center" (A39), as well as "more organized activities and cultural and leisure resources in the evenings and on weekends" (A65) that could serve as distractions during their free time to avoid involvement in CSEC.

When asked about situations that could pose a risk for CSEC, those that stand out in particular include sending intimate videos or images (79.1%), accepting offers to participate in photo sessions with adults (64.2%), and sleeping in unoccupied houses (62.7%), as shown in Table 2. The youths indicate the need to have friends, "always go with people you know very well and that you know can help you" (A29), avoiding "going out at night alone or with people who are older than them" (A29). They also warn that to prevent CSEC situations it is necessary "not to run away" (A29).

The preventive actions that young people consider most effective for avoiding becoming involved in CSEC situations can be seen in Table 3. More information on commercial sexual exploitation (53.7%) and more affective-sexual education (52.2%) are the ones most frequently reported by adolescents, followed by knowledge of more protection strategies for young people (49.3%) and more police action against exploiters (49.3%). Adolescents have emphasized the need to have contact with the police in situations that may be dangerous, "if you see that someone has been following you for a while call the police" (A29), as well as "if you see it, do not keep quiet and go tell the police so that they know what is happening" (A32). They consider it important both to have "more police surveillance" (A50) and "to have police telephone numbers" (A48) available in order to be able to make the appropriate warnings.

## DISCUSSION

Sexual exploitation of children and adolescents is a form of serious victimization that occurs relatively frequently among young people in the general population in different European countries. In Spain, although there are no published studies that allow us to make a statement in this sense and to make known the epidemiological reality of CSEC, several cases linked to the protection system have recently come to light and have had a significant social impact, especially in Mallorca.

International research shows that various characteristics of children and adolescents under legal protection entail a high risk of becoming involved in situations of sexual exploitation. Previous experiences of victimization, the presence of mental health problems, and substance abuse, as well as having run away from the residential center are high-risk factors present in these young people.

Although most publications on CSEC are exploratory in nature and are primarily based on information provided by archives and professionals working with victims (Rand, 2010), the study carried out by the Expert Commission of Mallorca shows the problem of commercial sexual exploitation from the perspective of the young people themselves, keeping the focus on them. Thus, the results show that most young people know what CSEC is, thanks to the information provided by the residential centers, indicating the importance of this information to prevent CSEC situations. They allude to obtaining money, followed by alcohol and other drugs, material goods, and a place to sleep as the main motives that can lead a young person to become involved in CSEC (Greene et al., 1999), although more than half also indicate that it is a means of



having fun or having new experiences (Fredlund et al., 2018), which shows the multiplicity of motivations and causes linked to this form of victimization.

However, the perspective that should govern the study and analysis of CSEC is that of the survival sex pyramid. From this perspective and, based on Maslow's (1943) pyramid of needs, it is assumed that the involvement of a minor in situations of sex with an adult, whether their motivation is monetary or any other, is always an exploitative situation given that it responds to the child or adolescent's need (whether physiological needs or needs of safety, love and belonging, self-esteem, or self-actualization and personal fulfillment), that a person with greater experience and resources takes advantage of (McDonald & Middleton, 2019).

The young people surveyed also know how to identify risky behaviors that can be avoided to reduce the likelihood of becoming involved in CSEC situations. Thus, sexting, or sending sexual material or nude photographs and videos, is something that most of the sample considers to be a high-risk behavior. This is followed by invitations to participate in photo shoots, generally through social networks such as Instagram, TikTok, or Onlyfans, which are especially valued as dangerous by girls, as well as dating someone they have only met through social networks. It should be added that ICTs have multiplied the possibilities of contact between people who are willing to pay to have sex via webcam with children and adolescents. According to the report "Internet Organised Crime Threat Assessment" (IOCTA, 2020), published by Europol, there is an annual increase in the amount of child sexual material found online, in many cases self-produced by the minors themselves. As the use of ICTs has become more widespread, the means for CSEC have become more sophisticated. The use of restricted access media, such as forums or messaging systems, massive storage in the cloud, the difficulty of tracing content on the Deep Web, file sharing systems through peer to peer (p2p) networks, and the generalization of electronic devices with cameras and Internet have facilitated the distribution of images containing sexual abuse of minors (Negredo & Herrero, 2016; Soldino & Guardiola-García, 2017). Offering material goods or money through ICTs can be done explicitly to achieve a sexual exchange (Shannon, 2008), or implicitly and subtly through gifts in the context of a relationship of apparent trust without explicitly requesting compensation (Webster et al., 2012). For example, the use of gifts in online grooming situations may predispose minors to agree to send photos or videos with sexual content to the adult (De Santisteban et al., 2018).

