

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents in Europe: A Systematic Review

Beatriz Benavente, Diego A. Díaz-Faes, Lluís Ballester, and Noemí Pereda

Abstract

Objectives: The objective of this review is to provide a systematic and critical summary of findings regarding empirical studies conducted on commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) in Europe. The purpose is to gain an understanding of the characteristics and main topics addressed in European research on CSEC, identify gaps, and give suggestions for future studies. **Method:** The review was guided by the “Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis—Protocols”. A comprehensive search on several databases was conducted to identify published and unpublished empirical research on CSEC in Europe, revealing 3,846 documents. In total, 56 research papers that focused specifically on CSEC in European samples were included. **Synthesis:** Research concerning European studies of CSEC and trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation has developed significantly over the last 20 years but is still rather limited and mainly focused on the UK and Sweden. Most of the studies reviewed suffer from important methodological flaws such as an inaccurate definition of the phenomenon analyzed, small and convenience samples, and nonvalidated and nonspecific instruments. **Conclusions:** Findings from this study demonstrate the need for greater exploration and research around a number of areas of sexual exploitation of children in Europe. Further work is necessary in terms of capacity building, training, and awareness-raising for society as a whole and, specifically, professionals providing direct support to children and young people at risk of exploitation.

Keywords

child sex trafficking, minor sex trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation of children, child sexual abuse, human trafficking, children and adolescents

Human trafficking is a global public health problem entailing different forms of exploitation such as labor trafficking, sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation, forced criminal activities, domestic servitude, forced marriage, debt bondage, organ trafficking, and other related “industries” and activities linked thereto, including the possible overlap between its different forms (Greijer & Doek, 2016).

Within these forms of trafficking in persons, child sex trafficking (CST) has traditionally been perceived as a hidden phenomenon occurring in low- and middle-income countries involving vulnerable children and adolescents being exploited within their own country and/or also entailing their transportation to developed countries to be sexually exploited there. Instead, it is now known that it can take place within or through any region or country with different levels of organization and can be classified into two large groups: domestic sex trafficking and international sex trafficking (Greenbaum, 2018). In line with this vision, commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), or child sexual exploitation (CSE), has been adopted as a more recent term and provides a broader definition of CST which has been revealed as an expanding framework to understand, prevent, and intervene when it comes to this type of

exploitation. However, both terms CSEC and CST still suffer from significant conceptualization and definition problems and asymmetries between countries, intergovernmental organizations, and nongovernmental organizations, thereby limiting identification and measurement. Thus, there is a considerable degree of overlap or intersection between the two terms even though they are not exactly alike (Gerassi, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2011) and have often been used interchangeably.

CSEC is a fundamental violation of children’s rights and a severe form of sexual victimization where sexual abuse and economic exploitation of minors coexist (Estes & Weiner, 2002). Terminologically, as contained in its definition in the

“First World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children” (1996; Mahler, 1997), CSEC comprises sexual abuse by the adult and remuneration in cash or kind for the child or a third party. The minor is treated as both a sexual object and a commercial object (see a summary of the three congresses addressing this problem in Beddoe, 2015). CSEC encompasses any kind of forced prostitution, production of CSE materials (CSEM), sexual exploitation in the context of tourism and travel, survival sex, early forced marriage and mail-order bride, and any kind of sexual performance (Barnert et al., 2017; Greenbaum & Crawford-Jakubiak, 2015). CSEC does not require any kind of force, fraud, or coercion, although this does usually occur, simply because minors cannot legally consent to trading for sex; in the same way, no movement or transportation of the minor is in itself needed (Greenbaum, 2018).

Prior Literature

The bulk of research on human trafficking focuses on sex trafficking to the detriment of other forms of exploitation, even so it is limited by the same challenges as other human trafficking research (Twis & Shelton, 2018); since few studies are empirical, most of them have no sample of victims or survivors and rarely are they based on a specific human behavior theory. The same happens with CST/CSEC, and although the global report by the International Labour Organization (2017) estimated one million children were victims of commercial sexual exploitation in 2016, no studies have been carried out in the general population to reveal its prevalence, and robust quantitative research remains scant (Cockbain & Bowers, 2019; Kelly & Karsna, 2017). Consequently, existing estimates vary widely, and the true extent of CSEC is unknown (Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2017); nonetheless, it seems that domestic trafficking victims are less likely to be identified than international trafficking victims across borders (Brayley & Cockbain, 2014). Likewise, the persistent shortage of identified boys and gender/sexual minorities as CSEC victims is related, to some extent, to social and cultural factors such as gender roles and social expectations (Greenbaum, 2020).

Most of the studies on the problem and its characteristics come from samples from the United States or focus on specific problems related to the response of professional contexts (such as health care or welfare). Thus, previously published reviews provide a general overview of CST (Chung & English, 2015; Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2017) focusing on the United States (Schauer & Wheaton, 2006) and also reviewing global evidence on transactional sex among youth (Krisch et al., 2019). Other reviews focus on minors’ risk factors from practitioners’ perspectives (Choi, 2015; Wood, 2020), mental health issues of the survivors (Levine, 2017), the role that professionals within the health care setting can offer (Walker, 2002), and the major lack of education and training in health care professionals to successfully detect and intervene with the serious consequences of this experience (Barnert et al., 2017). Some studies emphasize the social work perspective on sexual exploitation of women and children (Hodge & Lietz, 2007) or the major

challenges of this phenomenon for the child welfare system (Fong & Cardoso, 2010). Recently, Lavoie et al. (2019) described research concerning best-practice forensic interviewing approaches to elicit disclosures from child victims of sexual exploitation.

Regarding systematic reviews, Mitchell et al. (2017) and Moynihan, Mitchell, et al. (2018) alerted about the lack of data and information concerning CSEC in males, hindering the detection of these young men who in many cases are referred to as delinquents and not as victims. Meanwhile, Felner and DuBois (2017) summarized the programs and policies developed to prevent or intervene in CSEC, finding that there are few rigorous evaluations integrated into operational programs. Rizo et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of education programs addressed to youth to prevent CSEC, while Vrubliauskaitė (2018) underlined the psychological factors increasing the risk for adolescent girls to become victims of human trafficking. Le et al. (2018) showed the health issues associated with CSEC/CST. Further, Muraya and Fry (2016) analyzed the practices of aftercare services, and Moynihan, Pitcher, and Saewyc (2018) presented a critical summary of interventions that have been implemented with sexually exploited children and adolescents and their effectiveness. Focused on instruments to assess CSEC, the integrative review by Armstrong (2017) examined the existing CSEC screening instruments and evaluated the feasibility of their use in an emergency department setting; McCoy (2019) addressed the operationalization of vulnerability for CSEC, and Franchino-Olsen (2019a, 2021) analyzed the relevant vulnerabilities and its frameworks and theories in understanding the mechanisms behind the risk factors for CSEC. Recently, Garg et al. (2020) established the extrinsic, intrinsic, and systemic barriers leading to reduced utilization and access to medical services for trafficked youth, and in the same vein, Albright et al. (2020) found that the majority of the detected facilitators, barriers, and recommendations are related to health care providers and organizations. Franchino-Olsen et al. (2020) and Hampton and Lieggi (2020) focused on the prevalence of the problem in the United States, while Buller et al. (2020) summarized norms, attitudes, and beliefs associated with sexual exploitation.

