



THE HIDDEN REALITY: INSIGHTS INTO PERPETRATORS OF COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN THE RECIFE METROPOLITAN AREA, BRAZIL

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) remains a critical child rights issue in Brazil. However, there is relatively limited information on the motivations and behaviours of adults involved in the perpetration of CSEC. This study, designed by Promundo Institute and the Freedom Fund, aims to enhance understanding of CSEC perpetration in the Recife Metropolitan Area of Brazil, a location where an estimated one in six young women experienced CSEC as a minor (Freedom Fund, 2024). As speaking directly to known CSEC perpetrators proved immensely challenging, the study consulted people who frequent areas where CSEC is reportedly prevalent, using surveys and focus group discussions to gather comprehensive insights into the social norms associated with CSEC perpetration and accounts of CSEC offenders from those who interact with them. CSEC experts were also consulted through key informant interviews.

Participants overwhelmingly depicted CSEC perpetration as a deviant behaviour, especially when involving children under 14 years. However, building on gendered understandings of adolescence as a time of sexual readiness, social norms that tolerate sex between adults and children were evident, especially when involving men and adolescent girls aged 14 and older. Although CSEC perpetrators were understood to have diverse characteristics, the “typical” perceived profile was of a middle-aged or older local man, with no prior connection to the child, and who had a relative income advantage over the child.

CSEC perpetrators were described as engaging in different types of CSEC. These ranged from one-off, typically low-value exchanges to longer-standing relationships. The latter were more likely to be framed positively due to the perceived benefits to the child and their family. A diverse range of possible motivations for perpetration were cited, ranging from “sickness” or sexual desire to the pursuit of power. In circumstances where the child was perceived to exert some degree of agency, perpetrators’ responsibility tended to be diminished, with their actions explained in terms of the child’s direct or indirect solicitation, as portrayed through the child’s manner of dress or behaviour. Key findings included:

- Almost half of surveyed men (49.4 percent) believed that if a close friend had the opportunity to pay for sex with an adolescent, knowing there would be no repercussions, he would do so.
- Nearly one in five (19.0 percent) surveyed men admitted to having a friend that they knew had paid adolescents for sex in the last year.

Intermediaries, who profit from CSEC, were also depicted as deviant and motivated primarily by money. As compared with perpetrators, they were described as having a longer-term relationship with the child which lasts as long as the relationship remains profitable. Intermediaries’ profiles were understood to differ depending on their relationship with the child. Non-family intermediaries tended to be depicted as younger men (age 20 and up) with higher-than-median incomes due to their exploitation. Family intermediaries were understood to be more typically from low-income households, contradicting the myth of the affluent “pimp.” Mothers involved in CSEC were most commonly portrayed as active intermediaries, a depiction that did not align with the otherwise dominant discourse of men being sexual decision-makers.

Both perpetrators and intermediaries were understood to potentially expose children to deception, violence, and coercion, in line with indicators of forced labour and human trafficking. However, although the possibility of criminal action was understood to deter some potential perpetrators, faith in formal justice mechanisms was typically very low. Fear of retribution was commonly cited as a reason for not reporting CSEC perpetration. Communities thus appeared to also resort to informal justice responses such as vigilantism, or situational prevention approaches that reduce opportunities for offending but also carry a high risk of blaming the survivors. Critically, people who live and work in locations that favour CSEC also had little if any awareness of support services for CSEC survivors.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on these findings, the study makes the following recommendations, which are described in more detail in the report:

THE GOVERNMENT OF BRAZIL SHOULD:

- 1 Raise the legal age of sexual consent, currently set at age 14, with a view to reducing the gap between this and the legal minimum age for engaging in commercial sex, which is age 18.
- 2 Strengthen implementation of the current policy and legislative framework for preventing and responding to CSEC perpetration. This involves allocating sufficient funding for the justice system.
- 3 Increase investment in detection of online CSEC.

THE GOVERNMENT OF BRAZIL AND CSEC-FOCUSED CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS SHOULD:

- 4 Strengthen children's resilience against CSEC perpetration by increasing access to holistic, child-centred programs that address factors heightening their vulnerability to CSEC offenders.
- 5 Reinforce family resilience against CSEC perpetration by promoting awareness and understanding of it, while addressing socioeconomic factors that increase a family's susceptibility to CSEC.
- 6 Implement behaviour change interventions aimed at addressing social and gender norms that excuse or justify CSEC perpetration.
- 7 Pilot community-based mechanisms for deterring and responding to CSEC perpetration.
- 8 Support tourism-focused businesses that demonstrate a commitment by its staff to eliminating sexual exploitation of children.
- 9 Have a specific focus on CSEC in the state of Pernambuco's next 18th May Campaign ("Make it Beautiful") for the National Day to Combat Abuse and Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents.

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KEY TERMS

Within the report, the following definitions are used:

- **Commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents (CSEC):** When addressing the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents, there is an ongoing debate about which definitions, legal frameworks and terminologies are most appropriate. We base our definition on Paragraph 5 of the Stockholm Declaration and Agenda for Action (1996) defines CSEC as “sexual abuse by an adult and remuneration in money, goods or services to the child or third person or persons. The child is treated as a sexual object and as a commercial object. The commercial sexual exploitation of children constitutes a form of coercion and violence against children and is equivalent to forced labour and a contemporary form of slavery.”

Further, for the purposes of this study, we define CSEC as sexual acts involving children and adolescents aged 17 or younger and that occur in exchange for money or material reward. The latter includes payment in the form of gifts, services or favours. Sexual acts include penetrative sex, oral sex, masturbation, touching private parts of the body and erotic performances, as well as taking pornographic photos or videos. These acts can be performed in person, recorded remotely, or broadcast live.

Because this study was funded by the United States government, our definition aligns with the U.S. Department of State and University of Georgia’s statistical definitions for human trafficking (Okech et al., 2020), as well as the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000.

- **Commercial sex:** Situations where people are exchanging sex for cash, goods or other in-kind favours. Under Brazil law, it is legal for an adult (age 18 and over) to engage in commercial sex as long as there is no deception, coercion or abuse involved. The exploitation of someone of any age through commercial sex is prohibited by law.
- **Perpetrator:** This term is used throughout to refer to individuals who provide cash, goods or in-kind favours in exchange for sexual acts with children.
- **Intermediary:** Individuals who act as a bridge between the child and the perpetrator and derive a benefit from their role, be it in the form of cash, goods, or in-kind favours or services. They are third parties who profit from the child’s sexual exploitation.
- **Agency:** Refers to a child’s ability to make decisions and exercise power. In this report, when we refer to the agency of children, we are referring to a form of socially perceived agency that is not necessarily defended by the authors.
- **Locations that favour CSEC:** We use this term to refer to locations where CSEC is either reported to occur or locations with characteristics that make them likely locations for CSEC, such as bars, clubs and hotels in areas associated with commercial sex.

ACRONYMS

R\$	Brazilian real
CSEC	Commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents
FGD	Focus group discussion
KII	Key informant interview
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
RMA	Recife Metropolitan Area
US\$	U.S. dollar



1. INTRODUCTION

Commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents (CSEC) is a grievous violation of children's rights. It remains a chronic problem around the world, irrespective of a country's economic development (Simon et al., 2020; The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020), and has long-term negative social, physical and psychological effects on children (ECPAT, 2015; Barnert et al., 2017). Recognising this, in recent decades the Brazilian government, civil society organisations, and private sector and multilateral organisations have made efforts to better understand and combat CSEC in Brazil. This has led to the classification of CSEC in Brazil as a heinous crime (Library of Congress, 2014) and the establishment of the National Plan to Combat Sexual Violence against Children and Adolescents, the National Policy on the Human Rights of Children and Adolescents, and the National Council of the Rights of Children and Adolescents.

Yet, despite these initiatives, resources to implement policies are insufficient (de Araújo Costa, 2021), and CSEC remains widespread. A recent prevalence study involving surveys with more than 600 CSEC survivors estimated that roughly one in six young women in the Recife Metropolitan Area (RMA) have experienced CSEC as a minor (Freedom Fund, 2024). However, while knowledge about CSEC survivors in Brazil is growing, less is known about adults who engage in CSEC. This impedes the development of impactful, evidence-based programming that targets CSEC offenders and the social norms that support perpetration.

To address this knowledge gap, Promundo Institute and the Freedom Fund developed this perpetration-focused study to better understand the motivations and behaviours of men involved in CSEC in the RMA. Because speaking directly with multiple known perpetrators of CSEC proved to be highly challenging (see Annex A), the study consulted people who frequent areas where CSEC is reportedly prevalent, gathering their rich observations and perceptions of adults who engage in commercial sexual acts with children (perpetrators) and adults who profit from such acts (intermediaries). The study thus provides comprehensive insights into the social norms associated with CSEC perpetration, coupled with second-hand accounts of CSEC offenders relayed by those who interact with them.

1.1 SETTING

The study took place in the RMA. This is one of the poorest locations in Brazil, with over 10.5 percent of families living in extreme poverty (UNDP, 2022).¹ In 2021, the Freedom Fund established a hotspot project in the RMA that focuses on evidence-based prevention of and responses to CSEC. The Freedom Fund has since engaged in multiple large-scale research studies on CSEC in the RMA, including the aforementioned study on CSEC prevalence, the findings of which are frequently cited in this report.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the perceived profile of CSEC perpetrators and intermediaries in the RMA?
2. What are the perceived behaviours of CSEC perpetrators and intermediaries in the RMA?
3. What are the social norms that surround CSEC perpetration in the RMA?
4. What are the perceived motivating and inhibiting factors of CSEC in the RMA?
5. What are recommendations for combating CSEC in the RMA?

¹ Defined as individuals with household income per capita of R\$70 or less per month in 2010, or R\$131 (roughly US\$25) per month in 2021 when adjusted for inflation.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study used a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods.

2.1 QUALITATIVE METHODS

Focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with **five subject specialists and 41 adults who work in areas known for CSEC** to ascertain their perceptions of CSEC perpetration. The latter group included men and women (cisgender and transgender) who are engaged in commercial sex and people working in locations that favour CSEC, including tour guides, taxi drivers, bar owners, hotel staff, street vendors and housekeepers (see Annex A for details). Participants were identified using a purposive sampling approach that assumed participants' employment or business activities in locations that favour CSEC meant they would either have interacted with CSEC perpetrators and intermediaries or would have observed them during the course of their work. Validating this assumption, almost all participants discussed actual cases of CSEC. Nonetheless, participants who were more likely to have regular contact with perpetrators and intermediaries, such as adults currently working in commercial sex, typically gave the most detailed information. Most data collection for the FGDs and KIIs was conducted in person in hotels and coworking spaces in the city of Recife, although a few KIIs were conducted over the phone to facilitate participants' availability. The FGDs and KIIs were transcribed and coded using content analysis by the research team (Promundo Institute), then cross-checked for reliability by a child protection expert consultant hired by The Freedom Fund (Helen Shipman, PhD). The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Portuguese. The quotes provided in this report have been translated by from Portuguese into English, with some minor editing for clarity and without altering participants' message.

2.2 QUANTITATIVE METHOD

After the difficulties of recruiting convicted CSEC offenders for the study became apparent (see Annex A), we added a survey targeting men who frequent areas known for CSEC. Participants were recruited using an opt-in, convenience sampling approach based on their presence in the ten places or establishments most mentioned as areas where CSEC occurs in the qualitative phase. The survey questionnaire was completed by **80 male participants** (see Annex A for details). The data were then analysed using descriptive analysis; inferential models were not undertaken. Instead, the results helped us to verify clues and trends from the qualitative data, strengthening our understanding of the profile of adults who engage in CSEC, either as perpetrators or intermediaries, and community members' perceptions of these individuals.

2.3 ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical approval was granted for both phases of the study by the Research Ethics Committee of the University Centre of Brasília, located in the city of Brasília (CAAE: 61349422.8.0000.0023). For details of ethical considerations taken throughout the study, see Annex A.

2.4 LIMITATIONS

Although the study generated insightful findings on CSEC perpetration, a number of limitations were evident. These are discussed in greater detail in Annex A but include the risk of social desirability bias when participants discussed CSEC and the study's relatively limited geographical scope (predominantly Recife city). A further, clear limitation is the study's inability to consult directly with known offenders of CSEC and its reliance instead on community perceptions of them. However, given most participants were themselves either survivors or facilitators of CSEC, or had witnessed cases up close, the chosen approach was still an appropriate method for increasing understanding of this hard-to-access population. Finally, the survey asked questions relating only to the commercial sexual exploitation of adolescent girls (age 17 or younger) rather than other genders.

3. KEY FINDINGS



The results from both the qualitative and quantitative methods are presented below, focusing on community perceptions of CSEC perpetration, perceived factors motivating and inhibiting it, and perceived profiles and behaviours of perpetrators and intermediaries.

