



Giving a voice to adolescents in residential care: Knowledge and perceptions of commercial sexual exploitation and runaway behavior

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ABSTRACT

Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is a multifaceted global phenomenon in which adolescents involved in the child welfare system form a high-risk population. However, studies conducted in European countries remain scarce. We recruited a sample of 67 adolescents (50.7% girls and 47.8% boys) aged between 13 and 18 years old ($M = 15.8$; $SD = 2.2$) in residential care in the child welfare system in the south-east of Spain, and surveyed them about their runaway behavior, knowledge and perception of CSEC, and possible related preventive measures. Using a mixed-methods approach, we found that 47.8% of the adolescents reported having run away from the residential center and 92.5% knew someone that had run away. A total of 71.6% of the adolescents were aware of the problem of CSEC, and demanded more education and protection. They highlighted various motivations for engaging in this type of behavior. The use of ICT emerged as an important risk factor to take into account in prevention programs.

1. Introduction

Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) has been recognized as a serious form of victimization, and international organizations have recently begun to view it as a public health issue rather than as a law enforcement issue (Greenbaum, 2020). A global phenomenon, CSEC encompasses a broad range of sexually victimizing actions committed against children and adolescents that involve exploitation for financial or other gain, and range from the production and distribution of child pornography to the victimization of children through prostitution (Mukasey et al., 2007).

Traditionally, CSEC has been perceived as a hidden phenomenon, linked to organized crime, which occurs in developing countries. It involves vulnerable children and adolescents who are exploited within their own country and/or transported to developed countries to be sexually exploited there (Greenbaum, 2018). However, this rather limited vision has been overtaken by recent research, and it is now recognized that child and adolescent sexual exploitation can take place in any region or country (Greenbaum, 2020).

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2017), an estimated one million children and adolescents globally are affected by sexual exploitation each year. However, the true figure is probably much

higher given the disparities in definitions, the clandestine and criminal nature of the phenomenon, under-reporting, trafficked persons' lack of social recognition, and the absence of a centralized database to monitor cases (Greenbaum, 2020). A handful of European epidemiological studies have estimated a prevalence of CSEC of between 1 and 2.5% of girls and between 1 and 2.1% of boys in secondary schools in Sweden (Fredlund et al., 2013, 2018; Svedin & Priebe, 2007), Norway (Pedersen & Hegna, 2003), and Switzerland (Averdijk et al., 2019), but no study to date has addressed the sexual exploitation of boys and girls involved in the child welfare system in Europe. Meanwhile, in the USA, Edwards et al. (2006) estimated a national prevalence of 3.5% of youth (7–12th grade) who had at some point traded sex for money or drugs, of which two-thirds were boys. Greene et al. (1999) found that 28% of running away youth reported engaging in survival sex to obtain money, food, shelter, or other basic necessities, and that 10% of those living in shelters had been involved in situations of sexual exploitation. In addition, Kral et al. (1997) found that 14% of homeless girls and 23% of homeless boys had been sexually exploited in San Francisco, Denver and New York City. Nevertheless, the estimations found in these studies should be treated with caution due to the scarcity of the data and the difficulty of measuring and identifying this population. The reviews by Franchino-Olsen et al. (2020) in the US, and Benavente et al. (2021) in Europe offer

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a further analysis of the CSEC studies.

Sexually exploited youths usually present a constellation of physical and mental health problems which affect their wellbeing (Barnert et al., 2017), and which may directly result from their multiple victimization experiences. These include adverse health effects such as violence-related injuries, pregnancy, sexually transmitted and other acute infections (Greenbaum et al., 2015), mental health conditions, and disorders such as substance use and abuse, depression, post-traumatic stress, suicidal thoughts/behaviors, and anxiety (Le et al., 2018; McClelland & Newell, 2013). At the same time, this phenomenon presents many facets and nuances due to the overlap (and even role reversal) between victim and offender (Cockbain & Brayley, 2012; Reid & Piquero, 2014), CSEC and adult prostitution, and CSEC and homeless or running away youth (Klatt et al., 2014). In fact, runaway may be both a response to, and a cause of, further involvement in the welfare system and in commercial sexual relations (Pullmann et al., 2020), suggesting a possible two-way relationship.

On balance, the research carried out to date coincides in stating that the majority of victims of CSEC in Western countries have maintained multiple contacts with the child welfare system (Gibbs et al., 2018), due in part to their victimization history and in particular to sexual abuse in the family (Nixon et al., 2002; Tyler et al., 2001). Entering the child welfare system may add to the risk of CSEC (Bounds et al., 2015). Children and adolescents in the welfare system have great difficulty in identifying different forms of abuse and maltreatment such as CSEC, and since they lack strategies or resources to deal with them it is vital that the welfare system apply special protection measures in these cases (Rus et al., 2013, 2018).

