



# Prevalence and associated characteristics of sexual exploitation in a representative sample of spanish youth from an intersectional perspective

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Child sexual exploitation (CSE) involves using a child or youth as a sexual object in exchange for remuneration, reward, or favors, meeting their survival needs, and also serving the perpetrator's aims for sexual, social, or economic gain.

**Objective:** The present study addresses the prevalence of CSE in Spain. Participants: A representative sample of 4024 secondary school adolescents from 14 to 17 years old ( $M = 15.42$ ,  $SD = 1.034$ ) was surveyed.

**Methods:** Three questions adapted from previous European studies on the topic were used.

**Results:** An overall prevalence of 2.6 % was recorded, comprising exchange of sexual material (1.7 %), sexual touching (0.9 %), and sexual relations involving oral sex or penetration (0.9 %). While no significant age-related differences emerged, gender-specific patterns were observed. Boys exhibited a significantly higher prevalence of oral and penetrative sex than girls (1.2 % vs 0.5 %), while girls showed a slightly higher prevalence of exchange of sexual material (2 % vs 1.2 %) than boys. LGB youth reported a significantly higher risk for CSE than heterosexual youth (5.5 % vs 2.1 %), and European adolescents reported less CSE (2.2 % vs. 4.1 %) than youths from other ethnicities.

**Conclusions:** CSE should be a social concern because it affects a substantial number of children worldwide. Interventions should adopt an intersectional perspective that incorporates the various risk factors associated with this form of victimization.

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a global problem that victimizes children and youth worldwide, with a prevalence of approximately 1 to 2.5 % in samples from Europe (Benavente, Díaz-Faes, et al., 2022), and between 4 (Barnert et al., 2022) and 4.9 % (Ulloa et al., 2016) of people under 18 years old in the US. It is a specific kind of sexual victimization that involves not only the child or youth as a sexual object, but also has commercial or trading purposes (Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2017). The prevalence of CSE is higher in developing countries due to systemic and cultural risk factors (Babchishin et al., 2018; Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2017). However, it has been increasingly recognized as a significant issue in European countries as well, such as Switzerland (Averdijk et al., 2020), Norway (Pedersen & Hegna, 2003), and Sweden (Svedin & Priebe, 2007). This issue is especially prevalent in the online context, as seen in

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Denmark (Helweg-Larsen et al., 2012), or Italy (Longobardi et al., 2021).

However, difficulties in the conceptualization and description of CSE have been an obstacle to detecting it and also for developing research, public policies, and effective prevention and treatment programs. Laird et al. (2022) proposed that CSE is a form of sexual abuse driven by the exploitation of inequality and power imbalances. It involves coercing, forcing, or deceiving a child or young person into engaging in sexual activities both online and offline. CSE can also mean sexual, social, or economic gain for the perpetrator. The victim's consent is irrelevant, as is who initiates or solicits the contact. In most cases CSE is based on the vulnerability linked to the child or adolescent's stage of development (Finkelhor, 2007). This exploitation takes advantage of their younger age, as well as the presence of unmet needs, involving the underage person in engaging in sexual activities in exchange for payment (either monetary or material e. g., money, housing, food, alcohol, and drugs, or immaterial e.g. attention, protection, security, and affection) that addresses their survival needs (McDonald & Middleton, 2019).

CSE is a complex, diverse, and multidimensional type of sexual victimization that has evolved over time. Due to the technological revolution, the ease of access to the internet, social media, cellphones, and cameras, new forms of online sexual grooming and exploitation have increased substantially in recent decades (Ali et al., 2023). Evidence shows that the highest prevalence of internet sex crimes is against youth between 12 and 17 years old (Sutton & Finkelhor, 2023).

However, not all youth present the same risk of being involved in CSE. Victims tend to be engaged in risky sexual behaviors outside of the exploitation context (Klimley et al., 2018), in addition to other risk factors such as running away from home or residential care, alcohol abuse, and exposure to pornography (Laird et al., 2020). Thus, the explanatory model for CSE must necessarily be multifactorial and intersectional. This approach enables the elucidation of how various variables intersect and overlap, contributing to shaping patterns of inequality and discrimination, and leading to specific, highly vulnerable contexts (Gerassi, 2015).

Disproportionately high rates of CSE have been documented among runaway youth (Edwards et al., 2006), and runaway behavior has been identified as a precursor to CSE (Franchino-Olsen, 2021). It is essential to consider that these runaways may have previous experiences of abuse and maltreatment, and many young individuals escape from such situations by becoming involved in situations of exploitation as a means of survival (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016). Once more, it is crucial to employ an ecological framework to recognize, address, and prevent multiple risk factors that contribute to runaway behavior and subsequent sexual exploitation (Fedina et al., 2019).