3.1 COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF CSEC PERPETRATION



When considering how CSEC perpetration is viewed in the community, two dominant themes emerged: CSEC perpetration as common and CSEC perpetration as deviant. A third, less common theme was also raised mainly by men: *Tolerance or normalisation of commercial sex involving adolescent girls.*

CSEC PERPETRATION AS COMMON

Across all KIIs and FGDs, there was a dominant perception that CSEC is relatively common in the RMA:

-  **Cisgender man engaged in commercial sex, 02:** *It happens all the time, all the time.*
-
- Subject specialist, 02:** *In Brazil, especially in the Northeast, coming across this situation is very common.*
-
- Male tour guide, 01:** *You see a 45-year-old guy, who isn't from here, picking up a 15-year-old, putting him in a car, taking him away and nobody does or says anything... People see this as something natural. "He's off with a 50-year-old guy, because he'll give him 50, 100 reais."* 

This perception of high prevalence of CSEC aligns with the Freedom Fund's 2024 research on CSEC prevalence in the RMA, which found that roughly one in six young women have experienced CSEC while aged 17 or younger. Women engaged in commercial sex, men and women who work in contexts that facilitate CSEC, and subject specialists were most likely to attribute perceived high CSEC rates to poverty. However, the subject specialists also argued that historical elements related to the region's socioeconomic formation, such as colonialism and extractivist capitalism, contributed to prevalence, coupled with weak child protection mechanisms and tourism:

-  **Subject specialist, 02:** *It's a very robust tourism scenario, both international and domestic, so we hear things... When you're in Porto [another tourist destination], you don't see sexual exploitation right away, you know? But we're aware that it exists and that many tourist facilities contribute to it, despite monitoring and mapping. They've signed a pact for the protection of children, but it's at a standstill at the state level.*
-
- Subject specialist, 05:** *The issue of CSEC in Pernambuco traces back to the early days of the capital's formation. Until around 1990, it was tied to a capitalist way of producing sugarcane. Rooted in a patriarchal system, reminiscent of large estates and slave quarters, this exploitation is deeply connected to the oppression of the poorer classes, Black communities, and Indigenous peoples, allowing the monoculture of sugarcane in Brazil to continue until the 1990s. This historical backdrop creates an atmosphere and ecosystem highly conducive to exploitation.* 

Thus, the RMA was depicted as experiencing interrelated conditions that favour CSEC perpetration.

CSEC PERPETRATION AS DEVIANT

Although depicted as commonplace, CSEC perpetration was also depicted as abnormal and unacceptable:

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 02:

[A CSEC perpetrator] is a scoundrel, disgusting, worthless. It's something I can't fathom... how many escorts one can find on the streets. How many women engage in this work. And you take a child who is in a state of vulnerability, someone you could help, provide with food or a place to sleep.

Cisgender man engaged in commercial sex, 01:

[Discussing intermediaries' money] I'll tell you something. This money is not well-liked... It's dirty money, it doesn't last more than a day in that person's hand... It's a cancer.

Across the different groups, participants from all social groups often distanced themselves from CSEC perpetrators and intermediaries, being clear that they did not engage in such behaviour. As such, there was a tension between participants' clear positioning of intermediaries and perpetrators as "others" who operate outside dominant social norms and the view that CSEC is nevertheless common.

Condemnation of CSEC perpetration tended to be framed in terms of perpetrators being "sick," "naughty" or having abnormal fetishes (see section 3.7), of their exploitation of children's vulnerability, or of the perceived harm CSEC could inflict on a child. Across all groups, the latter was widely understood to include negative psychological effects (such as trauma and low self-esteem), poor health outcomes (including sexually transmitted infections or unwanted pregnancies), threats to a child's healthy development, and a range of social problems, the most common being the expectation that the child would remain engaged in CSEC and transition into commercial sex in adulthood:

Cisgender woman working in location that favours CSEC, 01:

They become very troubled when they really start to understand [what they are doing]. They become a quiet child who stays in the corner, with no friends; they shut themselves off from the world.

Subject specialist, 03:

This is a profound trauma. It can directly and immediately impact the continuity of their education; and there might be some delays in achieving milestones that are normal in a child's life, which come from being in school and studying.

Subject specialist, 02:

I can't help but see a causal connection. Because many adult women I've had the opportunity to talk to, who are in the sex industry, started in their adolescence.

These perceptions are supported by the literature (ECPAT, 2015; Barnert et al., 2017), as CSEC is widely understood to have multiple negative and potentially long-term physical, social and psychological effects on children.

However, participants' widespread condemnation of CSEC did not necessarily translate into protective action towards child survivors. Instead, a recurring theme across the FGDs and KIs was the expectation that community members would "turn a blind eye," even if they recognised an act to be CSEC:

Speaker D, FGD with male taxi or app drivers:

Where I live, the community knows what happens, but no one interferes. It's that idea, to each their own. I know... all of them, the girls, the boys, I know everything.

Cisgender woman working in location that favours CSEC, 06:

I think it should be reported. I think that whoever is close, whoever notices it, must report it. I can't do that because it's a matter of my work, but I think some people are often so close that they notice, but let it go.

Instead, as discussed in section 3.9, apparent apathy towards cases recognised as CSEC was linked to a variety of external factors, from fear of reprisal to a sense of helplessness when faced with ineffective legal systems or offenders who were related to the child. The recognition of CSEC as deviant and a child rights violation is a critical first step towards reprimanding offenders and providing trauma-informed care to survivors. However, community-based protection mechanisms are effective only if child rights violations are recognised as such and can then be addressed through functioning, trusted response mechanisms (UNICEF, 2021). This finding consequently emphasises the importance of programming that strengthens response systems and addresses social barriers to taking action against child exploitation.



TOLERANCE OR NORMALISATION OF COMMERCIAL SEX WITH ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Although participants overwhelmingly condemned CSEC, two men engaged in commercial sex and another who works in locations that favour CSEC did acknowledge that not everyone in the community shared this view. Some, they said, see commercial sex with children, and adolescent girls in particular, as acceptable or normal.

Cisgender man working in location that favours CSEC, 02: *Through the community we know that some do not accept it, others overlook it, others accept and experience that sort of thing in my community. There's always that side.*

Although a minority view in the community FGDs and KIs, the perceived high prevalence of CSEC arguably implies that it is tolerated by some community members. Supporting this, two participants who are transgender women engaged in commercial sex reported how perpetrators had shared explicit details of their offending:

Transgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 01: *One client sent me videos and I was... He sent me a video, wow... ejaculating in a child's mouth – a baby.*

Transgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 02: *One client told me a story about how he was at home alone and there was always a 14-year-old boy passing by, apparently 13, 14 years old. And he called this boy. He said: "I called the boy and hooked up with him. It was cool. Really cool. Very young and all." There. How absurd. How horrible. I heard that story, how absurd.*





These examples suggest that there are social circles where it is perceived to be acceptable to openly share details of offending, even leaving an electronic trail. They also indicate that people engaged in commercial sex may be at risk of being forced to bear knowledge of CSEC perpetration, including being made to watch videos depicting sexual assault and rape of children.

The survey findings also reinforced the "acceptability" of CSEC, where at least some men agreed with statements that normalised it (Table 1). As the questions focused on adolescent girls, the answers may not apply to younger children or other genders. However, at least some community members appeared to normalise men paying teenage girls for sex. For example, over half agreed or strongly agreed that "most guys wouldn't mind paying money to be with a beautiful teenage girl," while almost half believed that if a close friend had the opportunity to pay for sex with an adolescent, knowing there would be no repercussions, he would do so. Among the 19.0 percent of participants who reported that a friend had paid adolescents for sex in the last year, the proportion who agreed that most guys won't mind paying for sex with a beautiful teenage girl was higher (73.3 percent versus 55.7 percent), suggesting greater normative acceptance of commercial sex with adolescent girls in this group.



Photo credit: Natália Corrêa/Walk Free






Table 1: Statements relating to the normalisation of sex with adolescent girls

Response among men who frequent areas known for CSEC (N=80)	Fully Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
 "Men who go to places like bars or the cinema to spend time with teenage girls expect to pay something to be with them."	35.4	17.7	1.3	43.0	2.5
 "Most guys wouldn't mind paying some money to be with a pretty teenage girl."	34.2	21.5	3.8	31.7	8.9
 "If a close friend of mine had the opportunity to pay for sex with a teenage girl and was sure there would be no consequences, he would do it."	30.4	19.0	5.1	30.4	15.2
 "A close friend of mine has paid to have sex with adolescents in the last 12 months in an adult entertainment venue."	10.1	8.9	2.5	44.3	34.2

When considering why transactional sex between a man and a teenage girl risks being normalised, it is worth noting that although it is legal for adults over 18 to engage in commercial sex, CSEC is illegal, as is sex with a child under 14 years (the age of sexual consent in Brazil). Although the legal age of consent was not explicitly mentioned by participants, 14 years of age was mentioned by multiple participants as a threshold under which CSEC was perceived to be particularly deviant and assumed to be paedophilia. The current legal framework may thus contribute to an understanding of sexual development in which children are considered to be ready for sex from age 14, rather than being viewed as having the right to the development of a healthy and protected sexuality. Moreover, exchanges of cash or services are often accepted as a "normal" part of relationships in Brazil, with sex viewed as a normative means through which adolescent girls can access money (Garcia and Olivar, 2021). This potentially allows perpetrators to perceive themselves as providing or taking care of the adolescent rather than engaging in a "commercial" transaction. Exploitative relationships therefore risk being re-framed as normal sexual relationships.

The normalisation of sex between a man and an adolescent girl also arguably aligns with discourses that position adolescent girls as sexually desirable, dubbed the "Lolita Effect" by Durham (2008). Supporting this, the survey repeatedly found that men who frequent areas known for CSEC agreed or strongly agreed with statements that normalise men's sexual desire of adolescent girls (see Table 2). Interestingly, though, while 58.3 percent of participants thought it was easy for a man to fall in love with a teenage girl, only 19.0 percent thought it as natural for a man to desire sex with a teenage girl and only 15.2 percent said they would find it normal if their close friend got intimately involved with a teenage girl. Thus, there appears to be a line between *understanding* the sexual desirability of adolescent girls and *naturalising* this desire, a distinction that could be exploited in preventative and norms and behaviour change programming. This finding may also indicate a response bias when the behaviour (sex with a teenage girl) is intentionally separated from the concept of romance.

Table 2: Statements relating to the normalisation of men having sex with adolescent girls

Response among men who frequent areas known for CSEC (N=80)	Fully Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
 "It is easy for a man to fall in love with a teenage girl."	27.9	30.4	3.8	29.1	8.9
 "It is natural for a man to want to have sex with a teenage girl."	6.3	12.7	3.8	45.6	31.7
 "It is normal when a man goes out with a teenage girl to have fun."	18.0	10.1	3.8	46.8	25.3
 "I find it normal when a close friend is chatting and flirting with a teenage girl."	16.5	8.9	2.5	50.6	21.5
 "I would find it normal if a close friend was getting intimately involved with a teenage girl."	5.1	10.1	3.8	51.9	29.1





A final factor explaining why some acts of CSEC may be tolerated relates to whether they are recognised as exploitation. Across the community FGDs and KIs, adolescent girls in particular were frequently depicted as "agents" who knowingly agree to the sexual exchange, rather than considered as "victims":

- Cisgender man engaged in commercial sex, 01:** *She gives access [to her online content]. She says herself that she sells content.*
- Cisgender man working in context that favours CSEC, 02:** *I've seen it [an adolescent looking for a man], I've seen it several times... I've seen and heard it as I walked. And on the other hand, I've already seen him trying to seduce a minor.*
- Speaker H, FGD with female taxi or app drivers:** *I've seen it, but it wasn't like that; the girl was being exploited because she wanted to, it wasn't by force, you know? She wanted it herself.*