Aim of the Study

In recent years, CSEC has gained increasing recognition as an important area of study. This is particularly the case in the United States, where both domestic minor sex trafficking and CST/CSEC have been explored by researchers. In Europe, however, the evidence available has not been systematically reviewed, and there has been no joint identification or analysis of the research published; few studies have critically analyzed the problem of CSEC in European countries and its possible specific characteristics. Only the review of Chase and Statham (2005) highlighted the characteristics of the problem in the United Kingdom, while Colley (2019) examined the characteristics of organized CSEC perpetrators, also in the UK. To begin to address this knowledge gap, the current study aims to provide

a systematic and critical summary of findings regarding empirical studies on CSEC in Europe. Given the conceptual disparity, the differences in perspectives, and the need to promote and develop comparative research, this systematic review was carried out to identify and understand the characteristics of the quantitative European studies on CSEC including their aims, the terminology and methodology used, and the main results.

Method

This systematic review was conducted according to the guidelines of “Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis—Protocols” (Moher et al., 2015). To carry it out, we used a restricted definition of CSEC addressing the core of the phenomenon involving forced prostitution or transactional sex, trafficking for sexual purpose, and sex tourism and travel, not considering CSEM, forced marriage and mail-order bride, and HIV-AIDS due to its limited scope.

A comprehensive search on several databases was conducted to identify published and unpublished empirical research on CSEC in Europe. The review included all available publications in databases up to and including July 15, 2020. On the one hand, a search was performed in the following databases: Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, PsycINFO, and ProQuest, and the search strategy was focused on the phenomenon of CSEC and limited to the title, abstract, and key words. Search terms used to identify the studies were the following: (“sexual* exploi*” OR “CSEC” OR “CSEY” OR “CSE” OR “CST” OR “DMST” OR “human traffic*” OR “sex* traffic*” OR “domestic servitude” OR “prostitution” OR “sex* work*” OR “survival sex” OR “transactional sex” OR “sex tourism”) AND (“child*” OR “adolescen*” OR “youth*” OR “young” OR “teen*” OR “juvenile” OR “minor*” OR “girls” OR “boys”). Within the search terms, a territorial restriction was also applied to include only European studies or studies from a European country in a broad sense.

Meanwhile, gray literature, such as unpublished articles, reports, dissertations, conference papers, and editorials, was examined using different databases and resources: ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global, OpenGrey, Grey Literature Report, Social Science Research Network (SSRN), WHO Institutional Repository (IRIS), and Google Scholar. Different combinations of the key search terms restricted to the title were used in the Standard or Advanced Search, depending on the search engine. In addition to the above, reference lists from review articles and reports found during the search process were analyzed. Likewise, several organizations’ websites working on CSEC or related fields were searched and examined.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria identified original published or unpublished empirical research in English related to CSEC in Europe, focusing on samples of participants 17 years old or younger and the psychosocial characteristics of the phenomenon and its

victims. Reviews and summaries of previous studies were not included. Grounds for exclusion were also child and adolescent sexual abuse studies not addressing sexual exploitation and/or transactional sex, forced marriage and mail-order bride studies, CSEM studies, HIV-AIDS-focused studies, studies on sexual exploitation with adult samples, non-European studies or international comparative studies not focusing on Europe, studies analyzing perpetrators alone, synthesis of serious case review reports of CSE, and sociolegal studies related to CSEC. For multiple publications of the same study or multiple studies with overlapping samples, those with the most complete or pertinent outcomes or data were used.

Data Coding

Several characteristics of the studies were coded in relation to six differentiated aspects. First, with regard to bibliometric indicators, we coded (a) name of signatory authors and/or organizations, (b) year of publication, and (c) their country of origin. Besides, we coded several methodological aspects of the studies such as (d) method, (e) data collection period, (f) geographic location of study, (g) object of study, (h) study participants, (i) sample size, (j) response rate, (k) participant age range, (l) participant gender, (m) participant racial/ethnic/national background, and (n) terminology used.

Results

This systematic review reviewed a total of 56 publications, the vast majority of which are peer-reviewed publications (articles) accounting for 78.6%, while non-peer-reviewed publications account for 21.4% (Figure 1).

Description of the Studies

Peer-reviewed publications. Forty-four empirical studies published in scientific journals were included. Table 1 shows the main characteristics of the studies.

Most of the articles were a unique contribution by the authors, with the exceptions of Cockbain et al. (2011), Cockbain and Brayley (2012), Cockbain and Wortley (2015), Cockbain et al. (2017), Franklin and Smeaton (2017), and Franklin et al. (2018) in the UK. The studies by Fredlund et al. (2013, 2018) and Svedin and Priebe (2007) in Sweden also seem to come from the same research group. Regarding year of publication, all of the studies were published in the last 2 decades (ranging from 2002 to 2020), mainly between 2015 and 2019 ($n = 30$; 68.2%). Most of the authors work from the UK ($n = 26$; 59.0%), followed by six from the United States (13.6%), four from Sweden (9.0%), and three from Turkey (6.8%). The rest were unique contributions by authors from different European countries. The studies included qualitative ($n = 15$; 34.0%), quantitative ($n = 18$; 41.0%), and mixed ($n = 11$; 25.0%) research methods. In 34.0% ($n = 15$) of the studies, the authors did not report the data collection period. The rest reported periods ranging from 1996 to 2018. Most of the studies ($n = 23$; 52.3%) used samples