Substance use and abuse may arise before or as a result of sexual exploitation (Gerassi et al., 2021). Alcohol and drug use increase the odds of CSE by two-fold (Laird et al., 2020), and may be heightened when minors are already involved in situations of sexual exploitation (Jackson, 2014). Many exploiters use alcohol and drugs to attract or maintain adolescents in exploitative situations (McDonald & Middleton, 2019). It is crucial to note that gender differences have been observed in this risk factor, with a higher prevalence of substance abuse issues among girls involved in sexual exploitation (Reid & Piquero, 2016). An analysis of case files for 175 young persons who were sexually exploited or at risk of sexual exploitation in the United Kingdom showed that drug and/or alcohol use was a significant predictor of sexual exploitation, along with running away (Klatt et al., 2014).

Furthermore, the exposure of youth to pornography can influence their development and sexual practices, impacting their sexual and social behavior and significantly increasing the risk of involvement in sexual exploitation (Taylor, 2018). It is important to note that pornography is currently the most significant source of sexual education for many young people (Paulus et al., 2024). Studies conducted in Spain on this topic also underscore the risk associated with pornography consumption in relation to sexual victimization among Spanish youth (Ballester et al., 2019).

Regarding gender differences, sexual exploitation impacts all children, but there is a dearth of research on the needs and experiences of boys (Moss et al., 2023). From a gender perspective, giving attention to girls is crucial due to the serious consequences of exploitation in the affective and sexual spheres (Zimmerman et al., 2006). From an intersectional perspective, belonging to an ethnic minority interacts with misogynistic popular culture, whereby girls from certain ethnic groups are represented as sexually promiscuous and with low moral values (Chesney-Lind & Eliason, 2006). However, it is equally important to consider boys, who may remain overlooked due to stereotypes associated with hegemonic masculinity (UNICEF, 2020). Adherence to traditional gender roles and the stigma surrounding homosexuality have prevented many boys from recognizing themselves as victims and hindered the detection of those who do not fit the traditional perception of CSE victims by professionals (Nodzinski & Davis, 2023). This has resulted in many vulnerable young individuals in need of intervention being overlooked (Josenhans et al., 2020).

Young people who have doubts about their sexual orientation and live in a homophobic environment are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation because they may turn to the internet instead of other reliable sources for information, making them susceptible to manipulators (Capaldi et al., 2024). Belonging to a sexual minority also appears to interact with running away from homophobic contexts, significantly increasing the risk of CSE in these boys (Vidra et al., 2015). Gender stereotypes and cultural issues increase the barriers to the identification and treatment of sexual exploitation in boys and sexual minority youth, and there is a need for more solid and reliable data on these demographic groups.

## 1. Aim of the study

Studies on the prevalence of CSE in Europe are scarce (Benavente, Díaz-Faes, et al., 2022), with most of the research being focused on child sexual abuse and conducted with adults and using retrospective self-reports (Pereda et al., 2009). However, there is evidence that CSE is also a problem affecting youth from north-European countries (Averdijk et al., 2020; Pedersen & Hegna, 2003; Svedin & Priebe, 2007). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to establish for the first time in Spain the prevalence of sexual exploitation in a representative sample of high school aged, adolescent youth. The analysis also considered differences based on gender, age, sexual orientation and ethnicity. Additionally, the heightened risk of CSE associated with running away behavior, alcohol abuse, and

exposure to pornography was examined.

It is important to highlight that the age of sexual consent in Spain was established at 16 years following the 2015 reform of the Penal Code. Nevertheless, the Penal Code categorizes the prostitution and sexual exploitation of minors as a crime, penalizing anyone who induces, promotes, facilitates, or enables the prostitution of individuals under the age of 18. While various organizations and entities in Spain work with minors who are victims of international trafficking, the issue of domestic sexual exploitation has only recently begun to receive attention. Greater resources and heightened awareness are urgently needed to address this issue effectively (Pereda et al., 2021).