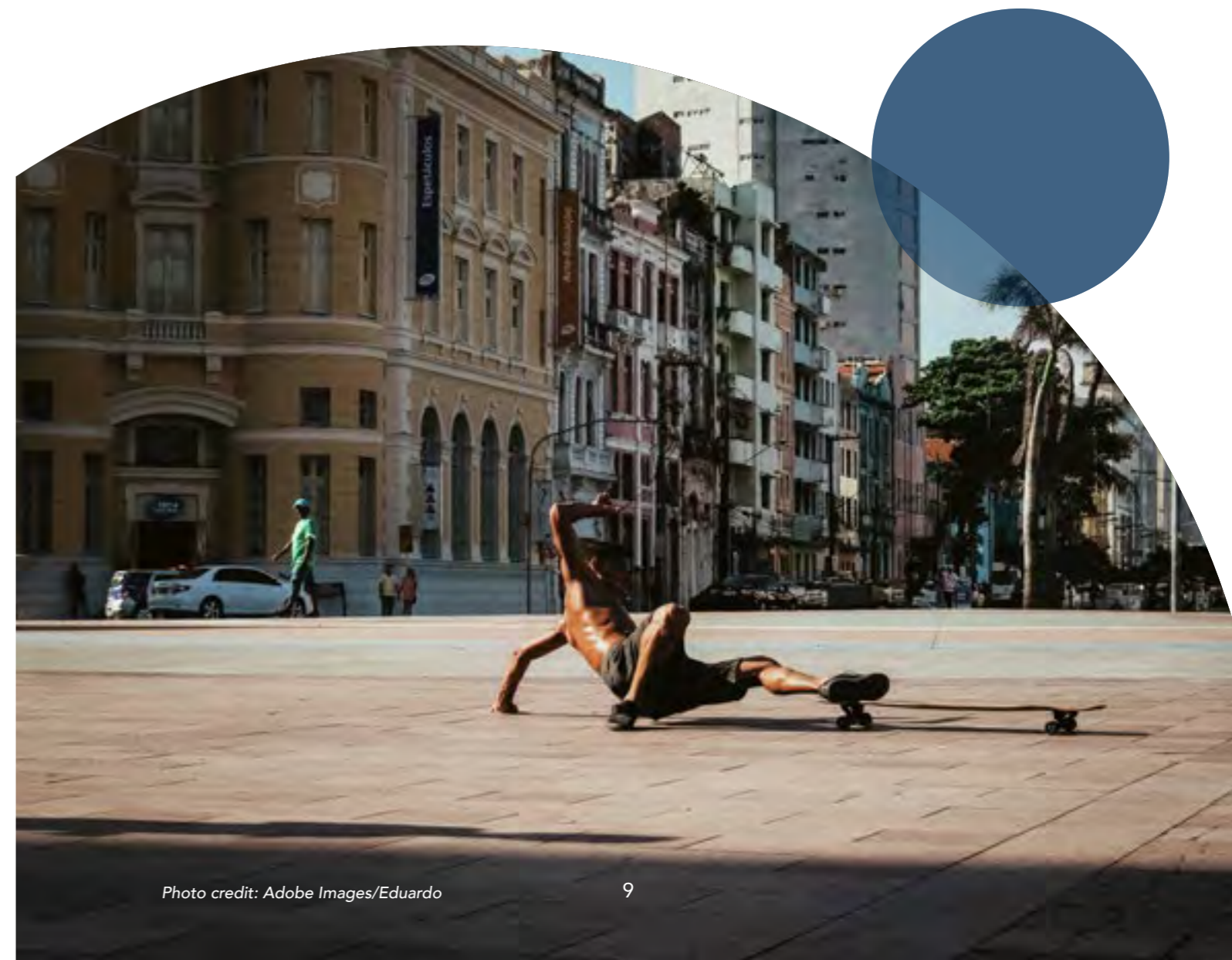
The last quote came from a cisgender woman who had engaged in CSEC as a child but stressed that she knew what she was doing – that she had exerted agency. She and another cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex both clearly differentiated between commercial sex initiated or agreed upon by an adolescent girl versus sexual exploitation by force. Supporting this view, the survey of men who frequented locations known for CSEC found that some agreed with statements that presented CSEC survivors as complicit and potentially willing participants (Table 3). For instance, 27.9 percent agreed or strongly agreed that adolescents engage in CSEC to fulfil sexual fantasies, while 15.2 percent agreed or strongly agreed that adolescents engage in CSEC because they enjoy sex.

However, undue focus on a child's agency risks overlooking external factors that potentially "thin" a child's agency (Klocker, 2007), such as poverty, intergenerational power differences between adults and children or family pressure. Indeed, the Freedom Fund's 2024 CSEC prevalence study conducted in the RMA found that CSEC survivors' agency is often heavily "thinned." Almost half reported being misled about the nature of the services or responsibilities they were expected to provide, and almost half had experiences that met indicators of forced labour, including violence, imposed debt and misleading recruitment.

Table 3: Statements that present girls as willing participants in CSEC

Response among men who frequent areas known for CSEC (N=80)	Fully Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
 "Adolescent girls who do sex work here in Recife and the RMA are morally corrupt."	27.9	22.8	11.4	29.1	8.9
 "Sex work allows adolescent girls who do it to fulfil their sexual fantasies."	12.7	15.2	5.1	41.2	25.3
 "Adolescent girls who do sex work here do it because they like sex."	5.1	10.1	6.3	45.6	32.9
 "If an adolescent girl is willing to hook up with a man, that consent is enough to make him guilt-free."	6.3	8.9	3.8	46.8	34.2

Note: The survey questionnaire mentions "sex work" as this is the term that is most commonly used and best understood by the respondents, and we have retained the direct translation here for transparency. In this report, the synonymous term of "commercial sex" is used instead.



3.2 PERCEIVED PROFILE OF CSEC PERPETRATORS

Across the community KIs and FGDs, and in the KIs with subject specialists, the overwhelming depiction was that CSEC perpetrators in the RMA are a relatively diverse, heterogenous group of individuals:

Subject specialist, 05: ... the data indicate that most aggressors are men, although women also commit sexual violence, whether in the form of abuse or sexual exploitation. These men can be married or single, can be white or black, there is no specific profile for those who are going to sexually exploit this girl.

Male tour guide, 01: When the person is sick, a sex maniac, they can be married or single... That is irrelevant, because some people hide in their marriage, in company, in everyday life.

A transgender woman engaged in commercial sex reflected on the effects of this diversity, saying: “they hide, they have a cover. It’s difficult for you to identify [them].” A similar view was shared by the subject specialists who noted that perpetrators’ heterogeneity made them difficult to profile. It was also unclear whether or how CSEC perpetrators differ from people who legally purchase sex acts from young women over the age of 18, and what proportion of men are preferentially perpetrating CSEC against minor girls versus those who are indifferent to whether the sex act is with a minor or an adult (opportunistic offenders).

Nonetheless, across the KIs and FGDs, perpetrators’ profiles were understood to share commonalities linked to their age, socioeconomic status and relationship to the child. Most were also depicted as male – not unexpected since the study focused on male perpetrators – although when actual CSEC cases were discussed, a handful of female perpetrators were also mentioned:

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 04 I was exploited by my cousin too... she’d tell me to poke [her insides]. She would climb on top of me and rub me, I was 12 years old. And she was already about 30. I didn’t know what that [act] was, and when it was over, she gave me money. She’d give me 30 to 50 reais... It continued happening for a couple of years, then it stopped.

This aligns with literature on CSEC perpetration, where female perpetrators have been observed, albeit it in much lower numbers (Carpinteri et al., 2018; Brouard and Crewe, 2012).



Photo credit: Natália Corrêa/Walk Free

AGE

Perpetrators were most commonly described as being 40 years or older, with some cases cited where the perpetrator was described as post-retirement age:

Speaker H, FGD with female taxi or app drivers: Most are much older. Most are old enough to be grandfathers. How can they? On Saturday I picked up a passenger in the West; it was a man, I think he was about 70 years old, but he was handsome, flashy. There was an adolescent [and] there was a guy about the same age, I think a little older than her, maybe 20. I didn’t understand it, but I told him: “I didn’t understand that situation.” But this happens a lot, because there are a lot of fetishes, because they are doing it with minors.

The typical perceived age of 40 and upwards is slightly older than the average age of 35 years recorded among men who admitted to CSEC in a quantitative survey in Rio de Janeiro (Segundo et al., 2012). However, it does indicate a similar, significant age disparity with the child. Away from CSEC situations, children are typically positioned in a subordinate position to adults (Meyer, 2007), underpinned by the latter’s normative authority and the child’s greater dependency. Yet, when age disparities occur within the context of commercial sex, they exacerbate other sources of power disparity, such as the child’s typically lower economic status. This heightens the perpetrator’s power and reduces the likelihood that the child will be able to exert meaningful agency in the relationship/encounter – for example, the child’s ability to say no to the adult perpetrator or to exit the situation if they no longer wish to continue with the exchange is likely to be significantly impeded (Freedom Fund, 2024).

RELATIONSHIP TO THE CHILD

When considering perpetrators’ likely relationship to CSEC survivors, two distinct views emerged. Among men and women who work in locations that favour CSEC, perpetrators were most commonly understood to be unrelated to the child. However, this did not fully align with findings from the Freedom Fund’s CSEC prevalence study in the RMA, where almost 60 percent of CSEC survivors knew the person who solicited them for their first CSEC encounter. Mirroring this, where FGD and KI participants disclosed personal experiences of CSEC, perpetrators who were their friends or family were also mentioned:

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 04: I was exploited by my grandfather. He would give me money, and call me into his hammock, and he would poke me. I didn’t understand what that was, I went because of the money. I was a child, I was 10, 11. He exploited me when I was 12; at that age I didn’t have the mindset I have now. Back then, I only cared about the money, I went for the money, because I didn’t feel anything there, no orgasm or anything. I didn’t feel anything, I went for the money.

Transgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 03: He always told me to sit on his lap when my dad wasn’t there. I’d sit down, he’d give me chocolate and sweets... My uncle too, but he gave me lollipops. “Sit here, let’s talk,” and if I did, he’d get intimate. I found it strange, but I already knew that I wasn’t normal, I was different, I liked men; but it wasn’t him I wanted.

These narratives suggest that although more visible CSEC may involve a perpetrator who has no prior relationship with the child, CSEC is also occurring behind closed doors, away from public venues typically associated with CSEC. Where children have close familial ties to the perpetrator, they may be expected to prioritise their family’s well-being over their own, especially if the perpetrator is a key breadwinner (Jones, 2013).

ECONOMIC STATUS

Perpetrators were most commonly depicted as having visibly superior economic status to the child they exploit. They were frequently described as either men who were economically active with average or high incomes (for example, businessmen, judges, policemen), men engaged in lucrative illegal work (for example, drug dealers, loan sharks) or men in receipt of pensions:

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 04: *There was a woman [intermediary] who was even arrested near the [location] in the city. Because only minors were there; teachers, judges, so many rich people went there, fancy people, old men in suits and everything.*

However, CSEC perpetration was not always associated solely with average or high incomes. Instead, a recurring theme, albeit to a lesser degree, was that perpetrators may be of lower socioeconomic status, with these perpetrators' roles including lower-paid manual work:

Cisgender man working in context that favours CSEC, 01: *Like I told you, I've even seen people who worked with me doing it, and their income was practically the same as mine.*

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 08: *There's a watchman at the Carmo Church...he always goes out and looks for [young girls]. He's even asked me where he could find a young girl. I said I didn't know. Because the girls told me about him. He always looks for a younger girl and takes her to the church parking lot.*

Perpetrators with lower socioeconomic status were more strongly linked with one-off exchanges or payment with drugs. When reflecting on this phenomenon, one male tour guide noted that those with only little to offer could still attract children, implying their expectations may be lower than that of adults. The economic status of perpetrators was therefore typically understood as needing to be *relatively higher* than the child so that they could afford the exploitation.

LOCAL VERSUS TOURIST

Across the community FGDs and KIIs, CSEC perpetrators were most commonly assumed to be local. This aligned with findings from the Freedom Fund's (2024) CSEC prevalence study where around three-quarters of CSEC survivors said perpetrators were local. However, particularly among tour guides and taxi drivers whose work meant they frequently interacted with tourists, perpetrators were also described as foreign men who travel to Brazil for CSEC, potentially exploiting multiple children per trip:

Male tour guide, 04: *... if he comes to Brazil, he does it every time he comes to Brazil.*

Male tour guide, 02: *Because these people are sick, the number [of times they exploit children] is different. Some of them do it several times. I don't know how many times; it depends on the guy.*

The tour guides reported observing mostly Germans and Italians engaging in CSEC, although more than one also mentioned Americans, British, French, Spanish, and Europeans in general. A male tour guide suggested that CSEC tourism was linked to Brazil's weak judicial response to CSEC:

Male tour guide, 04: *Sex happens. Gringos [foreigners, typically Caucasian] know... that the law [in Brazil] is quite different from the one in Europe. Based on what they know of the country, they like to come here and do these things; because, if there were stricter laws, they would look for people of [legal] age to do these things.*

The tour guide thus perceived that tourists view Brazil as a safe harbour for their offending or, at the very least, a place where they can be less discerning about the age of their sexual partner. Lack of faith in the judicial system was a recurring theme across the FGDs and KIIs (see section 3.9). Moreover, this viewpoint is supported by a study by ECPAT (2015) in another Brazilian tourist resort, Fortaleza, where the city was perceived as being marketed for CSEC. Hence, globalisation presents CSEC perpetrators with the opportunity to select from a global market (Perez et al., 2019), with countries that offer weaker legislative frameworks – and thus lower risks for perpetrators – likely proving more attractive (Jones, 2013). As such, there is a need for stronger implementation of child protection and anti-trafficking legislation, including holding local and foreign perpetrators accountable for their involvement in CSEC.