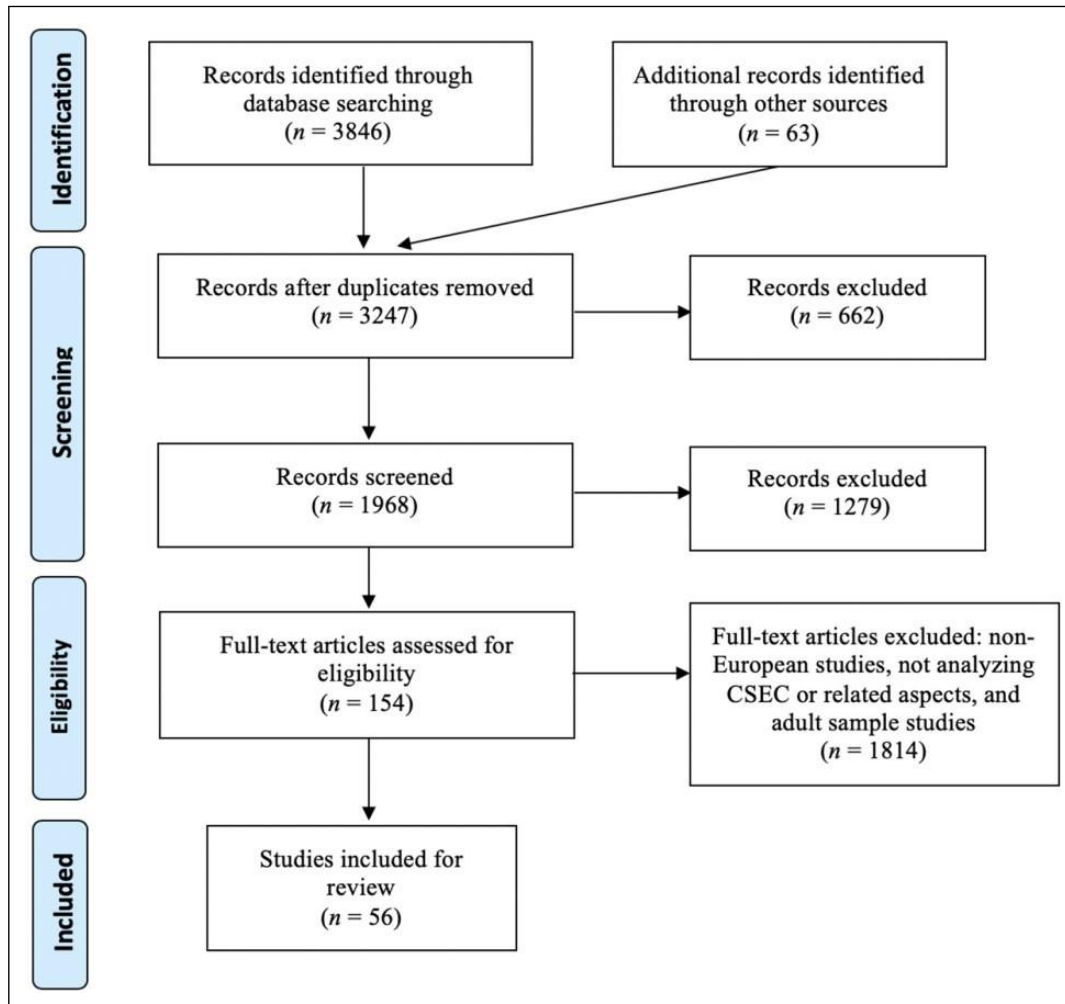


Figure 1. Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis diagram, search process.

from the UK, followed by four from Sweden (9.1%). Three articles came from Turkey (6.8%), and three studies used samples from different European countries (6.8%). The rest of the papers were unique contributions from Albania, Cyprus, Georgia, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Russia, Slovenia, and Switzerland.

Concerning the samples, Table 2 shows that 38.6% ($n = 17$) of the studies included practitioners and stakeholders, 40.9% ($n = 18$) of the studies involved child victims of exploitation, 21.4% ($n = 9$) analyzed adults and children from the general population, while the study by Brayley-Morris et al. (2015) used semen stains, Kragten-Heerdink et al. (2017) used trafficking situations, and McCarthy (2020) analyzed news media articles on trafficking cases, court documents, and information from court websites. Sample sizes ranged from four (Cody & D'Arcy, 2017) to 10,828 mid-teen adolescents (Pedersen & Hegna, 2003). Response rate: Participants mostly included both genders ($n = 25$; 56.8%), followed by only females ($n = 6$; 13.6%), whereas none of the studies featured only males. Response rate was reported in only eight studies (18.2%) varying widely from 16.4% (Brady, 2018) to 94.3% (Pedersen &

Hegna, 2003). In 12 studies (27.3%), data regarding the gender of the sample was not provided. In one case, it was not applicable (Brayley-Morris et al., 2015). More than half of the studies used samples of children and adolescents, ranging from 8 to 25 years old ($n = 24$; 54.5%). In 18 studies (40.0%), the age of the sample was not provided (exposing only whether the sample included adults, in 10 studies, or adults and children, in two cases). The study by Cockbain and Wortley (2015) used a sample of adults from 17 to 56 years, while the study by Brady (2018) used a sample from 18 years to 60 or older. In one study, this category was not applicable (Brayley-Morris et al., 2015). Finally, only eight studies (18.2%) included some information regarding participant racial/ethnic/national background.

Non-peer-reviewed publications. Twelve non-peer-reviewed publications were included, 10 of which are reports, one a working paper (Dottridge, 2008), and another one a PhD thesis (Hallet, 2013). Table 3 displays the main features of the studies.

Two thirds of the non-peer-reviewed publications were multiauthor contributions, the other third involved one-author contributions (Dottridge, 2008; Gohir, 2013; Hallet, 2013;

Table 1. Descriptive Summary of Peer-Reviewed Publications.

Authors and Year of Publication	Terminology	Study Method	Data Collection Period	Sample Geographic Location	Aim of the Study
Averdijk et al. (2020)	Transactional sex	Quantitative research, longitudinal, and survey-based	2011, 2013, and 2015	Switzerland (Zurich)	To establish the prevalence and examine the longitudinal predictors of buying and selling sexual services among youths in a high-income country.
Bailey (2015)	Trafficking for sexual purposes	Quantitative research and survey-based	2006 and 2008	Bulgaria, Belarus, Moldova, Romania, and Ukraine	To adapt microsimulation modeling to assess the impact of intervention efforts to combat sex trafficking out of Eastern Europe.
Beckett & Schubotz (2014)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Mixed methods, surveys, semistructured face-to-face individual or group interviews, and vignette-based face-to-face interviews	2009–2011	UK (Northern Ireland)	To explore young people's self-reported experiences of sexual violence and exploitation, collated from their responses to a module of questions placed in the 2010 Young Life and Times Survey.
Bond & Dogaru (2019)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Mixed methods and survey	NR	UK	To evaluate the outcomes of a short, interprofessional training course (Click: Path to Protection) designed to develop professionals' competence and confidence when responding to the needs of children and their families after online sexual abuse.
Brady (2018)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Mixed methods, online survey, and semistructured focus groups	NR	UK	To investigate and analyze paramedics' level of confidence in areas of child sexual abuse including child sexual exploitation.
Brayley-Morris et al. (2015)	Trafficking for sexual purposes	Quantitative and experimental study	N/A	UK	To obtain DNA measures from semen stains.
Buck et al. (2017)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Qualitative research, self-completion booklets, interviews, and a focus group	NR	UK	To give voice to young women using a peer-mentoring service and gather evidence of the impact of the approach.
Cockbain & Brayley (2012)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Quantitative and review of files	2001–2010	UK	To explore the relationship between CSE and youth offending.
Cockbain & Wortley (2015)	Trafficking for sexual purposes	Mixed methods and documentary analysis	2008–2012	UK	To examine the extent to which internal child sex trafficking conforms to the expectations of opportunity theories of crime, with a particular focus on the routine activity approach.
Cockbain et al. (2011)	Trafficking for sexual purposes	Mixed methods and documentary analysis	NR	UK	To explore victim networks alongside offender networks.
Cockbain et al. (2017)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Quantitative research and analysis of individual-level data	2004–2013	UK	Exploratory approach of males and females affected by CSE and supported by Barnardo's services in the UK.

