

THE RIGHT TO PROTECTION

THE COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN BELIZE

Summary of results



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Belize, through the stewardship of the National Committee for Families and Children (NCFC), has forged a path to tackle Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) comprehensively. NCFC took advantage of the opportunity presented by the ILO-IPEC sub-regional project “Contribution to the prevention and elimination of commercial sexual exploitation in Central America, Panama and Dominican Republic” to advance this process. As was done in the other countries, the sub-regional project commissioned a study to give greater definition to the problem. The study was undertaken by Belize ISIS Enterprises.

Over one hundred and fifty people – men, women, children and adolescents – from all walks of life in three districts of Belize, namely Belize, Cayo and Orange Walk Districts, confirmed the occurrence of the commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents. Thirty of these respondents were victims themselves of the crime. The information contained in this brochure attempts to highlight the main finding of the study.

What is Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents?

The commercial sexual exploitation of underage persons is a crime that occurs when one or more people use a boy, girl or adolescent under 18 years of age in sexual activities, in exchange for payment or the offer of purchase of clothes, food, drugs, etc.

It includes using persons under 18 years of age for:

- Sexual intercourse or carrying out other erotic or sexual acts
- Taking photographs, making pornographic videos or films, and distributing this material
- Carrying out sex shows in nightclubs, bars, private parties, etc.
- Transporting the minor within or outside the country for commercial sexual exploitation purposes

Who are the victims?

Thirty victims of CSEC participated in the survey, for a majority (20 out of 30 victims) CSEC was their only source of income.

- This study revealed victims of CSEC to be boys and girls although the majority of victims interviewed were girls (21 girls and 9 boys). CSEC victims were both Belizean and foreign-born with the majority interviewed being Belizean.
- The victims were of all ages although the majority of them were over 12 years old. Two (2) were under the age of 12 and they were 4, 12 years of age. Another 6 victims were between 14 and 15 and the majority were between ages 16 and 17.
- Of those who had children, half had their children living with them. One-third or 10 of the victims currently lived with their mothers while most had never lived with their father.
- None of the victims had completed a secondary school education either because they could not afford it or had not done well in school.

- A total of 14 victims (out of 30) had run away from home at least one time. Those that returned home did so of their own volition. A very small percentage returned home through the initiative of their mother and/or the police.
- Sexual intercourse was the primary activity victims of CSEC engaged in although some were also paid to dance naked, pose for naked photographs, and/or take part in a pornographic video. Although none indicated that they were victims of trafficking, 17 out of the 30 victims (10 females and 7 males) said that they had been approached to be taken to another country or another part of Belize to engage in sexual intercourse.
- Eleven (11) of the 30 victims reported having had at least one forced sexual experience before turning 12 years and except for 2 cases, all victims had their first CSEC encounter at, or above, the age of 12. Almost all victims suffered their abuse in silence.
- Physical and psychological aggression was a reality for 14 and 12 of victims, respectively. Roughly, half of the victims also endured insults and humiliation from the public in relation to CSEC. A significant number (11 out of 30) also said they were scorned by family members.
- Most victims reported having used addictive substances, primarily alcohol and to a lesser extent tobacco and cocaine on a weekly basis.
- Both male and female victims engaged in high risk sexual behaviour by not using condoms at all or consistently. Only 8 out of 30 victims (5 females and 3 males) reported that their male clients always used a condom. At least 7 of them had had an STI.

- CSEC victims hardly had any contact with child protective services. The very few instances in which they accessed services were for basic needs such as food, health and shelter.

What are the causes?

Like in other countries of the region, poverty is seen as the primary motive for the existence of CSEC in Belize. Nevertheless, the reason why many boys, girls and adolescents, -regardless of their sex, age, economic background or race- are trapped in CSEC stems from the demand, on the part of adult men and women, for sexual activities with persons under 18, either for satisfying their own personal pleasure or to obtain financial gain from these acts. However, there are some other factors that perpetuate and socially legitimize CSEC, including:

- Sexist culture
- Social tolerance towards this problem
- Impunity of the exploiters
- Consumerism
- Rise in sex tourism

Who are the exploiters?

Contrary to a popular perception that CSEC is a crime committed by foreigners, only 8 out of 30 victims stated that their client-exploiters were foreign tourists and even less were foreign men residing in Belize. A majority of the client-exploiters were Belizean men, primarily between the ages of 30 and 50, living in the same district as their victims. This was followed by men who came from other districts in Belize.

A majority of victims (21 out of 30) “provided services” only to men but 2 victims “provided services” only to women and 2 “provides

services” to both men and women. This indicates that women are also perpetrators of CSEC in Belize.

Only 5 out of 30 victims reported that clients-exploiters accessed them through an intermediary. Those who were contacted through an intermediary were at, or above, the age of 16 years. The intermediaries who first introduced victims to CSEC were relatives (including mothers), friends, boyfriends and bar owners.

A majority of victims were contacted either by telephone or through the internet (13 out of 30) or in person at parties, parks, bars or on the street (10 out of 30 victims). Some of these victims were solicited at specific locations where they “hang out”. The experience of these victims offers a very preliminary suggestion that CSEC may not yet be a highly organized criminal enterprise in Belize. In one way, this seeming lack of organization makes it difficult to detect CSEC and target an effective institutional response. On the other hand, if CSEC is not yet highly organized, an opportunity presents itself to prevent its evolution into organized crime.