1.1. Risk factors and reasons for involvement in CSEC

Multiple risk factors and vulnerabilities have been identified and connected to CSEC (Franchino-Olsen, 2021), including child abuse and maltreatment, caregiver strain, conflict with parents, running away or being thrown out, peer influence, exposure to family violence or criminal activity, economic vulnerability, school difficulties, substance use, poor mental health or view of self, involvement in child protective services, delinquency or involvement in the juvenile justice system, and prior sexual victimization. Of all of these, sexual abuse experiences, alcohol/drug use and running away behaviors are especially relevant.

De Vries & Goggin's (2020) meta-analysis of the impact of prior abuse (i.e., sexual, physical, and emotional) on the risk of child sexual exploitation showed that childhood sexual abuse significantly increases the risk of exploitation. Similarly, various studies have reported high rates of sexual exploitation among runaway youth and have detected a strong association between these variables (Fedina, Williamson, et al., 2019), which are also intertwined with experiences of poverty, homelessness, and survival sex (Jaekl & Laughon, 2021). Another study has also identified two trajectories of runaway behavior from a developmental perspective: chronic and low-rate runaway groups (Jeanis et al., 2020). These authors stress the importance of risk factors and the gender-specific trajectories of runaway. Thus, running away may also be a significant intervening variable between childhood sexual abuse and subsequent sexual exploitation (Fedina, Perdue, et al., 2019). Nonetheless, it should be borne in mind that the emotional reasons for young people to trade sex, such as the need to feel appreciated, the desire for closeness, and belonging, are also relevant but frequently ignored (Fredlund et al., 2018).

Beyond the motives underlying survival sex, namely, earning money or obtaining material rewards, other less explored motives have also been reported. Adolescents who participated in the Swedish national study (Fredlund et al., 2018) gave reasons such as fun and excitement, enjoying sex, the influence of their peers or partner, and the effect of alcohol or drugs. Most sexually exploited children do not self-identify as victims, often because of shame, fear, guilt, or close monitoring by the trafficker, but also because of their distrust of authorities or lack of

perception of themselves as being exploited. Many children and adolescents involved in CSEC have learned to rely on themselves out of necessity and reject paternalistic approaches to their situation (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018). Although the agency of young people to make their own decisions regarding engagement in commercial sex without any force or coercion is undeniable, this is a complex process, and it is necessary to consider the different underlying narratives and all the associated intervening factors. The involvement in commercial sex can be rethought through the matrix of vulnerability and agency (Showden & Majic 2018), which shows how the intersecting process of individual, social, structural and locational factors drive young people into the sex trade and also shape this kind of experience. Young people's engagement in commercial sex can be seen as a system-level failure: the inability to obtain adequate protection or prevention, the lack of economic alternatives or the scarce attractiveness of the existing ones, or a failure to understand the circumstances that make commercial sex a plausible option. Along these lines, research has also analyzed the long-term prognosis of sexually exploited children, revealing their high risk of continuing to actively engage in prostitution even after the intervention of protection services (Farley et al., 2004; Silbert & Pines, 1983). In order to facilitate early intervention and the prevention of situations of sexual exploitation it is necessary to determine the adolescents' contexts and/or reported motivations for engaging in commercial sexual relationships and the associated runaway behavior.

1.2. The present study

The factors affecting engagement in CSEC are complex, as are the needs of this vulnerable population. Prior studies have interviewed stakeholders, health care professionals, and social service providers about commercially sexually exploited youth (Sapiro et al., 2016), but few studies have included the perspective of children in the child welfare system, and although research on this topic is expanding rapidly, it remains scarce in Europe (Benavente et al., 2021).

Therefore, this study aims to give a voice to adolescents in the child welfare system, describing: (1) their runaway behavior, (2) their knowledge and perceptions of motivations for engaging in commercial sexual exploitation, and (3) possible preventive measures against commercial sexual exploitation. Understanding the barriers and facilitators of CSEC can inform the development of effective, targeted, and sensitive prevention programs and policies (Franchino-Olsen et al., 2021).