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Table 1. (continued)

Authors and Year of Publication	Terminology	Study Method	Data Collection Period	Sample Geographic Location	Aim of the Study
Cody & D'Arcy (2017)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Qualitative research and discussions	2013–2017	Across Europe: Albania, Bulgaria, England, Romania, Netherlands, among others	The paper summarizes two projects: Our voices and Leadership in Empowering and Activating Child Helplines to Protect Children Online (LEAP project).
Digidiki & Bhabha (2018)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Qualitative research and semistructured interviews	2016	Greece	To explore sexual abuse and exploitation of unaccompanied migrant children in Greece and the risk factors associated with their occurrence.
Frangez̃ & Buc̃ar Ruc̃man (2017)	Trafficking for sexual purposes	Qualitative research and semistructured interviews	2014	Slovenia	To present a research study on specific forms of human trafficking in Slovenia.
Franklin & Smeaton (2017)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Mixed methods, surveys, and interviews	NR	UK	To present an overview of the needs, gaps, and views of practitioners, regarding CSE of disabled children.
Franklin et al. (2018)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Qualitative research, rapid evidence assessment, review of tools and checklists, survey, and interviews	2015 and 2017	UK	To present the key findings of two studies. First study: The aim was to help support early intervention and better protect children and young people. Second study: The overall aim was to make recommendations for the development of tools, checklists, and practice.
Fredlund et al. (2013)	Transactional sex	Quantitative research, survey-based, and cross-sectional study	2009	Sweden	To investigate the lifetime experience of selling sex among Swedish adolescents.
Fredlund et al. (2018)	Transactional sex	Quantitative and survey-based	NR	Sweden	To carry out an explorative investigation of adolescents' motives for selling sex for compensation in a population-based study.
Frost (2019)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Qualitative research, semistructured, and face-to-face individual interviews and focus groups	NR	UK	To explore and analyze the public mental health challenges arising in the field of CSE, utilizing data gathered from frontline professionals.
Gjermeni et al. (2008)	Trafficking for sexual purposes	Mixed methods, surveys, and interviews	2003	Albania	To describe the characteristics of Albanian children who were trafficked.
Hallett (2016)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Qualitative research and semistructured interviews	NR	UK	To explore the relationship between (lack of) care and CSE.
Houston (2017)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Qualitative research, in-depth interviews, and participant observation	2011–2012	Georgia	To examine how gender operates within the anti-CSEC movement in Georgia.
Karayianni et al. (2017)	Trafficking for sexual purposes	Quantitative research, survey-based, retrospective, and cross-sectional	NR	Cyprus	To determine the prevalence of child sexual abuse (CSA) in Cyprus and to examine factors within the Cypriot cultural context that may relate to CSA.

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Authors and Year of Publication	Terminology	Study Method	Data Collection Period	Sample Geographic Location	Aim of the Study
Klatt et al. (2014)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Quantitative research and analysis of case files	NR	UK	To examine risk factors for CSE/trading sex in a sample of at-risk persons attending the young people's department of a voluntary organization.
Konstantopoulos et al. (2013)	Trafficking for sexual purposes	Qualitative research and interviews	2008–2009	Eight cities around the world (London)	To examine the local context in which sex trafficking of women and girls occurs in eight cities around the world.
Kragten-Heerdink et al. (2017)	Trafficking for sexual purposes	Quantitative and analysis of cases	2008–2012	Netherlands	To describe the human trafficking situations identified in the Netherlands.
Kuntay (2002)	Transactional sex	Qualitative research and semistructured in-depth interviews	NR	Turkey	To describe the characteristics and family background of teenage female sex workers.
Lindholm et al. (2015)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Mixed methods and transcribed semistructured interviews	2002–2012	Sweden	To explore the informativeness and responsiveness of adolescent girls who have been exploited in the sex trade.
Lloyd (2019)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Qualitative research, social constructionist, and semistructured interviews	NR	UK (England)	To consider social workers' understandings of the agency and choice-making of girls who are sexually exploited outside the home, by an extrafamilial person.
Mai (2011)	Transactional sex	Qualitative research, ethnographic observations, and semistructured interviews	Study 1: 2004–2005 Study 2: 2005–2006	Study 1: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands, Spain; Study 2: Italy and Romania	To deconstruct North-centric understandings of minors selling sex as coinciding with "child exploitation."
McCarthy (2020)	Trafficking for sexual purposes	Qualitative research, content analysis of media articles, court documents, and information from court websites	2003–2013	Russia	To analyze women's involvement in trafficking.
McClelland & Newell (2013)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Mixed methods: interviews and questionnaires	2006–2011	UK (England)	To examine the health risks, health needs, and health-seeking behaviors of young people involved in or vulnerable to sexual exploitation.
Merdian et al. (2019)	Transnational CSA	Qualitative research and roundtable	NR	UK (London)	To collate information from an international, multidisciplinary, multiagency perspective that will be of practical value and assistance to those working to combat or end this particular behavior.
Oram et al. (2015)	Trafficking for sexual purposes	Quantitative research and analysis of clinical electronic health records	2006–2012	UK (England)	To investigate the sociodemographic and clinical characteristics of trafficked people with severe mental illness.

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Table 1. (continued)

Authors and Year of Publication	Terminology	Study Method	Data Collection Period	Sample Geographic Location	Aim of the Study
Ottisova et al. (2018)	Trafficking for sexual purposes	Quantitative research and cohort design	2006–2014	UK (England)	To investigate the sociodemographic and clinical characteristics of trafficked children in contact with secondary mental health services and compare their pathways into services and current care with those of matched nontrafficked children.
Pearce (2011)	Trafficking for sexual purposes	Qualitative research, focus groups, interviews, and case studies	2006–2009	UK (England)	This article argues for a review of children's services responses to trafficked children.
Pedersen & Hegna (2003)	Transactional sex	Quantitative research and survey-based	1996	Norway (Oslo)	To give prevalence estimates of sex for sale from an adolescent community sample.
Radcliffe et al. (2020)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Qualitative research and focus groups	2017–2018	UK (England)	To examine CSE practitioners' understandings of the complexities in grooming, sexual, and other forms of exploitation.
Sarkar (2017)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Quantitative research and semistructured questionnaire	2015	Poland	To provide a comprehensive understanding of the determinants of women's exposures to sex trafficking in Poland.
Semerci et al. (2017)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Quantitative research, questionnaires, and phone interviews	2003–2014	Turkey	To determine the long-term prognosis of a sample of commercially sexually exploited youth living in a specialized center for protection.
Shuker & Pearce (2019)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Mixed methods, interviews, and surveys	2011–2013	UK	To evaluate the "Safe Accommodation Project."
Sofuoglu et al. (2018)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Quantitative research and electronic archives of CSA case files	2010–2011	Turkey	To investigate CSA cases registered in legal databases in select provinces in Turkey to improve our epidemiological understanding of regionally reported cases.
Stanley et al. (2016)	Trafficking for sexual purposes	Mixed methods, interviews, and surveys	NR	UK	To provide an in-depth picture of the health needs and health care experiences of young people in England who had recently been trafficked from other countries.
Svedin & Priebe (2007)	Transactional sex	Quantitative research and survey-based	NR	Sweden	To estimate the extent of selling sex among Swedish adolescents.