How does society view the problem?

At the level of key informants and community members, the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) is perceived as an emerging issue requiring priority attention in Belize. However, regardless of an overwhelming consensus on CSEC as

a problem, key informants reported that they were unable to estimate the extent of the problem in Belize because CSEC, other than what is presented in the media, remains a “hushhush” (silent) crime due to:

- 1) CSEC being perceived as a culturally accepted practice rather than as a crime,
- 2) fear of reprisal of the person who makes the report,
- 3) the status or social position of the suspected perpetrator,
- 4) the perception that reporting CSEC will not result in an adequate institutional response regarding the conviction of perpetrators and or the rehabilitation of victims,
- 5) the active participation and knowledge of parents in promoting CSEC in Belize and the resulting lack of cooperation of family members in the reporting, investigating and monitoring of CSEC cases and,
- 6) a lack of socio-economic alternatives available to children and families whose poverty situation can become exacerbated by the reporting of CSEC activities.

Other findings include:

- CSEC is perceived as a culturally accepted practice rather than as a specific crime against children
- Key informants report a deep fear of reprisal by the perpetrators of CSEC especially given a high crime rate in Belize
- After poverty, community people see low morals in adults as a key

cause of CSEC. However, they also blamed the victims, the children themselves, who they saw as the cause of CSEC through their ‘immoral behaviour’ or their ‘wanting or liking’ sex. Men held this view to a greater extent than women.

- While a majority of people signified that they would take action against CSEC in the form of reporting it to the police, most of them had not done anything about it.
- The majority of community people felt that perpetrators of CSEC should be punished, but a large number also perceived them to be mentally ill.
- Cultural values in some communities were believed to also play a critical role in sex crimes against children.
- CSEC was also seen as being more prevalent in rural communities.

The Male Perception of the Issue

A total of 39 adult male participants, married and unmarried, between the ages of 21 and 63 and came from diverse backgrounds participated in the focus group sessions.

- Some men expressed the idea of children and women as tempters, reflecting a predominantly religious belief that women, like Eve in the Bible, are responsible for making men “sin”.
- Men rationalize sex crimes against children, but the clandestine manner in which these crimes take

place gives a sense that at some level, men are aware that having sex with children is not okay.

- Some men make a distinction between sex with prepubescent and pubescent children. Sex with prepubescent children or children less than 90 lbs. is repugnant to them. However, children who pass what men define as a “90 lbs. test” are seen to be ready for sexual encounters regardless of their age.
- Although men said they did not support the idea of having sex with children over 14 years, they referred to the legal age for consensual sex (16 years) as justification for those who engaged in CSEC. They also said that it was difficult for a man to know the age of a child since the child could lie about her age. Thus, there was social tolerance towards CSEC when the adolescents were between 16-18 years.
- Like other respondents in this study the men perceived poverty to be the major cause of CSEC. Related to this was a reference to the level of absent fathers in homes in Belize.
- While sexist attitudes and beliefs predispose men to become client-exploiters, poverty and unstable home environments create vulnerabilities for children to become victims of CSEC.
- There was awareness among men that the laws needed to have a clear definition of what constitutes a child and to provide stiffer penalties for sex crimes against children.
- Men also acknowledged the need to be better educated about sexuality.

Recommendations

The major recommendation of this Study is therefore the need to build a capacity for resource mobilization, including advocating for greater participation in the national budget formulation process, to ensure the implementation of recommendations made. Linked to this recommendation is the need for an integrated, multi-disciplinary institutional plan of action to prevent and eliminate sex crimes against children, including CSEC. Resources should also be channeled to programmes already addressing the problem of CSEC in Belize.

Regarding legal reform, this Study supports the recommendation which calls for consolidation of all laws relating to sexual offences. This Sexual Offence law would amend all existing legislation to harmonize the definition of a child to under 18 years, eliminate prejudicial language and gender biases as well as increase penalties and fill gaps in the legal protection of child victims.

While legal reform can affect attitude changes in the perception of CSEC, other equally important strategies must be employed to target behavioural and attitudinal changes among service providers and among the general public. Based on the findings of this Study, behaviour change communication strategies must also deliberately target adult males.

A Violation of Human Rights

The commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents is a severe violation of that individual's human rights. All children and adolescents have the right to be protected from this form of modern day slavery, which is detrimental to the physical, psychological, spiritual, moral, and social development. Children and adolescents who are victims of commercial sexual exploitation quite often do not enjoy their right to good health, education, to live with their families, to enjoy childhood and to enjoy a life free from violence. The eradication of this problem must occur in order to ensure that all our children and adolescents are protected and are afforded to opportunity to grow and develop to the best of their potential.

**For more information or orientation about CSEC contact:
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Project: "Contribution to the Prevention and Elimination of the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of children and adolescents in Central America, Panama and the Dominican Republic"
International Labour Office

International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour

For further information, please visit the following web page: www.oit.or.cr/ipec/esc

With the financial support of the United States Department of Labour