2. Method

2.1. Sample

A convenience sample was drawn from the child welfare system in the southeast of Spain (Majorca) and consisted of 67 adolescents, who identify as girls (50.7%; $n = 34$) and boys (47.8%; $n = 32$). One of the adolescents chose to not indicate their gender. Participants were aged between 13 and 18 years old ($M = 15.8$; $SD = 2.2$) at the time of responding to the survey. The characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1. Most of the adolescents had lived in more than one residential center over the course of their lives ($M = 2.15$; $SD = 1.09$). More than half of the sample (55.2%) had been aged between 12 and 15 years the first time they entered a residential center. They had been in their current one for less than 6 months ($n = 19$, 28.4%); between 6 months and 1 year ($n = 16$; 23.9%); between 1 and 5 years ($n = 25$; 37.3%); and for more than 5 years ($n = 6$; 9%).

2.2. Procedure

In late 2019, the Spanish national media reported on various cases of CSEC in youth involved in the child welfare system in the southeast of Spain. This prompted the Majorcan Institute of Social Affairs (IMAS) to commission a study in order to collect information and empirical

Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample.

	Total	
	n	%
Gender ¹		
Boys	32	47.8
Girls	34	50.7
Age		
13–15	18	27.3
16–18	49	74.2
Age on entering a residential center for the first time ²		
0–5 years old	2	3
6–11 years old	16	23.9
12–15 years old	37	55.2
16 or older	11	16.4
Years living in the current residential center ³		
Less than 6 months	19	28.4
6 months – 1 year	16	23.9
2–5 years	25	37.3
More than 5 years	6	9

¹One participant chose to not indicate their gender.

²One participant did not indicate the age on entering a residential center for the first time.

³One participant did not indicate the years living in the current residential center.

evidence on this complex problem in residential centers and establish effective measures for prevention, early identification, and adequate care for victims of CSEC. To compile this information an *ad hoc* survey was developed by the research team during the initial research phase. The items included were created and conceptualized based on empirical knowledge of CSEC and its related risk factors. Adopting a child-centered approach (Toros et al., 2013), the present paper focuses on a questionnaire administered to adolescents in child welfare system residential centers in Majorca concerning their runaway behaviors, knowledge and perceptions of CSEC, and prevention measures.

Residential centers were contacted by email in April 2020. The study was presented to the director of the centers, detailing the aims and conditions. All 38 residential centers agreed to participate in the study. Thus, all 140 boys and girls aged between 14- and 18-years old living in residential centers run by the Majorcan Institute of Social Affairs (IMAS) were invited to participate in the study, and approximately 48% completed the questionnaire in May 2020. Participants were informed of the study aims and conditions via a brief online presentation before consenting to complete the questionnaire. They were also told that they could withdraw from the study at any point. It was emphasized that participation was voluntary, and that all data would remain confidential and accessible only to the research team. The identity of the participants was protected, and all the information given was coded randomly using a numerical ID to ensure anonymity of all responses. All procedures were conducted in accordance with the basic ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Assembly, 2013) and the ethical standards drawn up by the university Committee on Bioethics (IRB00003099).

2.3. Measures

A self-administered *ad hoc* online survey containing 12 closed questions and 2 open questions was designed for the study. Follow-up questions (e.g., *How many times? Or How long were you on the run?*) were added to some items to elicit more information about the answers given. These questions were grouped into 4 different areas presented in Table 2. The questionnaire obtained a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.64, indicating an acceptable level of internal reliability (Taber, 2018).

The survey was conducted in Spanish, and the adolescents responded in Spanish as well. Once the study was completed and the information stored in the database, the data were translated and revised by an expert

Table 2
Survey structure.

Areas	Items	Data recorded	Examples
Sociodemographic characteristics	1 to 5	Gender, age, and other information on residential experience and involvement in the child welfare system	<i>What gender identity do you identify with; How old were you the first time you entered a residential center?</i>
Runaway information	6 and 7	Runaway behaviors and details	<i>Have you ever run away from the place where you lived?; Where did you sleep when you were on the run?</i>
Knowledge of CSEC and its related risk factors	8 to 11	What adolescents know about these specific issues	<i>Do you know what it means to be involved in situations of CSEC? Which of these situations do you think are dangerous for a boy or girl like you? Has the residential center given you any information or instructions on how to prevent or act in these situations?</i>
CSEC prevention	12 to 14	Knowledge about prevention, proposals, and perceptions of the adolescents	<i>What do you think could be done by residential centers to prevent CSEC risk situations?; What would you say to a boy or girl who is in a CSEC situation?</i>

in translations and revisions from Spanish to English in the field of psychology and social sciences. When the translation was complete, the authors reviewed it to ensure that the content corresponded to what the participants had meant to say in their mother tongue. This back-translation was applied to ensure that the nuances of the responses were not lost in the English translation. Special attention was given to the answers given to the qualitative questions.