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Procedure

A representative sample of secondary school-aged students in Spain was surveyed about victimization and offending behaviors. Stratified random sampling was employed based on academic year and gender. Data were collected from September 2022 until June 2023 from 70 secondary schools (17 autonomous communities, and 2 autonomous cities) in Spain. Schools were contacted via phone and email. Upon obtaining permission from the school administration, information about the project was shared with the tutors of randomly selected classes. Tutors were briefed on the project and guided on managing potential emotional reactions in the classroom through a concise explanatory video. A video explaining the voluntary nature of participation, the anonymity of collected data, and the study's objectives was also made available to potential participants. Surveys were administered online through a secure platform.

We collected a non-probabilistic unweighted sample of 4319 students but excluded those who may have given false information because they presented rare or incoherent responses and those who were under 14 and over 17 years old ( $n = 295$ , 6.8 %), yielding an analytic sample of 4024 students.

Upon completion, participants were provided with information specifying the contact details of the child protection resources that exist at the national level and in their specific region (Fundación ANAR), as recommended by international standards (UNICEF, 2012). Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the Bioethics Commission at the University of Barcelona (IRB 00003099).

### 2.2. Participants

The sample included 4024 adolescents between 14 and 17 years old ( $M = 15.42$ ,  $SD = 1.034$ ) attending secondary school centers in Spain. Gender distribution revealed 46.2 % of self-identified males ( $n = 1858$ ), and 51.2 % of females ( $n = 2061$ ). The majority of participants self-identified as European (79.4 %). Regarding sexual orientation, 81.9 % of participants identified themselves as heterosexual, and 13.9 % identified as non-heterosexual (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or other). Table 1 shows the sample characteristics.

### 2.3. Measures

#### 2.3.1. Sociodemographic characteristics

Several questions regarding information on the participant (age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and country of origin); and (b) their family environment (whether they lived with their parents, other adults or in a residential care center) were included.

#### 2.3.2. Sexual exploitation victimization

Three questions regarding sexual exploitation, including both contact and non-physical contact behaviors, were included in the Spanish version of the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ) (Pereda et al., 2018) for the purpose of this study. These questions were adapted from previous European studies on the topic (Averdijk et al., 2020; Fredlund et al., 2013), including the exchange of sexual material (*In the last year, have you received money, alcohol, drugs, or any gifts or favors from someone to see you naked, take photos of you, or record you on video?*),<sup>1</sup> sexual touching (*In the last year, have you received money, alcohol, drugs, or any gifts or favors from someone to touch your intimate parts or for you to touch their intimate parts?*),<sup>2</sup> and oral and penetrative sex (*In the last year, have you received money, alcohol, drugs, or any gifts or favors from someone to engage in sexual relations (oral sex or penetration)?*).<sup>3</sup> The response scale for these questions was dichotomous, with “Yes” (1) “No” (0) options. If the participant answered “yes,” three follow-up questions were included to gather more details: the identity of the perpetrator (Stranger/Acquaintance), the type of contact involved (Online/Offline), and the frequency of contact, measured on a Likert-type scale ranging from “Once a year” to “Every day.”

#### 2.3.3. Alcohol use, access to pornography, and runaway behavior

Alcohol consumption was assessed via a Spanish adaptation of two questions from the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test – Alcohol Consumption Questions (AUDIT-C, Bush et al., 1998) (*In the last year, how often have you consumed alcoholic beverages?* and *In the last year, how often have you consumed 5 or more glasses of alcohol (such as beer, wine, vodka, mixed drinks, etc.) in one day?*).

<sup>1</sup> En el último año, ¿has recibido dinero, alcohol o drogas, o algún regalo o favor de alguien para verte sin ropa, hacerte fotografías o grabarte en vídeo?

<sup>2</sup> En el último año, ¿has recibido dinero, alcohol o drogas, o algún regalo o favor de alguien para tocarte en tus partes íntimas o que tú le tocaras en sus partes íntimas?

<sup>3</sup> En el último año, ¿has recibido dinero, alcohol o drogas, o algún regalo o favor de alguien para a mantener relaciones sexuales (sexo oral o penetración)?

**Table 1**  
Sample characteristics.

Variable	Total	
	n	%
Gender		
Male	1858	46.2
Female	2061	51.2
Other	36	0.9
Didn't answer	69	1.7
Age		
14–15	2167	53.9
16–17	1857	46.1
Sexual orientation <sup>a</sup>		
Heterosexual	3294	81.9
Other	559	13.9
Didn't answer	170	4.2
Family composition		
Parents (one or both)	3866	96.1
Residential center	26	0.6
Other <sup>b</sup>	132	3.3
Country of origin <sup>c</sup>		
Spain	3654	90.8
Other	339	8.4
Ethnic group <sup>d</sup>		
European	3195	79.4
Other	829	20.6

<sup>a</sup> In this variable, 152 students did not want to answer (3.9 %).