Note. CSEC ¼ commercial sexual exploitation of children; CSE ¼ child sexual exploitation; SE ¼ sexual exploitation; NR ¼ not reported; N/A ¼ not applicable.

Table 2. Characteristics of Peer-Reviewed Study Samples.

Authors and Year of Publication	Participants	Sample Size	Response Rate (%)	Participant Age Range	Gender	Racial/Ethnic/National Background
Averdijk et al. (2020)	Students	1,675 children	NR	13–17 Years	48% Female and 52% male	NR
Bailey (2015)	Adults and children from the general population	NR	NR	Adult and children	Male and female	NR
Beckett & Schubotz (2014)	Professionals and victims or at-risk of CSE	110 Professionals, 5 victims, and 786 at-risk young people	23	Adults and children aged 14 or above	64% Female and 36% male	NR
Bond & Dogaru (2019)	Professionals	114	NR	NR	NR	NR
Brady (2018)	Paramedics	276	16.4	18–60 or older	44.9% Female and 55.1% male	NR
Brayley-Morris et al. (2015)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Buck et al. (2017)	Mentees	NR	NR	NR	Female	NR
Cockbain & Brayley (2012)	Exploited children who have committed criminal offenses	211	NR	10–17 Years	75% Female and 25% male	NR
Cockbain & Wortley (2015)	CSE victims and offenders	55 Offenders; 43 victims	NR	17–56 Years; and 11–20 years	98.2% Male and 1.8% female victims; all females	NR
Cockbain et al. (2011)	CSE victims and offenders	25 Offenders and 36 victims	NR	NR	67% Females and 33% males	NR
Cockbain et al. (2017)	CSE service users (children affected by CSE as victims or recruiters)	9,042	NR	8–18 Years	Male and female	81 White, 6 Black, 5 Asian, 5 Mixed race, and 5 other
Cody & D'Arcy (2017)	Practitioners, children, and young people affected by or at risk of sexual violence	From 4–80 depending on the activity	NR	Adults and children	Male and female	NR
Digidiki & Bhabha (2018)	Key informants	24	NR	Adults	NR	NR
Frangez & Bucur Rucman (2017)	Key informants	NR	NR	Adults	NR	NR
Franklin & Smeaton (2017)	Authorities, stakeholders, practitioners, and disabled children victims or at risk of CSE	27 Young people with learning disabilities	Survey: 44	12–23 Years	74% Female and 26% male	White British: 22, White/Asian: 3, and Black Caribbean: 2
Franklin et al. (2018)	Literature and professionals	59 Professionals	NR	Adults	NR	NR
Fredlund et al. (2013)	High school students	3,498	60.4	$M \frac{1}{4} 18.3$ years ($SD \frac{1}{4} 0.6$)	53.2% Female, 46% male, and 0.8% neither male nor female	NR

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Table 2. (continued)

Authors and Year of Publication	Participants	Sample Size	Response Rate (%)	Participant Age Range	Gender	Racial/Ethnic/National Background
Fredlund et al. (2018)	High school students	5,873	59.7	$M \frac{1}{4} 18.0$ years ($SD \frac{1}{4} 0.6$)	Male and female	NR
Frost (2019)	Professionals specialized in CSE	14	NR	Adults	NR	NR
Gjermeni et al. (2008)	Trafficked and nontrafficked children with similar risk factors	61 Trafficked children; 22 not trafficked	NR	10–22 Years; 10–16 years	68.9% Males, 31.1% females; 15 males, and 7 females	85% Gipsy
Hallett (2016)	Adolescent victims of CSE involved with statutory care services	9	NR	14–17 Years	88.8% Female and 12.2% male	NR
Houston (2017)	Professionals working in CSE	NR	NR	Adults	NR	NR
Karayianni et al. (2017)	Adolescents and young adults from the general population	1,080 adolescents and 772 young adults	NR	15–18 Years; 19–25 years	Males $\frac{1}{4}$ 259 and females $\frac{1}{4}$ 821; males $\frac{1}{4}$ 182 and females $\frac{1}{4}$ 590	NR
Klatt et al. (2014)	Service users	175 Cases	NR	12–25 Years	93.7% Female and 6.3% male	NR
Konstantopoulos et al. (2013)	Antitrafficking stakeholders	277 (21 from London)	NR	Adults	NR	NR
Kragten-Heerdink et al. (2017)	Trafficking situations: one situation equals one trafficker regardless of the number of victims (or consumers)	782 Human trafficking cases	NR	NR	NR	NR
Kuntay (2002)	Teenage sex workers	30	NR	14–18 Years	Female	NR
Lindholm et al. (2015)	Police interviews with sexually exploited adolescent girls	24	NR	14–21 Years	70.8% Female and 29.2% male	NR
Lloyd (2019)	Social workers	18	NR	Adults	72.2% Female and 27.8% male	NR
Mai (2011)	Minors/young adults, key informants	110 Minors/young adults And 72 key informants	NR	30% Minors (15–17 years)	Study 1: male and female; Study 2: minors and young adults: 66.7% male and 33.3% female	NR
McCarthy (2020)	News media articles on trafficking cases, court documents, and information from court websites	5,200	NR	NR	Female	NR
McClelland & Newell (2013)	CSE victims and professionals working in agencies supporting CSE victims	24 CSE victims; 61 professionals	NR	Adolescents (13–18 years); adults	91.7% Female and 8.3% male; professionals: NR	Adolescents: 1 Black British, 1 Pakistani, and 22 White British

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Authors and Year of Publication	Participants	Sample Size	Response Rate (%)	Participant Age Range	Gender	Racial/Ethnic/National Background
Merdian et al. (2019)	Stakeholders	13	NR	Adults	NR	NR
Oram et al. (2015)	Clinical electronic health records of trafficked patients	133 (19 children)	NR	8–17 Years	51.4% Female and 49.6% male	54% Africa, 30% Asia, 13% other, and 3% unknown
Ottisova et al. (2018)	Clinical electronic health records of trafficked children	51	NR	5–17 Years	78.4% Female and 22.6% male	63% Africa, 22% Asia, 10% Europe, 4% other, and 2% unknown
Pearce (2011)	Practitioners	9 Focus groups, 72 practitioners, and 37 case studies of trafficked children	NR	Adults	NR	NR
Pedersen & Hegna (2003)	Adolescents in the public and private school systems	10,828	94.3	14–17 Years ($M \frac{1}{4} 15.4$, $SD \frac{1}{4} 0.9$)	50.8% Female and 49.1% male	14.2% Immigrant background from non-Western countries, mostly from Pakistan, Morocco, Turkey, and Vietnam; 3.5% from Western countries
Radcliffe et al. (2020)	Practitioners and stakeholders	4 Focus groups and 36 practitioners and stakeholders	NR	Adults	NR	NR
Sarkar (2017)	Victims	96	NR	13–20 Years old	Female	Trafficked victims from Belarus, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine
Semerci et al. (2017)	Victims	108 Initial sample and 76 follow-up	70.4 from the initial sample	9–22 Years old ($M \frac{1}{4} 16.7$, $SD \frac{1}{4} 2.7$)	Female	NR
Shuker & Pearce (2019)	Carers	402	NR	NR	NR	NR
Sofuoglu et al. (2018)	Child sexual abuse case files	1,005	NR	0–18 Years old ($14.4 + 3.0$ years)	Male and female	NR
Stanley et al. (2016)	Victims	29	NR	16–21 Years	82.8% Female and 17.2% male	NR
Svedin & Priebe (2007)	Third-year high school students	4,339	77.2	$M \frac{1}{4} 18.15$ years ($SD \frac{1}{4} 0.74$)	53.6% Female and 46.4% male	NR

Note. CSE $\frac{1}{4}$ child sexual exploitation; NR $\frac{1}{4}$ not reported; N/A $\frac{1}{4}$ not applicable.