2.4. Data analysis

A mixed methods design was used. A quantitative analysis enabled us to obtain descriptive statistics for the adolescents' runaway behaviors, knowledge, and perceived risk factors for CSEC. Frequency distributions and measures of central tendency were obtained to provide an overview of the sample. The Chi-square test was used to compare gender differences between boys and girls.

Qualitative methodology was used to explore the adolescents' impressions of preventive measures and obtain their advice on how to reduce the risk of sexual exploitation. The qualitative information obtained from items 13 and 14 was broken down and a thematic analysis performed, proposing categories and building a rationale behind them. Categories were agreed by consensus following several rounds of classification and discussion, when the team (consisting of two psychologists and two criminologists) found that the analysis reached saturation. It was also agreed that the categories would be mutually exclusive, so that an answer could not be categorized in more than one category. Once the classification system had been established, the knowledge yielded by the different methods was amalgamated and all findings were combined to integrate the different rationales behind the quantitative and qualitative methods (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006).

3. Results

3.1. Runaway behavior

Almost half of the adolescents (47.8%; $n = 32$) reported running away from their residential centers. No significant gender differences were observed in the runaway experiences.

Of those who had run away, 18.8% ($n = 6$) only did so once, 14.9% ($n = 10$) did so 2 to 6 times, and 46.9% ($n = 15$) did so more than 6 times. The longest time they had been on the run was generally less than a week (56.3%; $n = 18$), and at the time the questionnaire was administered the average time that had passed since the last time they had run away was 9.2 months ($SD = 6.2$). While they were on the run, they reported having slept at a friend's house (53.1%; $n = 17$), outdoors (19.4%; $n = 13$), at a relative's house (21.9%; $n = 7$), at their partner's house (21.9%; $n = 7$), in unoccupied houses (18.8%; $n = 6$), or in the house of someone they had just met (15.2%; $n = 5$). The most commonly reported motivations for running away were the center's excessive rules (50%; $n = 16$), to see friends living outside the center (46.9%; $n = 15$), because of an argument with a peer at the center (43.8%; $n = 14$), to have fun (43.8%; $n = 14$), because they felt bad about themselves (40.6%; $n = 13$), or to visit a relative (40.6%; $n = 13$). Only 9.4% ($n = 3$) reported having run away to obtain money. No significant differences were found between boys and girls in the motivations for running away.

Regarding the presence of excessively strict rules, the most frequently reported reason for running away, this rigidity seemed to cause discomfort in the adolescents, who considered that relaxing authoritarian control would not only be desirable but would also help stop people wanting to leave the center: "not being afraid that if something happens to me, they'll punish me" (participant 48); "stop burdening young people with rules, to prevent running away and its catastrophic outcomes" (participant 20); "giving us more freedom would be a way to prevent running away" (participant 67).

It seems that escaping was also related to not feeling at home in the center, according to some participants: "let us do the normal things that kids do when they're with a family [...] they tell you this is like your home [refers to the residential center], but sometimes it doesn't seem like it" (participant 3); "they could make more effort to make us feel more at home where we live" (participant 31).

3.2. CSEC knowledge

Most of the sample (71.6%; $n = 48$) reported knowing what it means to be involved in situations of CSEC, but 23.9% ($n = 16$) did not. More than half of them (65.7%; $n = 44$) said that the residential center had provided them with information or instructions on how to prevent or act in these situations. By contrast, 28.4% ($n = 19$) of them had not received any information from the center. No significant gender differences were found in knowledge or in having received CSEC awareness training.

The adolescents considered that educators and center personnel were ultimately responsible for providing this knowledge: "they should explain to us the risks of getting involved in a CSEC network, and the center staff should teach us what situations could put us in danger" (participant 37); "a good way to learn would be if they showed us real cases and statements from people who had experienced it" (participant 43); "talk more about this issue with us and stop it being a taboo subject" (participant 11).

3.3. Perceived motivations for running away and becoming involved in CSEC

When asked if they knew someone who had run away from the center, almost all of the adolescents (92.5%; $n = 62$) knew somebody who had. In their opinion, the motivations for this were mainly the center's excessive rules (56.5%; $n = 35$), to see friends living outside the center (56.5%; $n = 35$), to have fun (56.5%; $n = 35$), or because of an

argument with a peer at the center (43.8%; $n = 27$).

As regards their perception of other adolescents' motivations to become involved in CSEC situations, the most frequently reported reason for boys and girls alike was to obtain money (67.2%; $n = 45$), to obtain alcohol and drugs (56.7%; $n = 38$), and to have a place to sleep when you run away (56.7%; $n = 38$) (see Table 3).