<sup>b</sup> Other includes grand-parents, adult siblings, other family members, friends.

<sup>c</sup> Country of origin of the child.

<sup>d</sup> Self-identified ethnic group.

Consumption of pornography was evaluated using two questions based on the study by [Averdijk et al., 2020](#) (*In the last year, how often have you watched pornographic movies?* and *In the last year, how often have you visited pornographic websites on the Internet?*). Running away behavior was evaluated via a question based on the study by [Pereda \(2020\)](#) (*In the last year, how often have you run away from your home or the residential center where you lived?*). These variables were measured using a Likert scale, ranging from “Never” (1) to “Every day or almost every day” (5). All the associated variables were also categorized in dichotomous variables indicating the presence or absence of these behaviors.

## 2.4. Analytical strategy

The statistical analyses were conducted with SPSS v.27. We calculated descriptive statistics and carried out significance tests. When comparing gender (female vs. male), age groups (14–15 vs. 16–17), sexual orientation (heterosexual and non-heterosexual), and ethnicity (European and other), bivariate analyses were performed, and the odds ratio (OR) was computed in order to quantify the association between these variables and victimization rates. The OR measure was considered statistically significant when its 95 % confidence interval did not include 1 ( $p < .05$ ). To estimate the prevalence of victimization, the sample was weighted according to adolescent gender and age distribution in the general population in Spain.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Prevalence of sexual exploitation

A total of 2.6 % ( $n = 104$ ) of the surveyed adolescents reported experiencing some form of sexual exploitation. This included the exchange of sexual material, such as photos or videos (1.7 %), and physical contact encompassing sexual touching (0.9 %) or sexual relations, involving oral sex or penetration (0.9 %) in exchange for something [Table 2](#).

Comparisons based on age groups (14–15 years old vs. 16–17 years old) revealed no significant differences in CSE prevalence. Regarding gender, girls presented a higher prevalence of victimization via exchange of sexual material than boys (2 % vs 1.2 %). There were no significant differences in exploitation via sexual touching. In the case of oral or penetrative sex, boys exhibited a significantly higher prevalence (1.2 %) than girls (0.5 %).

Significant differences were also observed based on sexual orientation. Non-heterosexual youth reported more sexual exploitation than their heterosexual counterparts (5.5 % vs. 2.1 %), as well as being involved in more exchange of sexual material (3.8 % vs. 1.4 %) and sexual touching (1.6 % vs 0.7 %). Regarding ethnicity, those belonging to other non-European ethnic groups showed more general sexual exploitation (4.1 % vs. 2.2 %), more exchange of sexual material (3 % vs. 1.4 %) and more oral and penetrative sex (1.6 % vs. 0.7 %) than European adolescents.

**Table 2**

Self-reported sexual exploitation by gender, age, sexual orientation and ethnic group.

	Total	Gender n (%)			Age n (%)			Sexual orientation n (%)			Ethnic group n (%)		
	n (%)	M	F	OR	14–15	16–17	OR	Hetero	Other	OR	European	Other	OR
CSE	104 (2.6)	42 (2.3)	53 (2.6)	1.14	44 (2)	49 (2.6)	1.3	69 (2.1)	31 (5.5)	2.74***	70 (2.2)	34 (4.1)	1.9**
Sexual material	70 (1.7)	23 (1.2)	42 (2)	1.66*	36 (1.7)	34 (1.8)	1.11	47 (1.4)	21 (3.8)	2.7***	46 (1.4)	25 (3)	2.13**
Sexual touching	35 (0.9)	11 (0.6)	20 (1)	1.65	17 (0.8)	18 (1)	1.24	24 (0.7)	9 (1.6)	2.23*	28 (0.9)	7 (0.8)	0.96
Oral and penetrative sex	37 (0.9)	22 (1.2)	10 (0.5)	0.41*	20 (0.9)	17 (0.9)	0.99	29 (0.9)	7 (1.3)	1.43	23 (0.7)	13 (1.6)	2.19*

Note. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .Note. In the gender analysis, the total sample was 3919, excluding those who *don't know or refuse to indicate their gender*; in the sexual orientation analysis, the total sample was 3853 adolescents, excluding those who *don't know or refuse to indicate their sexual orientation*. The calculations were based on the total sample.**Table 3**

Characteristics of sexual exploitation by gender, age, sexual orientation and ethnic group in the last year.