Table 3. Descriptive Summary of Non-Peer-Reviewed Publications.

Type of Publication	Authors/Organization, Year of Publication	Terminology	Study Method	Data Collection Period	Sample Geographic Location	Aim of the Study
Report	Berelowitz et al. (2012)/Office of the Children's Commissioner	CSEC/CSE/SE	Mixed methods; data collected from call for evidence, data sets, site visits, interviews, and commissions research	2010–2011	UK (England)	To know CSEC prevalence in gangs and groups.
Report	Berelowitz et al. (2013)/Office of the Children's Commissioner	CSEC/CSE/SE	Mixed methods; data collected from call for evidence, data sets, site visits, interviews, workshop, seminars, commissions research, and policy review	2013	UK (England)	To identify effective practice in targeting CSE in the context of gangs and groups.
Report	van den Borne & Kloosterboer (2005)/ End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT) Netherlands and UNICEF Netherlands	Trafficking for sexual purposes	Mixed methods, questionnaires, and interviews	2004–2005	Netherlands	To establish whether the current measures designed to protect minors against trafficking are considered to be effective by various stakeholders.
Report	Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (2011)	CSEC/CSE/SE	Mixed methods and data set from UK agencies	2011	UK	To assess the size and scale of "localized grooming" in proportion to the overall known picture of sexual exploitation of children under the age of 18 in the UK.
Working paper	Dottridge (2008)/UNICEF	Trafficking for sexual purposes	Qualitative research and interviews	2009–2011	Albania, Kosovo, Moldova, and Romania	To illustrate, through concrete examples, the complexity and dynamics of child trafficking. To provide insight into how the children and young people perceived the assistance they were offered.
Report	Franklin et al. (2015)/Barnardo's and The Children's Society	CSEC/CSE/SE	Mixed methods, online survey, in-depth telephone interviews, and face-to-face interviews	NR	UK	To increase understanding of how to meet the needs of children and young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, child sexual exploitation.
Report	Gohir (2013)/Muslim Women's Network	CSEC/CSE/SE	Qualitative research and interviews	2012	UK (England)	To provide a better understanding of the sexual exploitation of Asian/Muslim children and young women.
Thesis Report	Hallet (2013)/Cardiff University Hickle et al. (2017)/Office of the Children's Commissioner	CSEC/CSE/SE CSEC/CSE/SE	Qualitative research and interviews Mixed methods, interviews, observations, and surveys	NR 2015	UK UK (England)	To examine CSE as a social phenomenon. To evaluate a program in a framework for protecting children and young people from strategic planning to operational interventions.
Report	Jay (2014)/Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council	CSEC/CSE/SE	Mixed methods, document analysis, and fieldwork interviews	1997–2013	UK (England)	To investigate whether the actions carried out by those responsible for child protection have been adequate.
Report	Stredder et al. (2009)/John Moore's University Centre for Public Health	CSEC/CSE/SE	Mixed methods, questionnaires, and interviews	NR	UK (England)	To explore young people's workers' experience of supporting young people (under the age of 25) who have "swapped" sexual activities for "favors" or "gifts."
Report	Zimmerman et al. (2003)/London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine	Trafficking for sexual purposes	Qualitative research and interviews	2002	Europe	To highlight the many health risks and consequences of trafficking in women and to provide information on women's health needs.

Note. CSEC ¼ commercial sexual exploitation of children; CSE ¼ child sexual exploitation; SE ¼ sexual exploitation; UNICEF ¼ United Nations Children's Fund; NR ¼ not reported.

Jay, 2014). All of the studies were published in the last 20 years (ranging from 2003 to 2017). Regarding methodology, studies were conducted using mixed methods ($n = 8$; 66.7%) or qualitative techniques ($n = 4$; 33.4%). Most studies provided the data collection period ($n = 9$; 75%) ranging from 1997 to 2015. A high proportion of authors were based in the UK ($n = 10$; 83.4%), one in the Netherlands, and another one was a cross-European contribution. Additionally, three quarters of the studies were conducted in the UK, barring three that were carried out with cross-country ($n = 2$; 16.7%) and Dutch ($n = 1$; 8.4%) samples.

With regard to the samples, Table 4 displays their characteristics. Participants were child victims in 10 studies (83.3%), in seven of which they were part of a larger sample that included offenders, professionals, and informants from agencies, authorities, and organizations; one study was based on case files from victims, and another one encompassed professionals alone. Despite these figures, the victims' samples were small except for two studies that exceeded 2,000 participants (Berelowitz et al., 2012; Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, 2011). Response rate was mostly lacking, and only three (25%) studies provided it, ranging from 30%–34% (Franklin et al., 2015; Stredder et al., 2009) to 100% (Berelowitz et al., 2013). Within the child victim studies, four were samples of only children aged 12–17 years (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, 2011; Franklin et al., 2015; Hallett, 2013; van den Borne & Kloosterboer, 2005); Berelowitz et al. (2012) included children and adolescents aged 4–19 years, and Gohir (2013) and Zimmerman et al. (2003) children from 4 until young adults of 30 years old. Age range was not provided in three studies (25%). Slightly over half of the participants were both genders ($n = 7$; 58.3%), two followed only females ($n = 2$, 16.7%), and the rest was not provided; even so, proportionally, the vast majority were females. Finally, nine studies (75%) reported data on racial/ethnic/national background, which was mostly white.

Terminology of the publications reviewed. Regarding the terminology used, most of the studies, both peer-reviewed ($n = 22$; 50.0%), and non-peer-reviewed ($n = 9$; 75.0%), refer to “sexual exploitation,” “CSE,” or “commercial sexual exploitation.” Two papers focused on online CSE and abuse (Bond & Dogaru, 2019; Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, 2011). Fewer authors preferred the term sexual trafficking in both peer-reviewed ($n = 14$; 31.8%) and non-peer-reviewed studies ($n = 3$; 25%). Transactional and selling sex was only used in peer-reviewed articles ($n = 7$; 15.9%). One peer-reviewed study also introduced the term “transnational child sexual abuse” (Meridian et al., 2019).