The only perceived motivation that showed significant differences according to participant gender was "to obtain material goods" ($\chi^2 = 4.853$; $df = 1$; $p = .028$), whereby girls were more likely than boys to believe that this was a frequent motivation for engaging in CSEC. This perceived deprivation of material goods owned by other people of the same age seemed to be a triggering factor, as stressed by some of the participants: "if we had money, clothes, and mobile phones, we wouldn't have to look for them on the street" (participant 65) and "they should give us more clothes and start giving us weekly rewards" (participant 67) in order to prevent them from obtaining these things in other ways.

3.4. Perceived risk factors for CSEC

As can be seen in Table 4, when asked about situations that could entail a risk of becoming involved in CSEC, the most threatening scenarios reported were sending intimate videos or images (79.1%; $n = 53$), accepting offers to participate in photography sessions with adults (64.2%; $n = 43$), and sleeping in unoccupied houses (62.7%; $n = 42$). No significant statistical differences were found between genders for any of the dangerous situations.

3.5. CSEC prevention measures

The preventive actions that the adolescents considered most effective to avoid becoming involved in CSEC are shown in Table 5, and included more information on CSEC (53.7%; $n = 36$), more sex education (52.2%; $n = 35$), the imprisonment of exploiters (52.2%; $n = 35$), knowledge of more protection strategies for young people (49.3%), and greater police action against exploiters (49.3%). No significant statistical differences were found between genders for any of the preventive actions.

Related to police surveillance and protection requirements, participants emphasized the underlying need to be self-aware and to report suspicious behavior: "if you see that somebody's been following you for a long time, call the police" (participant 29); "if you see it [a CSEC situation], don't stay silent, go and report it to the police so they know what's happening" (participant 32); "if something like this [a CSEC situation] happens to you, let them know because they can help you and you can go to a psychologist or something like that" (participant 23).

The bond with educators was a key element that became apparent in some of the emotional and supervision demands of the participants, for example that they "should give us a little more affection" (participant 21), "we need more affection and understanding" (participant 67), and "they must make sure that there's trust between educators and girls"

Table 3
Adolescents' perceived motivations to become involved in situations that may lead to CSEC.

	Total		Gender (%)	
	n	%	Boys	Girls
To obtain money	45	67.2	59.4	73.5
To have a place to sleep	38	56.7	43.8	67.6
To obtain alcohol and/or other drugs	38	56.7	46.9	67.6
To obtain material goods (e.g., mobile phone, clothes, shoes, jewelry, etc.)	37	55.2	40.6	70.6
Being threatened if you don't	33	49.3	37.5	61.8
Being in love with the person who introduces you to CSEC	33	49.3	40.6	55.9
To have fun or new experiences	20	54.1	31.3	29.4
To feel good and not think	17	45.9	25	26.5

Table 4
Situations related to CSEC and perceived as dangerous by adolescents in residential centers.

	Total		Gender (%)	
	n	%	Boys	Girls
Sending videos or images of yourself naked, in underwear, or in a sexual pose	53	79.1	78.1	79.4
Accepting an offer from an adult to participate in a photo shoot	43	64.2	56.3	70.6
Sleeping in an unoccupied house	42	62.7	59.4	64.7
Dating someone you've only met through social media	39	58.2	46.9	70.6
Sleeping at the house of someone you barely know	39	58.2	50	67.6
Frequenting places where older people go	35	52.2	53.1	50
Receiving any of these proposals through a friend or colleague	33	49.3	46.9	52.9

Table 5
Actions to prevent CSEC situations.

	Total		Gender (%)	
	n	%	Boys	Girls
More information about CSEC	36	53.7	40.6	64.7
More sex education	35	52.2	53.1	50
Imprison the exploiters	35	52.2	46.9	58.8
More protection strategies for young people	33	49.3	50	50
More police action against exploiters	33	49.3	46.9	52.9
More communication between educators and young people	31	46.3	50	44.1
Learn more about the risks of running away	30	44.8	37.5	50
More affection and understanding toward teenagers	29	43.3	37.5	50
More information on the risks of taking alcohol and doing drugs	24	35.8	37.5	35.3
More warnings about dangerous areas to avoid	21	31.3	40.6	23.5

(participant 23).

The participants also mentioned supervision and management of their free time, suggesting a need for the adult caregivers to exert some level of control over them, which could serve to distract from or avoid CSEC and to strengthen ties with them: “they should control who we go out with” (participant 48); “introduce the people you’re going to go out of the center with to the educators” (participant 54); “to strengthen the kids’ friendships and partner relationships, always keeping in mind that it is the kids who choose their relationships; we also need more organized activities, and more cultural and leisure resources in the afternoons and at weekends” (participant 65).