3.3 PERPETRATORS' PERCEIVED BEHAVIOURS

DURATION AND FREQUENCY OF CSEC

When considering the duration and frequency of perpetrators' offending, participants described either short periods of exploitation, where one-off, typically low-value exchanges were offered to the child by the perpetrator, or longer periods of exploitation. High frequency perpetrators (that is, those routinely seeking CSEC) were typically associated with one-off exchanges, with these perpetrators typically depicted as younger men who preferred numerous, brief sexual acts and could afford regular encounters. One tradesman suggested that these perpetrators have mental health disorders that encourage frequent engagement in CSEC:

Cisgender man working in context that favours CSEC, 03: *They're always there. There's a [middle-aged] guy, I mean, he's sick, "you come here to the square every day, you miserable..." excuse the word.*

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 03: *If he has the money, [he will engage in CSEC] every day.*



The first quote emphasises gaps in the legal and social framework for preventing CSEC if regular perpetrators can come to public places daily without facing arrest or retribution.

Perpetrators were also understood to provide children with longer-term financial or material support:

Cisgender man engaged in commercial sex, 01: *[The sugar daddy relationship is] very favourable, isn't it? Underprivileged families, unemployment. The need makes people do it. Because she's a laundress. In this case, her daughter doesn't want to study, she just wants to fool around. It's easy, isn't it?*

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 03: *Most of them have good jobs, they have degrees. Poor men don't go after women to pay, especially if they're adolescents. Because they want to pay for much more than just [sex]. They want to pay for romance, they want to take care of that person.*

These types of relationship, sometimes referred to as “sugar daddy” relationships, were perceived as more likely to involve adolescents than adults and can last for many years. One female respondent described a sugar daddy relationship she was aware of that started when the boy was 12 and has extended into adulthood, even though the boy is now an adult man who is married with children. Participants’ accounts suggested that longer-term relationships have a higher chance of being deemed socially acceptable by perpetrators’ and children’s social networks. For instance, although participants typically did not openly approve of longer-term relationships, they were depicted as fulfilling a need. This was either in terms of meeting the child’s basic needs or allowing them to have the latest consumer goods, such as phones and cosmetics, and thus be equal to their peers, an important form of social capital. A certain degree of acceptance is also reflected in some participants’ use of the term “sugar daddy,” which sanitises the exploitation by using terms associated with kinship. Further, these relationships align with a popular discourse in which sex is viewed as a normative way to access money in Brazil (Garcia and Olivar, 2021).

However, it is important to stress that tolerance for this form of CSEC contributes to continued perpetration (Buller et al., 2020). Moreover, despite having greater acceptability, longer-term relationships still carry high risks for the child, with not all such relationships fulfilling the child’s “needs”:

Female tour guide, 02: *There was a gringo who came from abroad. He took a girl, about a month ago, there at the São Pedro. The child says he did all kinds of things to her, but never paid her. She was crying, but there's nothing she can do.*

Furthermore, clear examples were given of how perpetrators “groomed” children in the context of longer-term CSEC relationships, first developing a relationship with them before initiating sexual behaviours:

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 04: *I know many girls who have been with him [...] because my uncle has a lot of money. He gives expensive gifts, takes them shopping, spends 1000, 2000 [Brazilian Reais]. He has a lot of money. And the girls stay. But the girl is already 16, she's already (old), but he starts giving them money when they are little.*

Transgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 02: *It always starts with a friendship [...] in exchange for a trip, money, clothes, ice cream, food [...] He won't approach them as the enemy... First he will do something that pleases the person and then he will get what he wants.*

Grooming allows perpetrators to engage not just with the child they are targeting but also the child’s families, building mutual trust and dependency. This, in turn, may further reduce the child’s ability to say no if their families have been similarly groomed and are thus supportive of the relationship.

GENDER PREFERENCES

Sexual encounters with cisgender girls were most frequently cited, particularly by the male participants, as the most common relationship/encounter in the RMA. This aligned with the actual narrated cases which mostly – but not exclusively – involved cisgender female survivors. The perception that girls are at greatest risk of CSEC was supported by the subject specialists. However, while a couple of community participants drew on gender norms that depict girls as innately vulnerable, subject specialists used an intersectional lens to highlight how different factors, such as race and class, interact to increase specific girls’ vulnerability to CSEC perpetrators:

Subject specialist, 01: *Without a doubt, girls are the biggest victims. From the age of 9, 10, we have situations where rights are violated and, certainly, black girls are the most exploited. So being a girl in a situation of vulnerability, and being black, are certainly very serious indicators of this girl's exposure to sexual exploitation.*

Subject specialist, 05: *Sexual exploitation... is present in the lives of girls who are, for the most part, black, poor, from underprivileged communities.*

Cisgender man working in context that favours CSEC, 05: *Girls suffer the most... I believe it's nine [girls out of ten] to one [boy].*

This aligns with reported cases of exploitation in Brazil indicating that those at highest risk of being exploited are black, female and of low socioeconomic status (Agência Brasil, 2019).

Nonetheless, most female participants also argued that perpetrators exploit boys as well as cisgender girls, while another moderately common view among participants was that the gender of the child does not make a difference:

Cisgender man engaged in commercial sex, 02: *It's the same. Boy, girl. They [clients] truly want to explore. I've heard from clients: "It doesn't matter. Are there boys or girls there?". I always say "no, I don't work that way".*

Perceptions about demand for transgender children varied and evidence was anecdotal. The most common perception was that CSEC perpetrators’ preference for transgender children has lessened, although women and men who were currently engaged in commercial sex noted a potential demand for transgender girls. This suggests that further research is needed to better understand the experiences of transgender CSEC survivors. When explaining why transgender children may engage in commercial sex, one cisgender woman commented:

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 08: *To begin with, there's the rejection at home. Then they will earn money however they want. As I've heard from several mothers: "I don't know how she's going to earn the money. All I know is that I want money brought home."*

A handful of participants argued that transgender children are at risk of rejection or discrimination by their families, due to transphobia and homophobia, making them more vulnerable to perpetrators of CSEC. This aligns with the overarching theme that intersectional characteristics of children serve to increase their vulnerability to exploitation by CSEC perpetrators.

NATURE AND AMOUNT OF EXCHANGES

The types of exchanges offered by perpetrators were understood to vary from basic food items or clothes to cash or drugs, with the latter affecting children from middle-income as well as low-income families:

Subject specialist, 01: *[Perpetrators] make use of a situation of vulnerability, of economic fragility due to gender. We have situations here in Olinda where children and adolescents exchange sex for a popsicle, for crack, with three reais.*

Transgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 02: *I see a lot of adolescents, a lot of children sniffing glue [...] and prostituting themselves to maintain their addiction and feed themselves. Because there's the addiction and there's the food part too, [so] that they won't die of hunger.*

In cases of low-value exchanges, perpetrators were framed as emphasising children's economic vulnerability. In contrast, payments in the form of drugs were typically depicted as a sign of the child's deviance, framed as prostitution. The role of the perpetrator in fuelling the child's addiction or using it to exert control tended to be overlooked, as was the possibility that CSEC survivors use drugs or alcohol as a coping strategy in the face of exploitation (Riley-Horvath, 2019).

In other cases, perpetrators were also understood to provide children with higher value commodities such as phones, clothes or perfumes, with children typically being depicted as actively seeking these items:

Subject specialist, 03: *... She [a girl] says, "oh, but I want to drink whiskey and Red Bull [...] and I want to buy a Melissa [shoe]". So, she [engages into CSEC] because it has become a quicker way to get the money so she can do what consumer society is dictating that she should do.*

These findings align with studies examining CSEC in other low-income settings in Brazil and elsewhere where consumer culture has been found to create new "needs" that children aspire to in order to fit in with their peers, gain status and increase their chance of social mobility (Kyegombe et al., 2020; Howard-Merrill et al., 2022; Buller et al., 2020).

However, higher value exchanges can mean that children are not viewed as "victims" since consumer needs may not be viewed as sympathetically as basic needs, depicted instead as "greed" and an indicator of the child's ability to exert agency in the relationship (Kyegombe et al., 2020). Higher value goods may also sanitise perceptions of perpetrators:

Cisgender man engaged in commercial sex, 01: *But there are some who have moved up in life. There's one [girl] I know who started [in CSEC] when she was 16. At 22, she went to Portugal, to France. When she came back, she already had five rented houses... and a daughter. And she lived with a lawyer for a long time, who gave her a pension of R\$150,000 [per year]. Did she make a life for herself? She knew how, didn't she? Pretty too. Very pretty... She only wanted guys who smelled good, were well-dressed, social. A guy soon took her away. He took her across the border; he couldn't take her directly because she was underage. He took her when she was 16, 17, and when she came back, she was 22. She had it all... a check book, a designer handbag, everything. Nice clothes, legs this size, very large breasts.*

Admittedly, the participant partly attributed the girl's "success story" to her knowing how to make a life for herself rather than being in a typical scenario. This aligns with findings from the Freedom Fund's 2024 CSEC prevalence study, which found that almost half (45.9 percent) of the surveyed young women (18-21 years) reported receiving R\$100 (roughly US\$20) or less for their first CSEC encounter. Further, only 16.6 percent of the surveyed young women were currently earning R\$2000 or more a month (roughly US\$400), suggesting that very few achieve the more profitable "escort" status. Nevertheless, it is notable that the participant described the perpetrator in the above example in neutral or positive terms, depicting him as a provider rather than someone exploiting an adolescent girl. Although just one example, it raises the possibility that affluent perpetrators can leverage power from their socioeconomic status to reduce the risk of their actions being condemned if the benefits they provide are perceived to outweigh the harm.

USE OF PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

A common theme in the accounts of CSEC that were personally experienced or witnessed by participants was perpetrators' use of violence against the child. This ranged from being hit in the face or pushed in front of cars to being raped or forced to have sex without a condom. Withholding of payment was also linked to violent scenarios on more than one occasion:






Speaker F, FGD with male taxi or app drivers: *[...] the door opened, when he threw [the girl in], he literally threw her... I got scared... He said, "Take that slut. Enjoy her yourself." And he threw in the money for the ride: "There's some extra for you." I looked and she was crying, so I left and then I stopped. Later I bought her some water to calm down. There were others that were more trivial, but this case impacted me the most.*

Cisgender man engaged in commercial sex, 01: *I really wanted an iPhone. When he gave it to me, it worked like a charm. But then he got jealous, aggressive, beat me up, cursed at me, humiliated me, threw money on the floor for me to pick up, threw food on the floor, took me to clubs to embarrass me in front of his friends. He'd order me to hook up with his friends, and at the same time force me to sleep with someone he chose so that he could satisfy himself by watching.*

These findings align the Freedom Fund's 2024 CSEC prevalence study, which found that 31.4 percent of survivors experienced physical violence during the time they were in CSEC. Moreover, the survey findings suggested that some men perceive use of violence during CSEC as potentially justified: 16.5 percent of men fully or partially agreed that a man has a right to get angry if he buys an adolescent girl drinks or food and she either loses interest or "cheats" about her level of interest in him (Table 4).

When reflecting on the violence during CSEC, one cisgender man engaged in commercial sex argued that men are drawn to CSEC since it allows them to enact violent sexual fantasies that they cannot indulge in with their wives. Although this is difficult to substantiate, it draws on dominant depictions of Brazilian masculinity that depict sexual desires as harder to control for men (Heilborn and Cabral, 2013), thus suggesting violence and control are an extension of male sexuality. In the survey (Table 4), 10.1 percent of participants agreeing that it is normal for a man to get carried away during a relationship that he is paying for, including doing sexual things that the adolescent has not agreed to beforehand. Similarly, 21.5 percent agreed that it is the man who decides what type of sex to have. Thus, violence during CSEC can arguably be understood in the context of patriarchal norms that suppress women's and girls' sexual rights by giving men disproportionate control during sex. The extent to which this applies to men's relationships with male or transgender children would need further exploration.