	Total n (%)	Gender n (%)		Age n (%)		Sexual Orientation n (%)		Ethnic group n (%)	
		M	F	14–15	16–17	Hetero	Other	European	Other
<b>Sexual material</b>									
Frequency									
Once a year	43 (1.1)	12 (0.7)	28 (1.4)	19 (0.9)	21 (1.1)	27 (0.8)	15 (2.7)	26 (0.8)	17 (2.1)
Every month	9 (0.2)	5 (0.3)	4 (0.2)	3 (0.1)	6 (0.3)	8 (0.2)	1 (0.2)	7 (0.2)	2 (0.2)
Every week	5 (0.1)	1 (0.1)	2 (0.1)	1 (0)	4 (0.2)	3 (0.1)	2 (0.4)	1 (0)	4 (0.5)
Every day	6 (0.1)	3 (0.2)	3 (0.2)	4 (0.2)	2 (0.1)	4 (0.1)	2 (0.4)	5 (0.2)	1 (0.1)
Perpetrator									
Stranger	38 (0.7)	14 (0.8)	22 (1.1)	18 (0.8)	20 (1.1)	27 (0.8)	11 (2)	28 (0.9)	10 (1.2)
Acquaintance	29 (0.7)	9 (0.5)	16 (0.8)	12 (0.6)	17 (0.9)	17 (0.5)	11 (2)	12 (0.4)	17 (2.1)
Contact									
Offline	34 (0.8)	16 (0.9)	16 (0.8)	18 (0.8)	16 (0.9)	25 (0.8)	9 (1.6)	24 (0.8)	10 (1.2)
Online	44 (1.1)	11 (0.6)	29 (1.4)	22 (1)	22 (1.1)	31 (0.9)	12 (2.1)	25 (0.8)	19 (2.3)
<b>Sexual touching</b>									
Frequency									
Once a year	21 (0.5)	5 (0.3)	16 (0.8)	10 (0.5)	11 (0.6)	14 (0.4)	6 (1.1)	16 (0.5)	5 (0.6)
Every month	3 (0.1)	1 (0.1)	1 (0)	1 (0)	2 (0.1)	2 (0.1)	1 (0.2)	2 (0.1)	1 (0.1)
Every week	5 (0.1)	3 (0.2)	1 (0)	2 (0.1)	3 (0.2)	4 (0.1)	1 (0.2)	5 (0.21)	0 (0)
Every day	2 (0.1)	2 (0.1)	0 (0)	1 (0)	1 (0.1)	2 (0.1)	0 (0)	1 (0)	1 (0.1)
Perpetrator									
Stranger	22 (0.5)	6 (0.3)	15 (0.7)	10 (0.5)	12 (0.6)	15 (0.5)	6 (1.1)	18 (0.)	4 (0.5)
Acquaintance	10 (0.2)	5 (0.3)	4 (0.2)	5 (0.2)	5 (0.3)	8 (0.2)	2 (0.4)	7 (0.2)	3 (0.4)
Contact									
Offline	22 (0.5)	7 (0.4)	13 (0.6)	9 (0.4)	11 (0.6)	14 (0.4)	7 (1.3)	18 (0.6)	4 (0.5)
Online	15 (0.4)	6 (0.3)	8 (0.4)	8 (0.4)	7 (0.4)	12 (0.4)	3 (0.5)	11 (0.3)	4 (0.5)
<b>Oral and penetrative sex</b>									
Frequency									
Once a year	18 (0.4)	11 (0.6)	6 (0.3)	10 (0.5)	8 (0.4)	15 (0.8)	2 (0.4)	12 (0.4)	6 (0.7)
Every month	7 (0.2)	4 (0.2)	2 (0.1)	4 (0.1)	3 (0.2)	6 (0.2)	0 (0)	3 (0.1)	4 (0.5)
Every week	5 (0.1)	4 (0.2)	1 (0)	1 (0.1)	4 (0.2)	5 (0.2)	0 (0)	3 (0.1)	2 (0.2)
Every day	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Perpetrator									
Stranger	24 (0.6)	16 (0.9)	7 (0.4)	12 (0.6)	12 (0.6)	21 (0.6)	2 (0.4)	14 (0.4)	10 (1.2)
Acquaintance	9 (0.2)	6 (0.3)	2 (0.1)	7 (0.3)	2 (0.1)	8 (0.2)	0 (0)	8 (0.3)	1 (0.1)
Contact									
Offline	24 (0.6)	16 (0.9)	7 (0.3)	13 (0.6)	11 (0.6)	21 (0.6)	2 (0.4)	16 (0.5)	8 (1)
Online	15 (0.4)	6 (0.3)	8 (0.4)	8 (0.4)	7 (0.4)	12 (0.4)	3 (0.5)	11 (0.3)	4 (0.5)

Note. The calculations were based on the total sample.