Some adolescents highlighted other related self-protection measures as being important to prevent CSEC: “always go out with people you know very well and be sure that they’ll be able to help you if necessary; avoid going out at night alone or with people who are older than you, and also don’t run away” (participant 29); “things should be talked about more with the kids, they should be taught that they don’t have to let themselves get into risky situations, and if at any time they feel threatened, they should learn to tell an adult” (participant 35).

3.6. Participants’ advice for young people experiencing CSEC

The adolescents were asked what advice they would give to other boys or girls that may be experiencing a CSEC situation and their answers were categorized into five groups.

The most usual response among adolescents was **help-seeking advice** ($n = 25$), which consisted of suggesting that the person in question should report it or seek help from a trusted adult such as an educator, parent, legal guardian, psychologist, or police officer: “you have to get help from an adult, and they’ll tell you what to do” (participant 46); “I would say tell a trusted adult, I’d encourage them to report it, always accompanied by an adult” (participant 50); “go to the

police or tell your legal guardian” (participant 60). Some adolescents emphasized reporting the situation to the police, indicating that they realized that those involved were in serious jeopardy: “don’t listen to anybody, report it to the police and don’t be afraid” (participant 57).

The second most frequently reported type of response was a **reprimand** ($n = 14$), evidencing moral rejection of the conduct and/or urging the minor to desist as it was inappropriate or inadmissible: “they must think of themselves; their dignity’s being violated and they’re being disrespectful to themselves” (participant 15); “I’d tell them not to do it, sex isn’t a way to make money” (participant 33); “if she was my friend, I’d tell her that what she’s doing is disgusting” (participant 23). In this type of answer, the participants tended to frame the problem as a free and rational choice to engage in CSEC, clearly laying the blame on the adolescent involved: “Because of this kind of stupid thing, you could end up in jail or worse; I’d ask them why they’ve done such horrible things because normal people don’t do this kind of thing for no reason” (participant 3); “Don’t let anyone or anything persuade you, especially if they’re adults, because you can end up with a very big problem, or getting an STD. If you want to get money or clothes... either you work or you go without” (participant 27).

Those who gave **emotional support** answers ($n = 9$) tried to understand the reason behind this issue and give support, provide hope, or encourage the victim. This kind of answer does not offer a specific solution but is empathic and shows intention to understand. Some examples were: “you shouldn’t feel alone, because you’re not” (participant 6) or “I’d tell her that none of it’s her fault, that she’s being deceived. Think about your family, who love you” (participant 64). Some of them also tried to give hope: “Although it’s hard, you’ll get over it, and this kind of thing makes you stronger, not weaker” (participant 20).

Some participants suggested **self-protection measures** ($n = 7$) consisting of actions or tips to avoid or prevent CSEC, such as “take care of yourself, and don’t go to certain places” (participant 10); “be very careful and be preventive with the things that are up to you” (participant 14); or “protect yourself a lot, and choose your friends well, tell your parents and educators where you’re going and who with, and tell them while you’re out that you’re ok” (participant 2).

Lastly, the most infrequent type of response, but no less important, were those **justifying** ($n = 4$) the motivation for engaging in CSEC or the “right” to do it, with statements such as: “I’d tell them only to leave it [the CSEC] if they wanted to, because if they didn’t want to, there’d be no use punishing them, they’d continue to do it. Because they must be doing it for a reason” (participant 33); “If a boy or girl wants to become involved in prostitution, it’s up to them, it’s no one else’s business” (participant 65); or “not having weekly pocket money like a normal teenager at home affects you because you see that your friends have things and you don’t because you can’t afford it, so that encourages you to do this type of thing [...] if I had to earn money to buy something that I liked, I’d do it too” (participant 66).

4. Discussion

The CSEC is a serious public health problem in European countries as elsewhere. Although no published studies have reported the prevalence of CSEC in Spain, various cases have recently come to light in the Spanish child welfare system and have had a major social impact.

International research shows that various characteristics of children and adolescents with legal protection measures are related to a higher risk of becoming involved in situations of sexual exploitation (Jackson, 2014). Thus, previous experience of victimization, mental health problems, substance abuse, and running away from a residential center are all high-risk factors for these young people (Panlilio et al., 2019).