Table 4: Statements normalising men’s control over, and violence towards, children during sex

Response among men who frequent areas known for CSEC (N=80)	Fully Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
 “It is the man who decides what kind of sex to have.”	10.1	11.4	17.7	35.4	25.3
 “If an adolescent girl and a man agree on the fee and the type of encounter, the adolescent should not try to back out.”	6.3	13.9	5.1	35.4	39.2
 “It is normal for a man to get carried away during a relationship that he is paying for, including doing sexual things that the adolescent has not agreed to beforehand.”	3.8	6.3	2.5	46.8	40.5
 “If a man is buying drinks or food for a teenage girl and she loses interest or is misleading about her interest in having sex, the man would be right to get angry.”	5.1	11.4	6.3	45.6	31.7
 “Men need sex more than women.”	15.2	19.0	5.1	39.2	21.5

3.4 PERCEIVED PROFILE OF INTERMEDIARIES

Like perpetrators, intermediaries were understood to have a relatively heterogenous profile, covering men and women from very different socioeconomic strata. Participants generally understood intermediaries to be a common part of CSEC relationships, bridging the child and perpetrator for a fee:

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 02: *And that adult gets something too, sometimes half the money. Have you ever seen situations where the child, or adolescent, offers this sexual contact? Where they offer it themselves? There’s always an adult.*

Intermediaries were most commonly mentioned in relation to acts of CSEC where family or friends take on the intermediary role, acts which occur in private establishments and situations where the child is not aware they are being exploited. However, in cases where children were understood to be very economically vulnerable and low rates of money or food were exchanged (R\$5 [~US\$1], for example), or where children were very young (up to 6 years of age), the study did not identify a significant reported use of intermediaries. Similarly, in the case of relationships established with drug dealers, participants suggested that an exchange of drugs first occurs directly between the dealer and child, with the former possibly stepping into the role of intermediary once dependency has been established.

The overall depiction of intermediary use as common did not align with the Freedom Fund’s CSEC prevalence study in the RMA, which found that 86.4 percent of CSEC survivors did not share money of their first CSEC encounter with a third party. While this could be unique to the dynamics of the first encounter, it is possible that prevalence of intermediary use was over-estimated in the FGDs and KIs or could have been affected by our use of specific questions pertaining to intermediaries. However, the split between family and non-family intermediaries mirrors other research on CSEC in Brazil (ECPAT, 2015; Jones, 2013).

GENDER AND AGE

CSEC perpetrators were overwhelmingly perceived to be men aged 40 and over. While across the FGDs and KIs multiple examples were given of female intermediaries, male intermediaries were most commonly cited in actual examples of CSEC provided by participants. Moreover, intermediaries of all genders tended to be depicted as younger than perpetrators, with their ages typically described as about 20 years old or a little older:

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 08: *[discussing a local intermediary] She places ads on the website. A lot of rich people go there. Sometimes the guy wants a homosexual, or he wants a young girl. When I say young, I mean 15 years old – 14, 15, 16. And she’ll make it happen. Whatever you want, she’ll get it.*

Male tour guide, 03: *No, age has nothing to do with it, because even a young person nowadays can open a house. A colleague of mine, I think he must be 36 or 35, 34. He opened a drink bar.*

However, even where the age gap is smaller, there are still likely to be significant intergenerational power disparities between the intermediary and child, linked to the child’s limited experience and opportunities and exacerbated by the intermediary’s economic and physical power. Moreover, when family have consented to the relationship, the exploitation risks being less obvious (ECPAT, 2015).

RELATIONSHIP TO THE CHILD

In contrast to perpetrators, who were generally depicted as unrelated to the child, intermediaries were depicted as either being strangers or having a prior friendship or kinship relationship with the child. Adolescents engaging in CSEC on the streets were understood more typically to use intermediaries unrelated to them. Depictions of this type of intermediary ranged from businessmen and women whose primary focus was “pimping” to intermediaries who combined their bridging roles with their day-to-day work. The latter included taxi drivers, tour guides and translators:

Male tour guide, 04: *[Tourists] ask us... where they can find these little girls. Then we tell him where they are. They often give us 50, 100 reais. “I’ll give you some money and you bring me a woman. Do you know where there are cheap women?” Then I say: “I do, they’re here in [mentions specific locations]”. Then I take him to these places... and he gives me 100 reais. Then we call the girl, and the girl already knows what the gringo wants, she asks for 200, 300 reais. Then he accepts and takes the car.*

As highlighted by the quote, some participants reported acting in an intermediary role to please their customers and get paid. However, they did not appear to view this as an intermediary role but as an extension of their day-to-day role. This conceptual distinction between themselves and more traditional “pimps” arguably allowed them to re-frame their behaviour in a more positive light.

Mirroring other studies in Brazilian contexts (Santos et al., 2004; Morais et al., 2007), a second recurring perception across all the FGDs and KIs was that family members act as intermediaries. Two women engaged in commercial sex noted that due to children’s dependency on their family, having a family member act as an intermediary was perceived to vastly curtail the child’s ability to refuse to participate. A handful of participants referred to fathers or extended family acting as intermediaries. However, most commonly, family intermediaries were assumed to be mothers from low socioeconomic backgrounds who actively encouraged their daughters to enter CSEC, mirroring their own experiences of commercial sex:

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 08:

Because the guy in the car says: "I'll give you so much." Then the mother says, "Go girl. You'll make money. And if I was your age, I'd be full of money. I'd be rich." I've heard it in front of me.

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 04:

There was a 13-year-old, who's already a grown woman, who wanted to hook up with him, with my uncle... Her mother said: "You can have her", to him. And the girl wanted to hook up with my uncle because of the money... Her mother saying: "Do it, girl. Do it. It's better to do it with these men than not at all".

Cisgender man engaged in commercial sex, 01:

I'm used to seeing various situations. Near where I live, there's an old man who's retired from the Navy, and he picks up little girls aged 10, 12, 13, 14, 15. There's one whose mother even takes her daughter to have intercourse with him, to earn 50 reais.

Yet, the depiction of mothers as decision-makers does not align with the positioning of men as primary decision-makers across many facets of life that was evident in most of the FGDs and KIs. Moreover, in contexts where transactional sex is a normal way for women and girls to acquire money, mothers may not see it as encouraging commercial sex but rather encouraging girls to use available resources to meet their needs (Jones, 2013). Having identified similar findings in a study exploring CSEC in Brazil, Segundo et al. (2012) argued that "mother blaming" may derive from a perception that acting as an intermediary violates the "natural" caring responsibilities of a mother. It is therefore arguably an unfeminine role that violates gender norms and, as such, invites particular condemnation.

Building on the "unnaturalness" of familial intermediaries, some women who worked in locations that favour CSEC argued that mothers who acted as intermediaries for their children would experience guilt that could lead to lifelong consequences such as alcoholism. Men working in similar contexts also suggested that a mother would feel guilt for risking the life of daughter by exposing her to people with potential for violence. Nonetheless, in the Freedom Fund's 2024 CSEC prevalence study, only 17.5 percent of CSEC survivors said that their family had been "fine" with them travelling for the purpose of CSEC, with the majority hiding it from their families. Similarly, in this study, female taxi drivers noted that the CSEC survivors they transported were often hiding their actions from their family. This suggests that while familial intermediaries may violate social norms and attract scrutiny, they may not be as common as perceived by participants in this study.

Similar to a study on CSEC in Brazil by Olivar and Farias (2021), friends were also cited as possible intermediaries, while simultaneously being exploited or young adult survivors themselves:

Transgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 02:

Let's say, I'm just starting out, I'm new to prostitution. Sixteen years old. I'll have friends who are 16, 15 years old. So I'll tell them. I will show them my experiences.

Female tour guide, 01:

Because she sees a peer going. She thinks it's easy. And she also goes down that road.

As highlighted by the first quote from a transgender woman engaged in commercial sex, participants suggested a relationship in which peers encouraged other children to engage in CSEC and facilitated the process. This aligns with a study conducted in three favelas in Rio de Janeiro, where pressure from friends, as well as family members, was understood to increase engagement in age-disparate transactional sex (Ignacio et al., 2020). However, it is important to note that peer pressure can mean many things, from simply talking about one's own experiences to actively recruiting friends into commercial sex (Escobar et al., 2020). Further, peer pressure needs to be understood in the context of consumer cultures that create gendered commodity "needs" that, when fulfilled, can provide social status and social mobility to marginalised individuals in low-income settings (Stoebenau et al., 2016).

ECONOMIC STATUS

When asked about the typical characteristics of intermediaries, participants overwhelmingly stated that intermediaries had above average or high incomes which fluctuated depending on "business":

Cisgender man working in context that favours CSEC, 04:

What we earn in a week, they earn in a day, depending on the situation.

It is worth noting, though, that while intermediaries were overwhelmingly described as relatively affluent, this picture seemed to apply to those who were not related to the child. In contrast, intermediaries related to the child were expected to be of lower socioeconomic position, a factor that was perceived to strongly contribute to them pushing their child into CSEC. Similarly, tour guides, taxi drivers or translators, who were also cited as possible intermediaries, were also not depicted as affluent. This mirrors findings of an ethnographic study by Blanchette and da Silva (2017), which explored third parties involved in commercial sex in Rio De Janeiro. Although not focusing specifically on CSEC, the authors noted that stereotypes associated with cafetões (pimps) did not reflect the fact that some were extremely vulnerable. The study therefore highlighted that while there is a strong local stereotype of intermediaries as economically comfortable, this perhaps overstates the economic status of all intermediaries.



3.5 PERCEPTIONS OF CSEC INTERMEDIARIES' ROLE

DURATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP

While a child's association with a CSEC perpetrator could be either a one-off interaction or a long-term relationship, the relationship between an intermediary and a child was overwhelmingly understood to be long-term, amounting to months or even years of exploitation. Similar to long-term perpetration, intermediaries were expected to use deceptive means to entice the child to "work" for them, ranging from false promises about the lifestyle on offer to using substances to cloud the child's judgement or create dependency:

Male tour guide, 06: *They're not family. Most of them are friends from the same neighbourhood. They get to know [children] and start playing tricks on their minds, telling them they're going to get everything they want, that the tourist or the gringo has money, that they're going to earn a lot from it, and they'll be able to buy the clothes, the designer shorts, the shirt. He strikes up conversations. He drinks with [the child], befriends [the child] and enters the mind of the one who will be abused.*

Transgender man engaged in commercial sex, 03: *Another thing, these people (influence) children to use drugs. Get them into drugs right away, so they become chemically dependent...*

The use of deceptive means to enlist children in CSEC has been well-documented (The Freedom Fund, 2024; Zsögön, 2019), as has intermediaries' use of drugs to control children (Riley-Horvath, 2019). The use of deception and drugs by intermediaries highlights children's vastly impeded opportunities for agency when "agreeing" to CSEC.

The duration of intermediaries' relationships with children was understood to be based on profitability:

Cisgender man engaged in commercial sex, 01: *Three years at the most... Because then [the child is] no longer useful. They no longer have the same clientele because new versions, new kids, come along. And new attractions. A guy like me, for example, doesn't stay in a relationship for more than a year. With experience, you get to know how a person is, their taste, everything, and it [the attraction] wears off.*

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 08: *After [the girl is no longer being profitable], [the exploiter] dismisses one girl and takes on another. And so on and so forth...*

These quotes from people engaged in commercial sex suggest children may be dropped by their intermediaries when demand for the child wanes and the relationship is no longer commercially attractive. However, the power to be able to end the relationship was not understood to be shared by the child. According to the following cisgender man engaged in commercial sex, intermediaries were instead perceived to use threats to make it difficult for children to choose to leave the relationship:

Cisgender man engaged in commercial sex, 01: *They [the intermediaries] threaten you and you have to pay; you have to stay for free [in the relationship] for a long time before you're able to leave, because everything has its price.*

Although not a recurrent theme across the KIIs and FGDs, this sentiment highlights a further layer of exploitation that has been routinely seen in relationships between CSEC survivors and their intermediaries in other studies. For example, 8.3 percent of CSEC survivors in the Freedom Fund's 2024 CSEC prevalence study reported being forced to trade sex to pay off debts. The child is thus made responsible for compensating the intermediary for "benefits" offered during the relationship or even supposed breaches of agreement.

SCOPE OF ROLE

Participants typically estimated that intermediaries would have multiple children under their control. Women and men engaged in commercial sex recounted that they had seen intermediaries with four to six children, with estimates from this group not exceeding ten. In contrast, participants working in locations that favour CSEC sometimes gave much higher estimates, such as 40 to 50 or even 100 children under a single intermediary, although these did not appear to be based on first-hand observations. However, even if the figure of four to six more accurate, this still suggests that intermediaries are simultaneously exploiting multiple children. Since answers to this question tended to focus on the stereotypical view of the affluent intermediary who is not related to the child, it was not clear whether family members are acting as intermediaries for multiple children.

PAYMENT ARRANGEMENTS

When considering payment processes, children were regularly conceptualised as commodities that could be exchanged by the intermediary:

Cisgender man engaged in commercial sex, 02: *[The intermediary] takes [the child], delivers them to the customer, and picks them up later.*

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 05: *"Find me a little girl. I like 15-year-old girls I like 12-year-old girls. I'll give you a little something on the side." It's like buying both.*

Under this discourse, which contrasts starkly with depictions of children as exercising agency during CSEC, children were de-personified and reduced to something that is "delivered" or "bought." Further, regardless of their relationship to the child, intermediaries were typically understood to take a large "cut" of the perpetrator's payment, with the child getting an inordinately small amount. The suggested percentage varied considerably across the FGDs and KIIs, with those working in locations that favour CSEC estimating a higher cut than people currently engaged in commercial sex. Yet, even the latter, who were more likely to have an accurate knowledge, still estimated a highly exploitative range, from 50 to 80 percent. Thus, although these statistics were clearly estimates and should therefore not be viewed as accurate statistics on an intermediary's cut, they validate that intermediaries are perceived to profit disproportionately from this exploitation.