Note. Adolescents could report sexual exploitation by a stranger and/or acquaintance.

Note. *Offline* = Street, school and/or home/residential care facility; *Online* = Social media, chat apps or another electronic device.

### 3.2. Characteristics of sexual exploitation

In terms of the frequency of sexual exploitation, the most frequently reported category was once a year (see Table 3). Significant differences were only found in the frequency of sexual touching, which was more frequent in boys than girls [ $t(1, N = 29) = 2.56, p = .025$ ].

Regarding perpetrator characteristics, Table 3 illustrates that, in most cases, the perpetrator was a stranger. No significant differences were found regarding sociodemographic variables, except in the case of ethnic group. Non-European adolescents showed a higher probability of suffering exploitation via the exchange of sexual material by acquaintances [ $\chi^2(1, N = 62) = 8.45, p = .004$ ; OR = 4.57], whereas for European adolescents this type of exploitation was more likely to involve strangers [ $\chi^2(1, N = 62) = 5.77, p = .016$ ; OR = 3.45].

The results reveal a high prevalence of online contact (social media networks, chat applications) by sexual exploiters, but also a high prevalence of offline contact (street, school or home/residential care facility). These results are shown in Table 3. Significant differences were only found between genders, with boys being more likely to be contacted for sexual material offline than girls [ $\chi^2(1, N = 62) = 6.09, p = .014$ ; OR = 4.00].

### 3.3. Variables associated with CSE

Other variables related to sexual exploitation, such as alcohol consumption, binge drinking, use of pornography, and running away from home, were explored. As shown in Table 4, the prevalence of these risky behaviors was significantly higher in the CSE group compared to their non-CSE victim peers.

## 4. Discussion

The sexual exploitation of children and youth is a major social problem in both developing and developed countries. In Spain, sexual exploitation affects 2.6 % of secondary school-aged students. This percentage is similar to that reported in previous studies that have analyzed the prevalence of the problem in Europe (1–2.5 %; Benavente, Díaz-Faes, et al., 2022), and lower than that reported in the United States (4–4.9 %; Barnert et al., 2022; Ulloa et al., 2016).

The results show that CSE is affecting a significant number of adolescents in the general population in Spain, not being confined to specific vulnerable groups. However, there are risk factors associated with this victimization that need to be considered in order to design effective prevention measures, associated both with gender and sexual orientation, and with ethnic group and risky behaviors such as alcohol consumption, use of pornography or running away from home.

### 4.1. Gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity

Sexual exploitation has traditionally been considered a form of victimization primarily affecting girls. The results obtained in this and previous studies highlight the prevalence of male victims of CSE in European countries (Krisch et al., 2019), yet they have been relatively excluded from relevant policy, research, and interventions (Josenhans et al., 2020). The results show that girls presented a higher risk of exchange of sexual material, while boys were at a higher risk for oral or penetrative sex. The severity of the reported sexual exploitation of boys in the present study underscores a significant problem because support services for boys are limited, often nonexistent, and workers lack specialized training to address their specific needs (Nodzenski & Davis, 2023). There is a social belief that males, having agency in their choices regarding sexual encounters, are inaccurately assumed to act only as willing participants or exploiters. Consequently, they are often perceived as incapable of being victims of sexual exploitation (Mitchell et al., 2017). Such gender stereotypes lead to poorer identification, a less effective response, and less support for male victims of sexual exploitation (Hill & Diaz, 2021). The results obtained underline that gender needs to be more effectively incorporated into the design and delivery of research, policy, and practice (Cockbain et al., 2017). Thus, to intervene from a gender perspective, it is essential to consider that social expectations around hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005)—which describes the stereotypical ways of behaving, feeling, and responding expected of boys and girls based on their adherence to traditional gender roles—along with the stigma surrounding homosexuality and its associated negative connotations, often lead many young people to avoid identifying themselves as victims. This complicates the detection of those who do not align with the traditional image of CSE victim by professionals (Josenhans et al., 2020).