Although most publications on CSEC are primarily based on information gleaned from archives and professionals who work with victims (Rand, 2010), the present study examined the problem of CSEC from the perspective of the young people themselves, keeping the focus on them (Toros et al., 2013). Our results show that the majority of our young

participants knew what CSEC is, as a result of the information provided by professionals in residential centers. Nonetheless, a significant number of them had not received any information in this regard, which may mask the lack of training or sensitivity of center staff toward CSEC. All this highlights the importance of prevention among professionals and adolescents, which should never be neglected (Rizo et al., 2019). The adolescents' perceived motivations to become involved in risky activities related to CSEC were as a means to obtain money, which was especially important for the girls in this sample, followed by alcohol and drugs, material goods, and a place to sleep, although more than half also indicated that it was a way to have fun or new experiences, as reported in other studies (Fredlund et al., 2018), evidencing the multiplicity of vulnerabilities and associated motivations. The boys and girls in our sample held quite similar opinions, and no significant gender differences were found other than in the motivation of obtaining material goods through CSEC. This homogeneity could be partially explained by the survival sex hierarchy model (McDonald & Middleton, 2019).

The survival sex hierarchy model is a theoretical approach that attempts to explain the variety of reasons reported by adolescents in the welfare system for becoming involved in CSEC. This model assumes that the involvement of a minor in situations of sex with an adult, be it financially or otherwise motivated, is always a situation of exploitation because a person with greater experience, maturity, and resources is taking advantage of a child's or adolescent's needs (i.e., physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, self-actualization, and transcendence) (McDonald's & Middleton, 2019). However, commercial sex in adolescents is not a uniform phenomenon but instead encompasses a wide range of situations that differ in terms of motivations, presence or absence of coercion, and frequency of the behavior (van de Walle et al., 2012). Therefore, some authors have questioned whether consent can be restricted to chronological age, arguing that adolescents can make decisions about their sexuality and contending that girls (Lloyd, 2019) and boys (Mai, 2011) involved in sexual activities should be recognized as decision makers and agents of their actions.

The adolescents surveyed also knew how to identify risky behaviors that should be avoided in order to reduce the probability of becoming involved in CSEC situations. Thus, most of the sample considered sexting, or sending sexual material or nude photographs and videos, to be high-risk behavior, followed by invitations to participate in photography sessions, generally through social media, which were considered especially dangerous by the girls, and meeting up with someone only known previously through social media. It should be added that ICTs have multiplied the possibilities for contact between people who are willing to pay to have sex via webcam with children and adolescents (Mitchell et al., 2011). The Europol report "Internet Organized Crime Threat Assessment" (IOCTA, 2020) has highlighted an annual rise in the amount of child sexual material available online, in many cases produced by the minors themselves. In this respect, as the use of ICTs has become widespread, the means for CSEC have become more sophisticated. Material goods or money can be explicitly offered via ICTs in exchange for sex (Shannon, 2008), or implicitly and subtly through gifts in the context of a relationship of apparent trust without explicitly requesting anything in return (Webster et al., 2012). For example, the use of gifts in online grooming situations can predispose minors to agree to send photographs or videos with sexual content to adults (De Santisteban et al., 2018).

Running away and not having a place to sleep were also high-risk factors highlighted by our adolescents, and have been identified as a repeated pattern linked to abuse and exploitation (Sidebottom et al., 2020). In turn, once involved in CSEC, the victims will likely run away again to return to the exploitative context (Hershberger et al., 2018). Running away from residential centers is not a new or country-specific problem (see Biehal & Wade, 2000; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; Lerpiniere et al., 2013), but more efforts should be made to better understand why minors run away and take effective steps to tackle the reasons (OFSTED, 2013).

The boys and girls surveyed also talked about prevention. They stressed the importance of emotional support, the relationship with staff members, sex and emotional education, and information on CSEC to reinforce the protection capacities of young people and reduce their vulnerability. Improving these aspects would help encourage adolescents' self-protective and help-seeking behaviors, as well as the processes of identification, disclosure, and reporting of sexual exploitation. In fact, in the wake of growing awareness of the nature and scope of CSEC, some residential centers and child welfare agencies in several countries have started to develop and implement training for their social service staff (McKinnin, 2017; McMahon-Howard & Reimers, 2013), which should include how professionals' gender stereotypes may influence the identification and response to sexually exploited youth (Hill & Diaz, 2021). In addition, an education website about CSEC for adolescents would appear to be a relevant and useful means by which to increase participants' knowledge of CSEC and decrease their tolerance of it (Murphy et al., 2016).