PROTECTOR OR ENFORCER?

Reflecting perceptions of CSEC survivors' relationships with longer-term perpetrators, the relationship between CSEC survivors and intermediaries was depicted as complex, offering both risks and benefits. Aligning with Blanchette and de Silva's 2017 observation that intermediaries may be the closest allies that people engaged in commercial sex have, they were depicted as "protectors" who supported the children if they faced threats:

Speaker F, FGD with male taxi or app drivers: *Why is that? Because she feels protected somehow. Because it's not easy out there. They feel protected. And there really is protection. When you have a pimp there is protection. When you work alone, the risk is much greater.*

Transgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 02: *I never had a pimp or a madam relative.... They are wonderful people. They treat you like a father or a mother. It gives you that feeling of safety, you know? They offer you safety. So, it's up to you... They offer you safety, a home. In return, you'll have to give her your daily fee. Now, you'll regret it if that payment is late. Everything changes.*

These quotes emphasise the potential risks associated with commercial sex that children must navigate on a daily basis. However, as highlighted by the last quote from a transgender woman engaged in commercial sex, the "protection" provided by intermediaries occurs within a complex web of exploitation and under a threat of violence for non-compliance.

Supporting this observation, several examples were given of intermediaries using violence against children under their "care." For example, a female tour guide commented:

Female tour guide, 01: *Then the pimp almost hit the girl... He pulled her hair. He wanted to force her to go. And the girl didn't want to.*

Violence inflicted by intermediaries was not mentioned as frequently as perpetrator violence, possibly due to the reduced visibility of intermediary-survivor relationships. However, when this issue was raised, intermediaries were still believed to pose a significant threat to the child's well-being, with threats and actual violence being part of their arsenal to control the child. This mirrors the Freedom Fund's 2024 CSEC prevalence study, which found that intermediaries used a range of tactics to control children that align with indicators of forced labour and human trafficking; these range from withholding identity documents to using or threatening to use physical and sexual violence against children or their loved ones. The same study also found that more than one in ten CSEC survivors reported that police were violent when they came to their work venues. Thus, when faced with multiple sources of violence, children may be forced to turn to intermediaries to provide "protection," even if this comes also at a substantive cost.

3.6 PERCEIVED LOCATIONS OF CSEC PERPETRATION AND HIGH-RISK TIMES

When considering *where* CSEC occurs in the RMA, places and occasions where drugs or alcohol were consumed, and thus inhibitions were typically reduced, were commonly associated with a high risk of CSEC perpetration. These included house parties or festivities, such as São João festival and Carnival, which were associated with children wanting new clothes or consumer goods. The Carnival/Summer season was also associated with behaviours considered more "liberal," increasing the risk of CSEC perpetration:²

Cisgender man engaged in commercial sex, 01: *[In] Olinda, on every corner, there's a transsexual, there's a gay man, there's a lesbian, there's a couple having sex, masturbating, giving blowjobs. Everything is allowed during Carnival. There's no policing or anything.*

Male tour guide, 02: *[Explaining why CSEC thrives during Carnival] Because there's drinking, there are loads of tourists, gringos, people from abroad. There are paedophiles in Brazil already, now there are more from abroad.*

As highlighted by the quotes, Carnival was understood to increase both the supply of and demand for commercial sexual encounters, amid the additional "fuel" of substance use.

Participants also mentioned locations where CSEC perpetration was perceived to be common throughout the year. These included Recife city centre, specific beaches and specific neighbourhoods (Pina and Boa Viagem). People currently engaged in commercial sex provided the most detailed information, likely reflecting their work alongside CSEC survivors. Women engaged in commercial sex commonly mentioned specific streets, squares or landmarks. Other areas mentioned included the Olinda neighbourhoods of Casa Caiada and Bairro Novo, and neighbourhoods in the north of Recife that are typically considered upper-middle class – Torre, Espinheiro and Casa Forte. Men engaged in commercial sex suggested similar locations, including several beaches, commercial points in the Boa Viagem neighbourhood and specific areas in downtown Recife. However, since the sample had greater representation of people who work in specific regions of the city, the findings should not be taken as an indication that CSEC is not happening as intensely in other regions of the city.

² The festivals mentioned are specific to the region where the research was conducted. However, it is likely that other festivals across Brazil may also be associated with conditions that favour CSEC.



A handful of references were also made to the internet being a “place” where CSEC occurs through dating apps and social networks. Subject specialists voiced a belief that CSEC is leaving the streets due to an increase in online methods, meaning CSEC is becoming less visible and harder to “police”:

Subject specialist, 05: *Before, sexual exploitation happened on the streets. Nowadays, sexual exploitation happens here, on social media. It's on WhatsApp, on Instagram, on virtual platforms, in private conversations... So, with the internet and new technologies, sexual exploitation has taken on a new form. [CSEC on the streets] still happens in some places... But we also know that there [is] a much larger number of children and adolescents being victims of sexual exploitation through this other platform.*

Subject specialist, 04: *You might think that you [can] find victims of sexual exploitation by searching the streets. They are not on the streets. They are on websites, social media and instruments of digital technologies set up for this sexual exploitation.*

This aligns with ECPAT’s 2014 analysis of CSEC in Latin America, which noted that intermediaries’ shift to using mobile phones and the internet to contact children has made it harder to identify CSEC offenders. As digital technology progresses and further enables offenders to instantly exploit a child anywhere in the world, these difficulties are likely to increase (Laser et al., 2020). This process arguably accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, where internet use increased – including use of video-streaming – and a number of studies have found that levels of online sexual exploitation of children and distribution of exploitative material also increased across the globe (Harris et al., 2021; Drejer et al., 2024; Europol, 2020).

Although CSEC was understood to occur at any time, it was also understood to most likely occur at night:

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 06: *Most of the time, there is no schedule. Yeah, it doesn't matter to them [perpetrators], any time, any moment he gets it into his head that he wants to do it, he'll do it anyway.*

Transgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 03: *Yes, at night. 8, 10 P.M., it [CSEC] starts.*

Speaker C, FGD with female taxi or app drivers: *The afternoon [and] into the night, is more [common] for adolescents over 15 years old, who already have a greater conception. But adolescents between 10, 12 and 13 years old focus more on the school side, because that's the time they can move around without any difficulty.*



Photo credit: Natália Corrêa/Walk Free

Among tour guides, weekends were also perceived to be a time of increased CSEC occurrence, although one said that tourists have more time on weekdays, suggesting tourist spots had their own “peak flows”:

Female tour guide, 02: *I leave at 1:00 P.M., 2:00 P.M. at the most, and it's already happening. It's already starting, the tour guides pass by, they take advantage of it, they get the girls, book them, and leave.*

Male tour guide, 04: *It happens more during the week and in the evenings. Because the gringos don't come as much on the weekends, they come throughout the week to do this type of thing.*

The broad range of times aligns with the heterogeneous profile of perpetrators, ranging from those who are economically active in standard 9-to-5 work to those who are retired, work in casual or night labour, or are on vacation.

3.7 PERPETRATORS’ PERCEIVED MOTIVATIONS FOR ENGAGING IN CSEC

Participants’ explanations for CSEC perpetration fell into two categories. Most attributed responsibility to the perpetrator’s character and behaviour, while others – echoing ECPAT’s 2016 notion of “situational” sex offenders – considered factors external to the perpetrator, such as the child’s behaviour and the context.

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH THE CSEC PERPETRATOR’S CHARACTER OR BEHAVIOUR

When considering perpetrators’ motivations, a range of factors were cited which referred to their behaviours or characters. On one hand, these were intrinsic characteristics over which the perpetrator was depicted as having relatively little control. These included sickness, sexual fetishes or inadequacies, or the clinical condition of paedophilia (seemingly understood as engaging children under the age of 14 in sex):

Male tour guide, 03: *Age has nothing to do with it either. Age and money help, but age has nothing to do with it. I think it's in the person's nature, not their age. It's in the person's sick, mental nature. I think in any age. Like you said, both the poor and the rich.*

Male tour guide, 02: *Paedophiles, that's a disease, they're sick people... grooming underage people.*

These quotes depict paedophilia is an illness rather than a choice, a view supported by subject specialists who displayed scepticism over whether paedophiles could be rehabilitated.

On the other hand, the most common explanation for CSEC perpetration was perpetrators’ “naughtiness,” with the notion of *safadeza* appearing strongly across the different groups of participants, especially among female participants.³ However, unlike sicknesses, this tended to be presented as a behaviour over which the perpetrator had some control. As such, perpetrators were potentially assigned greater responsibility for engaging in CSEC since it was a conscious “bad behaviour”.

³ The term *safadeza* can alternatively be translated to mean crude mischievousness or wicked behaviour.

Woman working in locations that favour CSEC, 01:

I think it's out of vanity, out of naughtiness really. Because there are so many women in the world and men, too. And they go for a child? I've heard people say they'll go for anyone over 12 years old... [or] over 30 kilos. I think it's absurd. I've heard that a lot. I've also seen cases of [perpetrators] putting children on their laps and getting excited, you know? Because that's also abuse.

Transgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 03:

In my opinion, it's pure naughtiness. For them, it's a sexual desire, I think.

A further behaviour linked to increased risk of CSEC perpetration was drug and alcohol use, with a cisgender man engaged in commercial sex arguing that "after the man drinks he can't be trusted." Drawing on a discourse of poor impulse control as a normal feature of Brazilian male sexuality (Medeiros, 2022), this view naturalises men's loss of control and engagement in CSEC after a few drinks:

FACTORS TIED TO ADOLESCENT GIRLS' APPEARANCE AND BEHAVIOURS

Perpetrators' motivations were also described in terms of a girl's appearance or behaviours. Explanations again reinforced the aforementioned discourse of men being naturally attracted to adolescent girls, as well as the notion that girls elicit attention through their dress or dancing:

Male tour guide, 03:

The girl walks by, in front of us. She's a bit sickly, but she likes wearing clothes that are...you know? And she's got a nice little body, she's skinny. It catches the eye.

Male tour guide, 07:

The girl walks by, in front of us. She's a bit sickly, but she likes wearing clothes that are...you know? And she's got a nice little body, she's skinny. It catches the eye.



Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 09:

What motivates [them] is that children nowadays dress like grown women. Those disgusting little dances, literally promoting sex and humiliating women... And the young girls, 13, 12, 14 years old, they think it's cute. Their mothers think it's cute to buy them short shorts, short tops... and the child is out there shaking their butt. And then they call him a pervert. Why is he a pervert? In my opinion, [the child] encouraged [him].

Other studies in Brazil have argued that men's references to adolescent girls' bodies when explaining CSEC motivations are linked to biological markers of puberty, which are perceived to convey girls' perceived sexual readiness (Ignacio et al., 2020; Segundo et al., 2012). However, contradicting this, 84.8 percent of survey participants disagreed that a girl's physical development reflected her ability to make decisions about sex (Table 5), suggesting some awareness of the need for emotional as well as physical readiness for sex.

When considering links between dress and "victim blaming," the qualitative and survey findings aligned, with almost two-thirds of survey participants agreeing that the way adolescents dress says a lot about what they expect from men. These findings echo a body of literature observing that when men argue that girls' dressing style provides "indirect signals" of agreement, they draw on inequitable gender norms that frame girls' sexuality as deviant and men's sexual urges as natural (Ignacio et al., 2020; Kyegombe et al., 2020). This perspective allows perpetrators' actions to be re-framed as a "normal" male reaction to young girls' developing bodies, while also shifting responsibility onto the adolescent. Despite community-based participants frequently alluding to gender norms perpetuating CSEC perpetration, their own responses reveal subconscious norms that seem permissive of CSEC perpetrators' behaviour. There is consequently a need for multi-year programming that targets men, boys and the wider community to challenge harmful gender norms that not only support CSEC but also excuse offending.

Table 5: Statements that focus on a child's physical development and dress

Response among men who frequent areas known for CSEC (N=80)	Fully Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
 "The way teenage girls dress says a lot about what they expect from men."	35.4	29.1	1.3	27.9	6.3
 "An adolescent with a developed body has the maturity to make decisions about her sexual partners and relationships."	6.3	5.1	3.8	46.8	38.0

CSEC AS A SOURCE OF POWER FOR PERPETRATORS

CSEC perpetration was also explained in terms of perpetrators' associated feelings of power. These were perceived to derive from multiple sources, including their ability to "teach" children new things (thus exploiting their innocence), the perceived status afforded by their peers in response to them having an adolescent girl on their arm, and the use of CSEC to display relative wealth:

Cisgender man working in locations that favour CSEC, 04:






[Perpetrators] know the risks they're taking [in terms of getting caught], but sometimes the ego speaks louder, doesn't it? The macho ego, it transforms them. "Oh, I picked up a 14-year-old girl." [By saying that] he thinks he's more of a man than the other [men].