Furthermore, a comprehensive analysis of the gender perspective must also acknowledge that exploiters use different manipulation

**Table 4**  
Risky behaviors and CSE.

	Total N = 4024	Non CSE victims (n = 3920)	CSE victims (n = 104)	OR
Alcohol consumption	2324 (57.8)	2248 (57.5)	76 (73.1)	2.01*** [1.30–3.11]
Binge drinking	1591 (39.5)	1521 (38.9)	70 (67.3)	3.24*** [2.14–4.90]
Porn consumption	2076 (51.6)	1999 (51.1)	78 (75)	2.87*** [1.83–4.48]
Running away	562 (14)	515 (13.2)	47 (45.2)	5.43*** [3.65–8.08]

Note. \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .

and grooming strategies depending on the gender of their victims. For example, they tend to be less overtly sexual and more cautious and indirect when addressing sexual topics with girls, as observed in the United Kingdom (van Gijn-Grosvenor & Lamb, 2016). This distinction should be factored into the design of prevention programs. International organizations such as UNICEF (2020) have also raised concerns about this issue and the barriers that gender stereotypes pose for victims and those responsible for assisting them.

There is a gap in research regarding CSE among sexual minority youth. The present study found significant differences in the risk of victimization between heterosexual (2.1 %) and non-heterosexual (5.5 %) youth, with sexual minority adolescents being at a higher risk of victimization. Barnert et al. (2022) found that adolescents who have experienced same-sex romantic attraction reported CSE more frequently, with no gender differences. Previous studies show that children and youth from sexual minorities are exposed to significant risk factors for increased victimization, such as running away and homelessness (Robinson, 2018), as well as substance abuse, including alcohol and illicit drugs (Marshall et al., 2008). Even when they experience a range of behavioral and emotional difficulties, they often do not seek treatment from health providers (Russell & Fish, 2016), so CSE is not likely to be reported among these victims, and professionals need to be aware of it in order to be responsive to their needs (Kenny et al., 2019).

Ethnicity has been shown to be a significant factor associated with sexual exploitation, with non-European adolescents showing a higher prevalence of both non-contact and contact sexual exploitation, similarly to previous studies (Fedina et al., 2016). However, the perspective must be intersectional to understand how this variable interacts with other sociodemographic categories, such as gender, which has been shown to be a highly relevant factor for sexual exploitation (Williamson & Flood, 2021).

Regarding age, no significant differences were found between the two age groups. However, previous studies have indicated that the age at risk for CSE lies between 13 and 18 years old (Klimley et al., 2018), the same being the case for online sex crimes (Sutton & Finkelhor, 2023), coinciding with the age range of the participants in the study. This alignment might be the reason for not finding significant differences among the age groups.

In sum, although demographic characteristics such as gender, age, sexual orientation, and ethnic group may not be predictive of sexual exploitation (Choi, 2015), these variables are significant and should not be underestimated in the design of prevention programs.

#### 4.2. CSE characteristics

The use of technology plays a crucial role in the contacting of adolescents for sexual exploitation, and it appears that offenders have swiftly embraced internet technology (Mitchell et al., 2011), with social media being depicted as the most common form of contact in this study. Previous studies involving adolescents sexually exploited online before the age of 18 in Sweden indicated that, for all participants, the internet was described as the most natural point of contact with individuals wanting to buy sex (Jonsson et al., 2014). Nowadays, social media tends to be the main point of contact. The street was identified as the second most common form of contact for CSE, highlighting the need to develop preventive programs for victimization not only through online technology but also in other contexts.

In the current study, the majority of the exploiters were strangers to the adolescent, which underlines the importance of preventing risk-taking behaviors in order to reduce the risk of sexual exploitation. It is important to note that there is a significant association between risk-taking in the online and offline environments (Quayle, 2016), and the design of programs for preventing sexual exploitation should take into account the role of adolescents' own risk-taking behavior.

Nevertheless, in other cases the exploiter was an acquaintance. Previous studies have found that the need for attachment and sense of belonging among many young people makes them more susceptible to pressure from their peers, or even from their own family members or caregivers, to engage in situations of exploitation (Reed et al., 2019). For these young people, who are vulnerable and lacking care, attention, and affection, relationships involving sexual exploitation can be interpreted as a form of support and recognition from someone, ultimately becoming a trauma coercive bonding (Sanchez et al., 2019). Their emotional needs are, in a way, fulfilled by those who take advantage of them (Hallett, 2016).

Regarding the frequency of these exploitative relationships, most of the adolescents surveyed reported that these had occurred at least once in the previous year. However, the second most reported frequency for sexually exploited encounters was every month or even every week, highlighting the continuity of these victimization experiences for some youth, which could contribute to high rates of dissociation disorders and complex trauma symptoms (Cole et al., 2016).