The role of professionals, especially police officers, is also crucial in CSEC prevention, according to the adolescents surveyed. Previous studies have indicated that law enforcement responses to juvenile prostitution are influential in determining whether these young people are viewed as victims of CSEC or as delinquents, and can affect the resources offered to them (Mitchell et al., 2010). Three professional attitudes toward young people in welfare system residential centers have been described as increasing their risk of becoming involved in CSEC. The first of these is the view of children and adolescents as clever, with experience of how to behave on the streets (streetwise), leading to the assumption that they will know how to protect themselves and the consequent failure to provide the protection resources that would be offered to other children. The second is the perception of minors as problematic, rather than understanding that their behavioral problems are a consequence of their underlying vulnerability. Finally, the third attitude associated with a higher risk of CSEC is that of having much lower expectations of these children and adolescents than of minors who do not reside in protection centers, leading to the perception that many of their behaviors are normal for them, when in other children they would be considered alarming (Lerpiniere et al., 2013).

However, studies in which child victims of sexual exploitation have been interviewed have also reported that these young people described an acute sense of feeling criticized for their actions or lifestyles or of being told what to do by professionals, which often deterred them from seeking help. Therefore, to reduce the risk of involvement in CSEC and improve adolescents' engagement in self-care, professionals in residential centers should adopt a non-judgmental approach to understand the needs and lifestyles of the young people in their care (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018). Our study also confirms the need for solid, reliable, and comprehensive instruments to assess risk factors for CSEC, which has been the subject of recent research using quantitative (De Vries et al., 2020) and qualitative methodologies (Roache & McSherry, 2021).

CSEC remains a broad social problem entailing norms, attitudes, and beliefs that maintain and reinforce sexual exploitation of minors and stigmatize victims (Buller et al., 2020). Consequently, it is also imperative to better unravel the environmental systems that perpetuate this kind of practice and improve interventions. Similarly, the effectiveness of previously implemented laws and plans that remain mostly unclear requires clarification (Dubowitz, 2017).

5. Limitations

Our findings should be considered within the context of several methodological limitations. All data were cross-sectional, and consequently, causality between variables could not be established. The sample size was small, and larger samples are needed to conduct analyses that lead to robust results in this area. However, it should be borne in mind that the sample surveyed represented almost half of the total population of adolescents in residential centers in Majorca. In addition,

even though European studies have underlined the importance of giving young people a voice and involving them in CSEC prevention (Cody & D'Arcy, 2017), most studies have used adult samples (Benavente et al., 2021). The present study is one of the first attempts to give a voice to adolescents in the welfare system regarding an important topic that directly affects them. Generalizability may also be limited as data were only collected in one Spanish region; consequently, our findings may not apply to other regions in Spain or to other European countries. Furthermore, this study used self-report measures, which are susceptible to recall bias. The survey instrument did not include standardized measures and was instead developed *ad hoc* by the research team and community collaborators during the initial research phase. The researchers created a new instrument because few previous studies have surveyed adolescents in the welfare system on this topic. There may also be limitations related to the data collection method, which included an online questionnaire that may have impacted the outcomes. Alternative procedures, such as in-person field interviews, may have served as a more robust data collection method for the purposes of our study. It should be borne in mind that this study was part of an official investigation regarding CSEC in children from residential centers in Majorca. Our objective was to obtain information regarding the risk factors and dynamics that might be related to this problem. Thus, we were not allowed to intervene in the investigation and were not able to question adolescents regarding their direct or indirect experiences of CSEC. Thus, this useful information was not obtained. Finally, because we did not analyze how respondents construct their perceptions, their opinions may not be grounded in their own experiences but to some extent in stereotypes or beliefs of third parties (Ellemers, 2018). We acknowledge that this may have impacted the findings. Despite these limitations, this study improves our understanding of salient risk factors and motivations for involvement in CSEC based on young people's reports.

6. Conclusions

In summary, although few studies have been carried out on CSEC in Europe, and more specifically in Spain, our results indicate that adolescents with legal protection measures in residential centers are aware of the problem of CSEC and demand more information, education, and protection. They reported various reasons for engaging in this type of behavior, all of which may be located in the survival sex hierarchy (McDonald & Middleton, 2019). The use of ICTs renders it easy for exploiters to approach children and adolescents who, often unaware of the risk involved, enter into personal relationships in which they end up self-producing pornographic material. The results also indicate that understanding the experiences and perceptions of adolescents in the welfare system regarding CSEC is essential to develop effective prevention services and evidence-based treatment tailored to their unique needs (Landers et al., 2017). We would also like to highlight the need to adopt an ecological perspective to address adolescent runaway behavior due to the importance of the context in which these adolescents live.

Uncited references

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Noemí Pereda: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition. **Marta Codina:** Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. **Diego A. Díaz-Faes:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization. **Bárbara Kanter:** Data curation, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence

the work reported in this paper.

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