Victimization rates of CSEC. Studies in Cyprus (Karayianni et al., 2017), Norway (Pedersen & Hegna, 2003), Sweden (Fredlund et al., 2013; Svedin & Priebe, 2007), Switzerland (Averdijk et al., 2020), and the UK (Beckett & Schubotz, 2014) attempted to establish the prevalence of CSEC based on adolescent self-reports. In all of these studies, and also in another study

conducted in Turkey with electronic archives of child sexual abuse case files (Sofuoglu et al., 2018), the prevalence of CSEC ranged from 1% to 2.5%. However, these percentages cannot be compared because the studies used different measurement instruments, with some not differentiating between male and female victims, and also different time frames such as 2 years (Averdijk et al., 2020), 1 year (see, e.g., Karayianni et al., 2017), or lifetime (e.g., Svedin & Priebe, 2007). Similarly, only three reports assessed the prevalence of CSE. One of the reports was conducted in the Netherlands through case files (van den Borne & Kloosterboer, 2005), while in the UK, the prevalence of CSE was addressed in gangs and groups (Berelowitz et al., 2012), and the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (2011) focused on “localized grooming.”

Professionals' perspectives and knowledge of CSEC. Another frequent topic of study was to analyze the perspective of professionals regarding CSEC, their knowledge, and issues related to this problem (Frost, 2019; Konstantopoulos et al., 2013; Lindholm et al., 2015). Some of these studies focused specifically on the lack of knowledge and training of professionals (Berelowitz et al., 2013; Brady, 2018; Franklin et al., 2015; Meridian et al., 2019; Pearce, 2011), including the perception of exploited children with regard to professionals' performance (Dottridge, 2008), and the lack of research evidence on which CSE risk assessment practice is currently based (Franklin et al., 2018). An evidence-based evaluation of programs and models to intervene in the problem (Bailey, 2015; Buck et al., 2017) or to train professionals (Bond & Dogaru, 2019) was also of interest.

Risk factors for CSEC. The studies reviewed revealed the complexity surrounding many of the issues most likely to make young people vulnerable to CSE (Radcliffe et al., 2020) and its entrenchment within structural and contextual issues such as poverty, major internal and external migrations—especially unaccompanied migrant children—discrimination, cultural values reproduced over generations, and problems with the legal system (Digidiki & Bhabha, 2018; Gjermeni et al., 2008; Kuntay, 2002). Other studies underlined the risk attached to the family histories of these children, frequently linked to abuse, neglect, and maltreatment (Klatt et al., 2014), and also the responsibility of the foster system to provide affection, even more so when the family context for care is no longer possible (Hallett, 2016; Shuker & Pearce, 2019). Attempts have been made to explain this risk by using opportunity theories of crime (Cockbain & Wortley, 2015) or network analyses (Cockbain et al., 2011).

Health risks related to CSEC. Regarding the health risks specific to CSEC and trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation, the research by McClelland and Newell (2013) offered a description of some of the physical and psychological health issues encountered by this group, including the apparent high levels of self-harming, suicidal thoughts and behavior, and drug and alcohol problems. Other studies focusing on this topic found that victims have significant mental health needs (see Stanley et al., 2016), with posttraumatic stress disorder and affective

Table 4. Characteristics of Non-Peer-Reviewed Study Samples.

Authors and year of Publication	Participants	Sample Size	Response Rate	Participant Age Range	Gender	Racial/Ethnic/National Background
Berelowitz et al. (2012)	CSE victims, offenders, agencies, and professionals	2,409 Victims, 1,514 offenders, 115 agencies, and 235 professionals	NR	4–19 Years and 12–75 years	Victims: 72% female, 9% male, and 19% not specified; offenders: 72% female, 10% male, and 18% not specified	Victims: 60% White (42% White British), 13% Black, 6% Mixed, 5% Asian, 1% White other, and 2% other; offenders: 36% White, 27.5% Asian, 16.1% Black, 3.2% Mixed, 0.8% Other, and 16.4% unknown
Berelowitz et al. (2013)	Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCB), police forces, specific health services, victims, and victims' parents	10 Children and young people and 11 parents and carers of victims	100% Response from LSCB and police force	NR	NR	NR
van den Borne & Kloosterboer (2005)	Case files	230 Cases involving 169 child prostitution	NR	13–17 Years	92.9% Female and 6.5% male	12.1% Africa, 1.3% Asia, 6.1% Central and South Eastern Europe, 14.3% Morocco, 27.7% the Netherlands, 4.7% the Netherlands Antilles, 2.2% Suriname, 9.1% Turkey, and 22.5% unknown
Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (2011)	CSE victims and offenders	2,083 Victims and 1,217 offenders	NR	14–15 Years and 18–24 years	Victims: the vast majority female, 31% unknown; offenders: 87% male, 4% female, and 9% unknown	Victims: 61% White, 3% Asian, 1% Black, and 33% unknown; offenders: 30% White, 28% Asian, 3% Black, 0.16% Chinese, and 38% unknown
Dottridge (2008)	Victims	31	NR	10–24 Years	30 Females and 1 male	Eastern Europe
Franklin et al. (2015)	Local authorities, statutory and voluntary sector stakeholders, people with learning disabilities who have experienced, or been at risk of, CSE	27 Victims or potential victims, 71 local authorities, and 34 professionals	Survey: 34% of local authorities	Victims: 12–13 years	Victims or potential victims: 20 females and 7 males	22 White British, 3 White/Asian, and 2 Black Caribbean
Gohir (2013)	CSE victims	35	NR	9–30 Years	Female	31 Muslim, 1 Asian/white, 1 Indian (Sikh), and 2 Asian (subethnic group unknown)
Hallet (2013)	Victims and “nonspecialist” professionals	9 Victims; 25 professionals	NR	14–17 Years; NR	8 Females and 1 male; 13 males and 12 females	Victims: White Welsh/British
Hickle et al. (2017)	CSE victims and professionals	257 surveyed professionals and 3 young person's interviews	NR	NR	Professionals: 73.4% female and 26.6% male	Professionals: Over 80% White British, 3.9% Black or Black British-Caribbean, 3.9% White background, 2.5% Mixed-White and Black Caribbean, and 1.9% White Irish
Jay (2014)	CSE victims	66 Victims	NR	NR	NR	NR
Stredder et al. (2009)	Young professionals	57	30%	NR	NR	NR
Zimmerman et al. (2003)	Trafficked women and adolescents and key informants from the health, law enforcement, government, and NGO sectors	28 Victims and 107 professionals	NR	11–30 Years	Female	Primarily from Eastern Europe, with only two women coming from South East Asia (Laos)

Note. CSE ¼ Child sexual exploitation; NGO ¼ nongovernmental organization; NR ¼ not reported.

disorders as the most frequent diagnoses (Oram et al., 2015; Ottisova et al., 2018; Zimmerman et al., 2003). The relationship between CSEC and juvenile delinquency was also established by Cockbain and Brayley (2012). Only one study 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 (Semerci et al., 2017).