#### 4.3. Characteristics associated with CSE

In this study, several risky behaviors such as alcohol use, porn consumption, and running away from home were identified as variables associated with sexual exploitation in adolescents, which is consistent with previous literature (Laird et al., 2020).

Alcohol is often used to attract adolescents to exploitation (McDonald & Middleton, 2019). Several reviews have systematically confirmed the association between running away and sexual exploitation (Choi, 2015; Fedina et al., 2019; Franchino-Olsen, 2021), making it one of the most relevant risk factors to be addressed in prevention programs. Both alcohol use and running away from home or residential care are significant predictors of sexual exploitation in youth (Klatt et al., 2014). Understanding sexual exploitation requires addressing the intersection between risk factors, in this case, alcohol use and running away behavior (Fedina et al., 2019). Additionally, pornography, often used as a tool for grooming children and youth, has shown a significant association with sexual exploitation in previous European studies (Averdijk et al., 2020).

#### 4.4. Conclusion

The prevalence of sexual exploitation among the general population of Spanish youth aligns with the upper range of prevalence rates reported in previous European studies (Benavente, Díaz-Faes, et al., 2022). Several variables associated with an increased risk of sexual exploitation in adolescents have been analyzed, defining different patterns of exploitation. From an ecological (Edwards & Mika, 2017) and intersectional perspective (Gerassi, 2015), some of these variables are nested at different levels. These include belonging to sexual orientation and ethnic minorities, which are influenced by gender, and are intertwined with behaviors such as alcohol use, pornography consumption, and running away. It is important to note that these variables overlap but have rarely been examined concurrently. This study represents the first attempt to describe the sexual exploitation of youth in Spain, considering an intersectional perspective that needs to be taken into account in the design of prevention programs.

#### 4.5. Practice implications

The results indicate that to prevent and detect CSE it is crucial to develop strategies that involve direct conversations with youth not only about exploitation itself but also about sexuality and gender topics (Laws & Hall, 2019), since the gender perspective should be incorporated into the design of intervention programs. The high risk of sexual exploitation related to belonging to a sexual minority, which is also intertwined with situations involving running away from home (Tyler & Schmitz, 2018) and alcohol abuse (Fedina et al., 2019), shows the need to rethink the resources allocated to this group of youth in Spain. Furthermore, the risks associated with the internet and social media need to be addressed. Although there have been some initiatives to protect children and youth from the potential dangers of Internet use, ensuring the safety of children and youth over the Internet is largely viewed as a responsibility that needs to be addressed by parents, children and youth themselves. Continued research is necessary to understand these issues and to effectively respond to them through the development of evidence-based prevention programs (Ospina et al., 2010). In addition, this study exposes the need to develop protective intervention in the street context as a common form of contact for victimization. It is important to protect children and youth from online apps but also from in-person risk contexts.

The use of effective tools that assess sexual exploitation from an ecological and multifactorial perspective is essential for early detection and developing prevention strategies (Franklin et al., 2018). In Spain, one such tool is the EDR-ESIA, which has proven effective in identifying multiple risk factors for sexual exploitation in adolescents from 11 years old (Benavente, Ballester, et al., 2022). However, its implementation has not been widespread, and public policies still need to acquire this intersectional perspective to understand the complexity of detecting and preventing sexual exploitation.

#### 4.6. Limitations

Research on sexual victimization is challenging, and even when youth strive to accurately report past behaviors or experiences, issues with recall can distort the reported incidence and frequency of events. Nevertheless, self-reporting appears to be the most effective way to obtain approximate figures reflecting the reality of sexual exploitation. This study excluded youth who identified themselves as “other gender identity,” other than girl or boy, so it will be essential to include transgender and nonbinary identities more accurately in future research. The inclusion of a limited range of possible risk factors is another limitation to consider, even though this study attempted to include a wide range. Given that sexual exploitation has been shown to be a multifactorial social problem, future research should aim to broaden the scope of risk factors examined. This study was cross-sectional, which limits the ability to draw conclusions about the temporal sequence between sexual exploitation and its associated variables, a challenge common to many studies (Krisch et al., 2019). Understanding this temporal order is crucial for identifying potential pathways leading to sexual exploitation, which can inform the design of effective prevention programs.

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Noemí Pereda:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Alba Águila-Otero:** Writing – original draft, Software, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Varinia Leiva:** Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation.

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#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

#### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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