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 10:

I once asked a man I met, what's the appeal in doing that with children? "Oh, I [just] fool around." He told me it's because children are innocent. And that he liked seeing their little faces when they feel what [he's] doing... the way they act, the way they react. I don't understand their minds. That's what he told me.

In the focus groups and interviews, among male participants in particular, CSEC perpetration was frequently depicted as a modality through which men could enact hegemonic masculinities, including the display of virility, despite the risk, however small, of being held accountable. This mirrors findings from the survey, where almost a third of men who frequented CSEC locations agreed that sex with a teenage girls can make a man feel more powerful (Table 6). While the perceived source of this power is not clear, other studies on CSEC in low-income settings have echoed the qualitative findings of this study, identifying that men derive a sense of power from their ability to exert control, display their masculinity and virility, and display their wealth (Segundo et al., 2012), with this coming particularly from age-disparate relationships (Perrin et al., 2022). Moreover, although only 6.3 percent of survey participants agreed that being with a teenage girl helps a man gain the respect of his friends, this nonetheless suggests that, among a small proportion of men, sex with a minor girl is not only tolerated but is also a source of status. The qualitative and quantitative data from male participants thus suggested that some acts of CSEC may be motivated by a desire to enact an "acceptable" masculinity.

Table 6: Statements that associated sex with teenage girls with improved self-image and power

Response among men who frequent areas known for CSEC (N=80)	Fully Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
 "Sex with a teenage girl can make a man feel more attractive."	16.5	11.4	1.3	50.6	20.3
 "Sex with a teenage girl can make a man feel more powerful."	20.3	12.7	1.3	44.3	21.5
 "Sex with a teenage girl can make a man feel more adventurous."	31.7	12.7	2.5	44.3	8.9
 "Sex with a teenage girl is less risky than sex with a woman."	3.8	7.6	3.8	44.3	40.5
 "Staying with a teenage girl helps a man gain the respect of his friends."	3.8	2.5	0.0	53.2	40.5

SOCIOECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR CSEC PERPETRATION

Finally, drawing on ECPAT's 2016 notion of "situational" sex offenders, the context of widespread poverty, consumer-driven needs and weak social protection was widely understood to create a social environment where opportunities for CSEC perpetration thrive since children are pushed to consider commercial sex:

Transgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 04: *Sometimes, I wouldn't have anything to eat. Sometimes I would look for bread at home and find none. I said, "instead of going to school, I'll go to the streets; see what the world of prostitution is like." That was where I conquered the world, until this day, 32 years.*

Despite social protection initiatives, such as the Bolsa Família and Auxílio Brasil, participants perceived there to be a large pool of economically vulnerable children in the RMA for perpetrators and intermediaries to exploit. Thus, situations of poverty provide middle- and lower-class perpetrators with opportunities that might otherwise not present themselves. This aligns with a study by Divino et al. (2011), which found that Brazilian municipalities with high tourism and low per capita income had the highest occurrence of CSEC. It should be noted, though, that the Stockholm Declaration states that poverty is not the only determining factor of CSEC and cannot be considered a justification for it. Cross-cutting factors such as gender, sexuality and race also increase girls' and boys' vulnerability to those who seek to sexually exploit them.

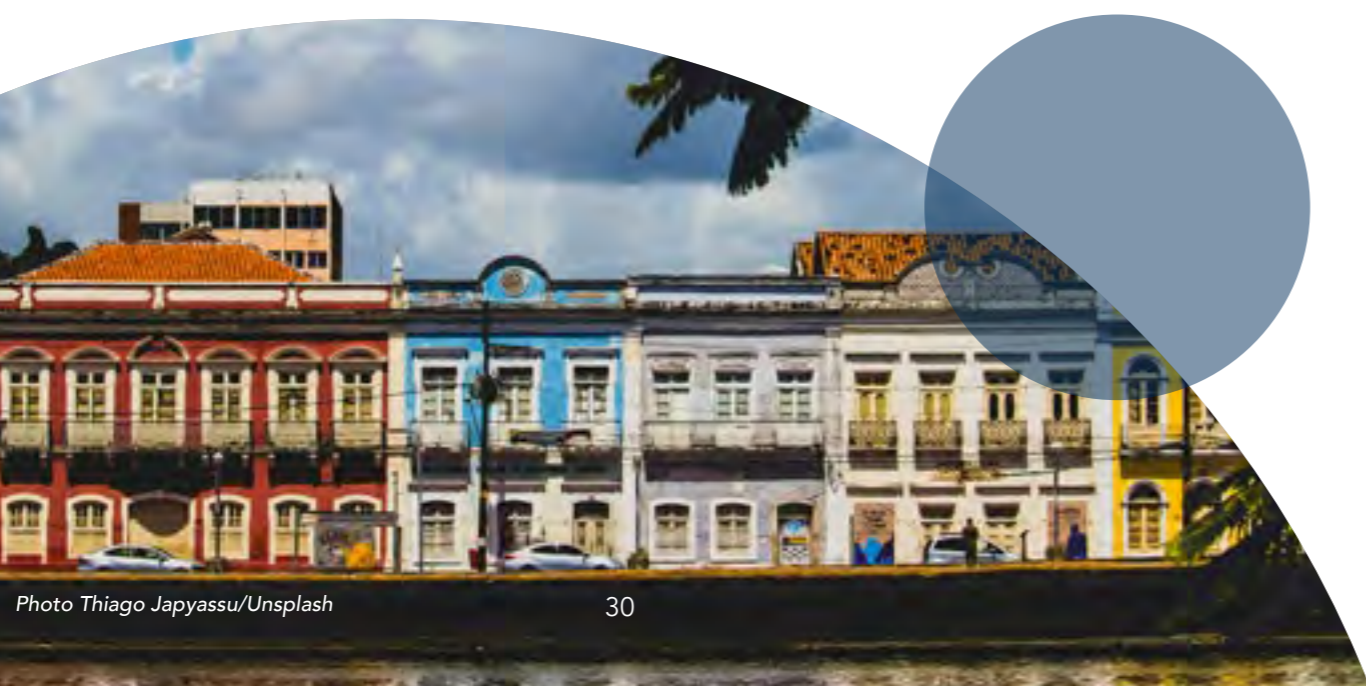


Photo Thiago Japyassu/Unsplash

3.8 INTERMEDIARIES' PERCEIVED MOTIVATIONS FOR ENGAGING IN CSEC

In contrast to perpetrators, intermediaries' motivations were typically viewed as less complex in that they were tied primarily to profit. Supporting this, in the narratives of the handful of men who worked as tour guides and discussed what was arguably an intermediary role, their economic motivation and self-interest were clearly evident:

Male tour guide, 02: *We take them [tourists] to the places they want, but I have no way of proving what they do inside those places. They ask me to take them somewhere and my role is to take them there. I can't afford to get mixed up in that. It's up to that person, I've got nothing to do with it.*

Male tour guide, 05: *[Tourists] usually look for [CSEC], and we see them, but there's nothing we can do. Otherwise [if I did something], I wouldn't get paid... we also don't know what they can do [to us].*

Thus, while the last tour guide also said that he did not know what action he could take to stop potential perpetrators, the primary motivation for supporting tourists to find children for CSEC appeared to be money and job security, with the intermediary role perceived to be an extension of their jobs. These findings also align with the overarching, and somewhat fatalistic, theme of CSEC being common and hard to address.

Less frequently, meeting basic needs or financing a drug habit were also mentioned as intermediaries' possible motivations:

Cisgender man engaged in commercial sex, 02: *There are lots of [mothers] who just... want drugs, want money to spend on something, and not on the child. That child is being abused. [The child] is the victim. [The mother] says: "I want money to pay the rent". A client come in and says: "Do you want to sell your child?" "I'll bring my child in a little while. I need my rent." The clients want to abuse a child, [so they] pay up.*

Male tour guide, 02: *They're usually [not relatives], but there are cases where family members, women rent out their daughters. I see that a lot in the city... mothers finding clients for their underage daughters to be abused in exchange for money. Mothers, fathers, most of them, in exchange for money, practically throw their daughter or son into this world.*

Such motivations were typically associated with family intermediaries. However, their actions were still depicted as a deliberate choice to exploit their children. Despite the recognition that external factors like poverty might compel family members to act as intermediaries, societal norms condemning CSEC as deviant behaviour ensured that their role was still perceived as abusive.

3.9 PERCEIVED FACTORS DETERRING PERPETRATORS AND INTERMEDIARIES FROM ENGAGING IN CSEC

Alongside factors understood to encourage CSEC perpetration were those depicted as possible deterrents. These included formal and informal protection and retribution mechanisms.

THREAT OF FORMAL JUSTICE

Among formal justice actors, the police and Guardianship Council (Conselho Tutelar) were most frequently cited by all groups as possible deterrents for perpetrators and, to a lesser degree,

intermediaries. Underpinning this was a widespread understanding that CSEC is a crime that may result in imprisonment:

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 05: *It depends on whether the person wants to risk it, because fear is involved; they're afraid of being arrested or something, because whether they like it or not, it's a crime.*

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 10: *I met an old man – I even had an affair with him after he was almost arrested – who was a customer at a boarding house owned by a lady who arranged girls for him. And then she was arrested for it. Then he became afraid of being arrested and we met; he told me that he stopped because he was afraid. But he liked being with little girls.*

The last quote highlights that the threat of prosecution may deter certain offenders. This mirrors findings from a study exploring Brazilian truck drivers' perceptions of CSEC, which found that although more than a third admitted being romantically and sexually involved with a minor, the second highest reason for not engaging in CSEC was fear of getting caught (de Morais et al., 2007). Notably, however, more than a third of the participants in our survey (35.4 percent) disagreed that the prospect of consequences would deter a man from paying for sex with a teenage girl (Table 7). This may reflect the perception that some perpetrators cannot control their sexual desires.

A handful of cases were discussed where perpetrators and intermediaries had been processed through the formal justice system, and some participants described how the police conducted checks on locations known for CSEC. However, a dominant theme throughout the FGDs and KIs and subject specialists alike was a depiction of the formal justice system as largely ineffective, having insufficient police surveillance and being fraught with impunity. This reflects findings from wider literature (Le Clerq Ortega and Sanchez, 2017; Drybread, 2020). As such, many participants did not believe CSEC offenders would be held accountable:

Female tour guide, 01: *He's got money. That sort of thing. You know? He's well-off [so nothing happens].*

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 06: *... most of the time they [perpetrators] are all released and doing the same thing again.*

Subject specialist, 02: *... [there] was a very famous pimp in Pernambuco, that she was very involved with [people in] power: with congressman, state governor, a lot of powerful people. When she was arrested, within 48 hours she said she would be released, and she was.*

Even non-family intermediaries, who operated in public areas and were locally known, were perceived to rarely face arrest and move around easily, suggesting law enforcement may be turning a blind eye.

The weak judicial system was also cited as a deterrent for reporting CSEC; the most common reason for not reporting cases of CSEC was fear, particularly of non-family intermediaries:

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 08: *We think [CSEC] is bad, we think it's absurd. But that's the point. If we get involved, if we report it, if we get a license plate or if we confront them, the consequences will be worse. Then I'll have to move from where I live, I'll have to make a big mess....It's like Big Brother over there.*

In the FGD with male taxi drivers, fear for one's safety appeared to resonate with the whole group. Furthermore, as highlighted by the following female tour guide, fear could also be tied to loss of work:

Female tour guide, 02: *When I start talking [about CSEC], I find it revolting, but I need that money, it's my job, I can't get involved in anything... I can't say anything.*

Loss of employment was similarly mentioned by the female Uber drivers, who faced poor ratings if they rejected passengers, even if the passenger appeared to be sexually exploiting children. Thus, exploiters, and particularly non-family intermediaries, appear to not only hold power over children but also communities who do not feel safe reporting cases for fear of retribution.

The justice system was also depicted as a less effective deterrent for perpetrators or intermediaries who are related to the child. In such cases, a recurring theme was that community members felt helpless to act since the family is expected to protect the offender, preventing the child from seeking help:

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 04: *[Discussing her own sexual exploitation at the hands of her grandfather] I've spoken to my aunt. My aunt said he does it with her too, my aunt is in her 60s. I think he did it with everyone, his nieces, his granddaughters*

This links to intergenerational power inequalities between a child and their caregivers, where the former's dependency on the latter places them in a weakened position to report abuse or exploitation. Moreover, there is also danger that the act will be seen as a "family matter," rather than something warranting intervention, with parental wishes trumping the rights of the child.