**TABLE 1  
MOTIVES FOR ENGAGING IN SITUATIONS THAT MAY LEAD TO CSEC ACCORDING TO THE ADOLESCENT SAMPLE**

Motives for CSEC	Total		By gender (%)	
	n	%	Boys	Girls
1. Being in love with the person who subsequently introduces you.	33	49.3	40.6	55.9
2. To obtain alcohol and other drugs	38	56.7	46.9	67.6
3. To obtain money	45	67.2	59.4	73.5
4. It is a means of obtaining material things	37	55.2	40.6	70.6
5. It is a means of getting a place to sleep.	38	56.7	43.8	67.6
6. It is a means of entertainment or a way to have new experiences.	20	54.1	31.3	29.4
7. It is a way to feel good and avoid thinking	17	45.9	25	26.5
8. Due to being threatened if you don't do it	33	49.3	37.5	61.8

**TABLE 2  
SITUATIONS PERCEIVED AS DANGEROUS BY THE SAMPLE OF ADOLESCENTS**

Dangerous situations	Total		By gender (%)	
	n	%	Boys	Girls
1. Sending a video or images of yourself naked, in your underwear, or in a sexual situation	53	79.1	78.1	79.4
2. Accepting an offer to participate in a photo shoot from an adult	43	64.2	56.3	70.6
3. Meeting someone you've only met through social networks	39	58.2	46.9	70.6
4. Sleeping at the home of someone you barely know	39	58.2	50	67.6
5. Sleeping in unoccupied houses	42	62.7	59.4	64.7
6. Frequenting places where older people go	35	52.2	53.1	50
7. Receiving any of these proposals through a friend or colleague	33	49.3	46.9	52.9

**TABLE 3  
PREVENTIVE ACTIONS AGAINST CSEC ACCORDING TO THE SAMPLE OF ADOLESCENTS**

Preventive actions	Total		By gender (%)	
	n	%	Boys	Girls
1. More affective sex education	35	52.2	53.1	50
2. More information about CSEC	36	53.7	40.6	64.7
3. More information on the risks of running away	30	44.8	37.5	50
4. More information about the risks of alcohol and other drugs	24	35.8	37.5	35.3
5. More warnings about areas not to go to	21	31.3	40.6	23.5
6. More protection strategies for the youths	33	49.3	50	50
7. More communication between educators and youths	31	46.3	50	44.1
8. More affection and understanding for young people	29	43.3	37.5	50
9. More police action against exploiters	33	49.3	46.9	52.9
10. Putting exploiters in jail.	35	52.2	46.9	58.8



Running away and having nowhere to sleep is another high-risk factor detected by the youths. Furthermore, once involved in CSEC, it is highly likely that child and adolescent victims will run away again to return to the exploitative context (Hershberger et al., 2018). Running away, however, is not a current or country-specific problem. Evidence in this regard is abundant. Thus, for example, two nationwide studies conducted in the United States at two specific points in time in 2007 and 2017 found that 1-2% of all children who should have been in residential care at that moment were runaways at the time of the study (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). Another study conducted in the United Kingdom found that between 25% and 71% of young people aged 11-16 years in British residential care centers had run away at least once in the last year (Biehal & Wade, 2000). The differences found between the figures respond to different areas of the country and different centers. Thus, these environmental characteristics should be taken into account when quantifying runaway cases and assessing the differences that exist in the development of intervention plans. Along the same lines, other works (Lerpiniere et al., 2013) present an estimated prevalence of involvement in CSEC of 1 in 4,000 English children and adolescents (0.027%), a figure that increases to 1 in 20 English runaway children and adolescents (4.7%). If we focus on children in care, the risk is 1 in 40 (2.3%). And if these children and adolescents are runaways, the risk is 1 in 8 (12.5%). The figures are probably very similar in Spain.

Finally, the boys and girls surveyed by the Expert Commission of Mallorca also talk about prevention and the importance of affective-sexual education and information on CSEC to strengthen young people's protective capacities and decrease their vulnerability. Some residential centers in the United Kingdom and the United States have developed written and audiovisual materials of great interest (McKinnin, 2017).

The role of professionals, especially the police, is also key in the prevention of CSEC according to young people. Previous studies indicate, however, the existence of three attitudes of professionals towards young people in residential centers of the protection system that increase their risk of becoming involved in CSEC. The first of these is the view of children and adolescents as "streetwise", so they assume that they will know how to protect themselves and do not offer them the protection resources they would offer to other children. The second is the perception of children as troublemakers, instead of understanding that their behavioral problems are a consequence of their underlying vulnerability. Finally, the third attitude associated with greater risk of CSEC is related to the disposition towards these children and adolescents of much lower expectations than towards minors who do not reside in protection centers, which means that many of their behaviors are assumed as normal, when in other children they would be alarming (Lerpiniere et al., 2013).

## CONCLUSION

In summary, although there have been few studies carried out on CSEC in Europe and, specifically, in Spain, the approach made by the Commission of Experts of Mallorca to the knowledge and perceptions of young people with legal protection measures in residential centers illustrates that it is a problem that is known to them and for which they demand more information, education, and protection. They allude to diverse reasons for becoming involved in

this type of behavior, although all of them can be placed in the survival sex pyramid (McDonald & Middleton, 2019). The use of ICTs is an easy way for exploiters to approach children and adolescents who, often without awareness of the risk involved, enter into personal relationships in which they end up self-producing pornographic material. The results indicate that CSEC is a problem in Spain, still unknown to the majority of the population, and we hope that further studies will be carried out.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest.

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