Critical perspectives on CSEC. Some studies attempted to describe the characteristics of CSEC in a specific country, such as the Netherlands (Kragten-Heerdink et al., 2017) or Slovenia (Frangč & Bucar Rucman, 2017), whereas others focused on gender (Houston, 2017; McCarthy, 2020) and racial (Britton, 2019) perspectives of CSE. Two studies alerted about the hegemonic narrative of victimization regarding CSEC, defending that both girls (Lloyd, 2019) and boys (Mai, 2011) involved in sex work can be recognized as choice makers and agents and that their actions must be read within their cultural and social realities. In this line, even when two European studies underlined the importance of giving young people a voice and involving them in sexual violence prevention (Cody & D'Arcy, 2017; Dottridge, 2008), most of the studies reviewed used adult samples.

Discussion

This review attempts to draw together what is known about CSEC and young people based on European empirical studies. It highlights the strengths of the existing research base as well as identifying gaps in knowledge regarding this relevant social problem.

Research concerning European studies of CSEC and trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation has developed significantly over the last 20 years but is still rather limited and mainly focused on two countries, the UK and Sweden. The theoretical point of view on which the studies are based is not always clearly defined or is imprecise, or only part of the phenomenon is covered. The present review shows that CSEC and CSE are the most used terms in European studies. However, sexual trafficking is still used in some studies, and some authors have even coined new terms (such as transnational child sexual abuse by Merdian et al., 2019). The lack of accurate conceptualization and particular definitions is linked to the divergent legal definitions and policy approaches found between countries and cross-country organizations (Cameron et al., 2015). Therefore, definitions are not often mutually exclusive in differentiating child sexual abuse from CSE as well as between the different forms of CSE (Beckett & Walker, 2018).

Our findings suggest that an epidemiological study at European level is needed to establish the prevalence of CSEC in the general population of adolescents and in order to see how to prevent most of these situations from an early start, by understanding its different motives, not only related to material rewards but also to emotional reasons and even pleasure (see Fredlund et al., 2018). However, this epidemiological study should not only focus on the general population but also on

high-risk groups such as children and adolescents with learning disabilities, as underlined by Franklin and Smeaton (2017). In addition, this study should analyze the different prevalence between male and female victims since male victims seem to be frequent but are also regularly overlooked in many studies. As stated by Cockbain et al. (2017), more work is clearly needed to disentangle the complex relationship between CSE and gender.

The articles under review show the very wide range of social, personal, psychological, family, environmental, and technological factors that make young people vulnerable to CSE and demonstrate the complexity of defining and designing appropriate responses. In this sense, connecting published risk factors with relevant theoretical frameworks (e.g., ecological, traumagenic dynamics) aids in clarifying the potential mechanisms by which they interact in the lives of children and youth prior to their exploitation (Franchino-Olsen, 2019). Frameworks help organize and conceptualize the complex relationships and interactive nature of many of these cited risk factors and vulnerabilities and are essential in designing and implementing interventions and responses (Edwards & Mika, 2017).

The review also shows that further work is required in terms of capacity building, training, and awareness-raising for society in general and, specifically, professionals providing direct support to children and young people at risk of exploitation. In addition, evidence-based research is needed on effective interventions to reduce trauma symptoms in sexually exploited children and adolescents, such as trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (see Márquez et al., 2020), and to prevent their reentry into commercial exploitation (Hammond & McGlone, 2014). Assessing the effectiveness of policies, laws, and programs related to the prevention of CSEC in different European countries is also necessary (see the framework for evaluating evidence provided by Kellam & Langevin, 2003).

The articles reviewed identify that relatively few European studies document the health risks specific to CSEC and trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation, even when prior reviews have revealed several substance use, mental health, sexual/reproductive health, physical health, and health care utilization issues among exploited children and youth (Le et al., 2018).

The present review highlights the need to rethink conceptualizations based on assumptions that present minors only as passive subjects of sexual exploitation since dichotomous ontological positions that assume a certain degree of implicit moralism or paternalism may influence the possibility of capturing and understanding the nuances, controversies, and crucial aspects of the phenomenon. Indeed, a critical reappraisal could help to understand the potential role reversals or overlapping relationship development between victimization and offending among the different forms of sexual exploitation and related activities.

Limitations

The findings of this review must be seen in light of some limitations. The information displayed is valuable as a first

approach to the problem of CSEC in Europe, but most of the studies reviewed suffer from important methodological flaws, such as an inaccurate definition of the phenomenon analyzed, small and convenience samples, and nonvalidated and nonspecific instruments. Attention must be placed on developing a solid evidence base and evaluating tools in order to better support frontline practitioners who face the daily reality of trying to protect vulnerable children and young people at risk of CSE. Further, the overwhelming majority of the studies focus on CSE in female children and youth. It is essential to analyze the extent and characteristics of the problem in male children and sexual/gender minority minors, and children with specific risk factors such as disabilities, as these are very understudied samples. Some of the studies reviewed also combine adults with children and adolescents in the study groups and use victims from diverse forms of trafficking or victims of different nationalities (Zimmerman et al., 2003). These limitations should be overcome if we aim to have a clear picture of the problem of CSEC in Europe.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this review is an initial analysis of the papers published to date concerning CSEC in European countries, for the purpose of offering professionals who work with children and adolescents further information regarding this serious social problem. The review shows there is a need for greater exploration and research around a number of areas of sexual exploitation of children in Europe. For example, more needs to be known about unaccompanied minors, their vulnerability to abuse through prostitution, and the effectiveness of current support mechanisms. The relationship between use of the Internet and CSEC also needs more attention. In addition, clearer and more systematic data collection on all areas of abuse is needed.

Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research

- Epidemiological research, particularly in Southern European countries, and for at-risk subpopulations, would help to respond to the problem of CSEC according to its real characteristics and dimensions.
- A critical reappraisal of the hegemonic narrative on CSEC is needed in order to capture the complexity of the phenomenon.
- Studies to improve the understanding of the personal pathways of the victims, including the processes that led the risk to be translated into effective situations of exploitation, are needed.
- More research using larger sample sizes and diverse populations to better understand the needs of particularly vulnerable groups (including runaway and homeless youth, unaccompanied minors, young people in care, as well as those involved in juvenile justice, and young people lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/

transsexual, intersex and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) is also relevant.

- Development of a CSEC screening tool to identify adolescents at risk or already involved in CSEC is critical in health, social, and educational contexts.
- Professionals working with minors who are exploited or are at risk of being exploited need to be specifically trained in order to improve awareness and detection and also to avoid neglecting interventions that could put minors at great risk of abuse or revictimization.
- Studies on the multiple experiences of victimization that sexually exploited children and adolescents have to face (see the complete analysis of Wilson & Butler, 2014) need to be conducted.
- Evidence-based research on effective interventions to reduce trauma symptoms in children and adolescents and their reentry into commercial exploitation are needed.
- Assessing the effectiveness of policies, laws, and programs related to the prevention of CSEC in different European countries is also necessary.
- Drawing up a European protocol of action for cases of CSEC that will enable detection and notification by adequately trained and educated staff is critical.

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