THREAT OF INFORMAL SOCIAL SANCTIONS

Likely linked to the perceived absence of an effective formal justice system, participants reported that communities also turn to informal justice mechanisms. These were perceived to act as a potential deterrent for CSEC perpetration. However, they were reported to focus predominantly on perpetrators of CSEC, perhaps unsurprisingly given the aforementioned fear of non-family intermediaries. Informal "justice" was reported as ranging from informally paying compensation to the family (for example, providing "food baskets") to acts of violence, such as vigilantism (including lynching), referred to as "justice with one's own hands."

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 06: *If the community catches him, most of the time they'll call the police... take his life, make him masturbate, make him do the same thing he did with the child... I'm not going to lie, the people there might even kill him.*

Cisgender man engaged in commercial sex, 01: *[Discussing a 70-year-old perpetrator of CSEC] ...because people [in the community] don't do anything, but they did once. They've broken his door, they've kicked it in, they've broken his car window.*

Further highlighting the perceived weakness of the formal justice system, vigilantism was also expected to occur en route to public security units and within the prison system:

Male tour guide, 06: *Everyone agrees that they're perverts. That's what happens in my region. If he's caught, in prisons all over Brazil, but especially in Recife... and they know that he's a rapist, a pervert, the inmates kill him... a lot of things, like broomsticks, carrots in the anus of the accused.*

Although lynching was frequently mentioned as a hypothetical reaction and deterrent for perpetrators, very few actual cases were cited. Nevertheless, the widespread use of lynching in Brazil has been well-documented (Clark, 2011), with someone killed by lynching approximately once every two days in 2015 (Oliveira, 2016). Moreover, in a study exploring what factors were perceived to justify lynching across all regions of Brazil, Freire and Skarbek (2023) found that rape was by far the most significant factor, particularly the rape of a child. This consequently suggests lynching is a possible response to CSEC, but a phenomenon that is currently not well documented.

Social stigmatisation was also cited as a possible deterrent for both intermediaries and perpetrators:

Male tour guide, 02: *[Perpetrators and pimps] get scared, it's not just shame. I think they're afraid. I think it's shame and fear too. Fear of being judged by the people in the neighbourhood or the place, the city.*

Given that non-family intermediaries appeared to operate on the peripheries of society and command considerable fear, the extent to which stigmatisation is an effective deterrent is questionable. However, 60.8 percent of survey participants agreed that men would stop visiting venues known for having unaccompanied teenage girls if their wife or relatives found out, suggesting it may be more effective for perpetrators.

SITUATIONAL PREVENTION

Alongside sanction-based deterrents, specific actions for preventing CSEC were also cited by participants. Community participants from all social groups had low awareness of mechanisms for preventing CSEC, with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Bolsa Família and Auxílio Brasil mentioned by only one person. However, improved access to social protection, education and other basic social rights was commonly seen as a possible measure for preventing CSEC. Participants also mentioned informal measures that reduce opportunities for CSEC offending rather than addressing the behaviour of the perpetrator or intermediary. This alludes to what Smallbone et al. (2008) refer to as a situational prevention framework in which sexual offending is understood to be about motivations and opportunities; curtailing opportunities can therefore deter offending. This aligns with the subject specialists' perception that it is incredibly difficult to rehabilitate paedophiles.

The biggest selection of reported informal measures came from people currently engaged in commercial sex, many of whom were CSEC survivors and thus had first-hand experience of the dynamics of CSEC. Examples included asking minors for IDs at hotels, giving perpetrators one-star ratings on transport apps, or alerting parents if their child engaged in CSEC. Women engaged in commercial sex also reported refusing to help perpetrators find a child for CSEC encounters, refusing young children (under 12) entry to settings where commercial sex takes place, or suggesting a young-looking adult when perpetrators sought a child for commercial sex:




Transgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 01: *Several of my clients keep saying: "Find me an underage girl, 16 years old, a little girl." Look, I don't like these things, I'm not going to help someone and get involved in it. Also, because it's a crime to get an underage girl to have sex with a man.*

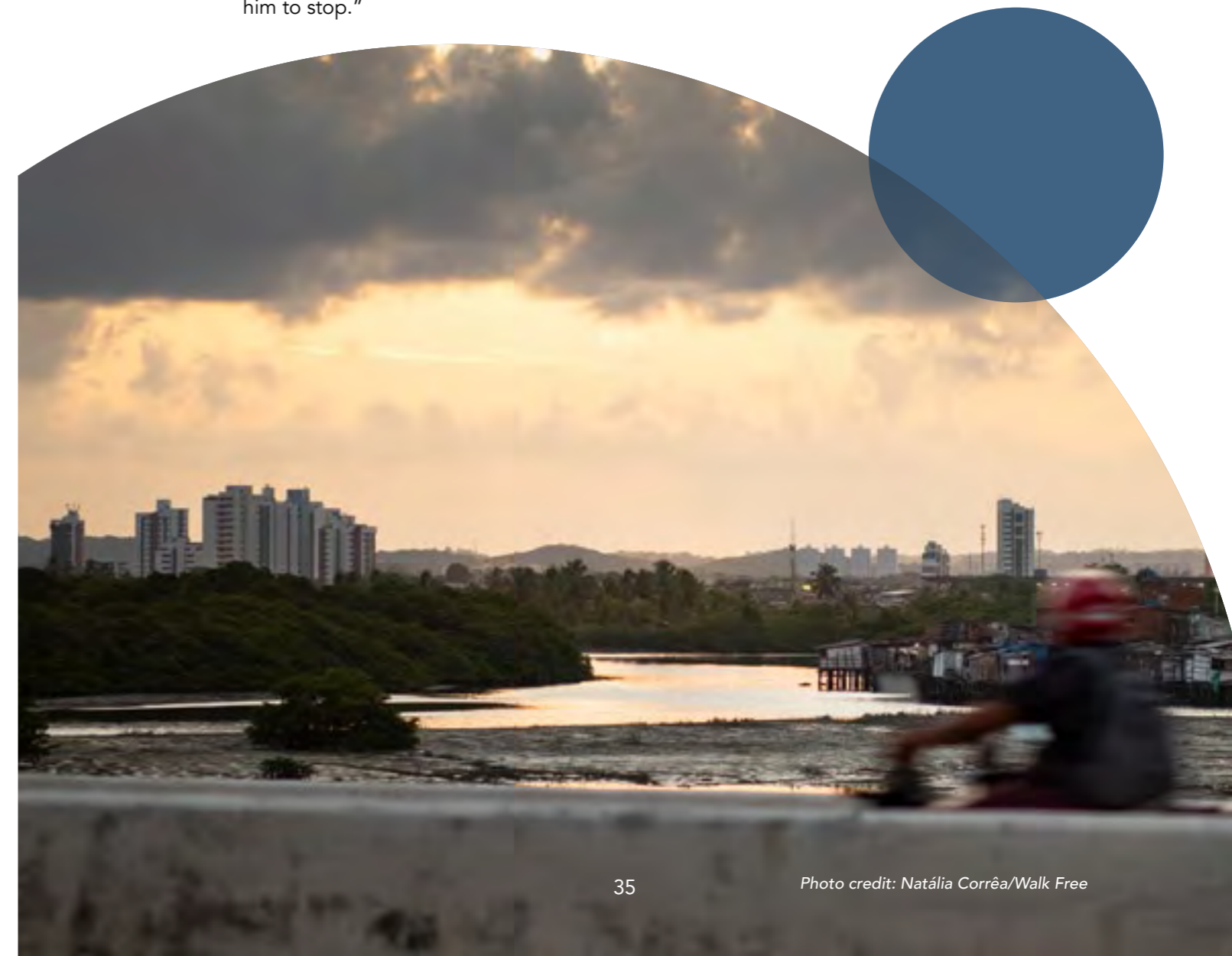
Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 03: *She was 19, but she looked 15. A man wanted someone underage. And we tricked him, as if she were underage, but she wasn't, she's 19... The man preferred someone underage, a young girl of 15. He said: "I'll pay double. I'll pay a lot. I'll pay whatever she wants."*

Situational prevention tactics also predominated when participants were asked to think about possible approaches for preventing CSEC (included in the recommendations below). However, while these may deter some offending, they do not address root causes of CSEC, such as poverty and gender

norms that support male sexual violence and entitlement. There is also a risk that situational prevention approaches place undue responsibility on children to "avoid" CSEC, causing them to be judged if they do not follow appropriate safeguards, such as dressing "appropriately."

Table 7: Statements relating to deterrents (including social stigma)

Response among men who frequent areas known for CSEC (N=80)	Fully Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
 "If a close friend of mine had the opportunity to pay for sex with a teenage girl and thought there would be consequences, he wouldn't do it."	35.4	25.3	3.8	29.1	6.3
 "Men who frequent adult leisure/entertainment venues where there are unaccompanied teenage girls would probably stop doing so if their wives or relatives found out."	27.9	32.9	3.8	21.5	13.9
 "If a close friend was getting too presumptuous or physically aggressive with a teenage girl, it would be acceptable for me to step in and tell him to stop."	41.8	49.4	2.5	3.8	2.5



4. DISCUSSION OF MAIN FINDINGS

The findings of this study on perpetrators of CSEC reveal significant individual- and community-level norms and behaviours that contribute to a general tolerance of CSEC. Further, there is noticeable reluctance among bystanders to intervene, even in situations that they personally regard as unacceptable or harmful. Many of the perspectives obtained through this study align the results from the Freedom Fund's CSEC prevalence study in the RMA (2024), where it found that one in six young women had experienced CSEC while they were a minor.

Across all groups of participants, CSEC perpetration was overwhelmingly depicted as deviant, especially when involving children under 14 years of age. However, there was also evidence of social norms that tolerate sex between adults and children, especially sex between men and adolescent girls aged 14 and older. These norms appeared to build on gendered understandings of adolescence as a time of sexual readiness, possibly reflecting the Brazilian age of sexual consent (14 years). There is therefore a risk that acts of CSEC may be re-framed as acceptable, consensual relationships in which the exploitation is overlooked if the child is deemed "ready" and perceived to be exercising sufficient agency.

CSEC perpetrators were depicted as a heterogeneous group, making profiling difficult. Although the typical perpetrator profile was a middle-aged or older man with no prior connection to the child, they were nevertheless understood to come from a range of economic backgrounds, with the consistent trait being their relative income advantage over the child rather than absolute wealth. Similarly, while perpetrators were often depicted as "local," tourists were also understood to engage in CSEC. However, evidence of the extent to which tourists actively come searching for underage children for commercial sex remains limited, and it is not clear how tourists who engage in CSEC differ from tourists who legally engage in commercial sex with young adults.

Although all intermediaries were depicted as profiting disproportionately from a child's exploitation, intermediaries' profiles were understood to differ depending on their relationship with the child. Non-family intermediaries tended to be depicted as younger men (about 20 years old or a little older) with higher-than-median incomes due to their exploitation. In contrast, family intermediaries were understood to be more typically from low-income households, contradicting the myth of the affluent "pimp." Possibly reflecting a "mother blaming" discourse, mothers were most commonly portrayed as active intermediaries, a depiction that did not align with the otherwise dominant discourse of men being the sexual decision-makers.

CSEC perpetrators were understood to engage in different types of CSEC, ranging from one-off, typically low-value exchanges to longer-standing relationships that might be framed more positively due to the perceived benefits to the child and their family. In contrast, intermediaries were understood to have a longer-term relationship with the child, lasting as long as the relationship is profitable.

Both perpetrators and intermediaries were understood to potentially expose children to deception, violence and coercion, in line with indicators of forced labour and human trafficking. However, intermediaries were typically perceived as being motivated by financial incentives, while perpetrators' motivations were understood as being considerably more diverse, ranging from "sickness" or sexual desire to the pursuit of power. In circumstances where the child was perceived to exert agency, perpetrators' responsibility risked being diminished, with their actions explained in terms of the child's direct or indirect solicitation, as portrayed through their dress or behaviour.

Although the possibility of criminal action was understood to act as a deterrent for some potential perpetrators, faith in formal justice mechanisms was typically very low. Fear of retribution was commonly cited as a reason for not reporting CSEC perpetration. Communities thus appeared to also use informal justice responses, such as vigilantism or situational prevention approaches that reduce opportunities for offending but carry a higher risk of the child being blamed. Regarding identification of and support for CSEC survivors, people living and working in locations that favour CSEC had little if any awareness of such services.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, we present a prioritised set of recommendations, drawing on insights from this study and the extensive programmatic experience of Promundo Institute and the Freedom Fund. These recommendations underscore the need for multi-level interventions that maximise policy opportunities, identify and address gaps in the protection system, and target community and individual norms and behaviours that support CSEC. By engaging comprehensively with various levels of the child protection system, our goal is to diminish opportunities for perpetrators and intermediaries to engage in CSEC, while ensuring that offenders are held directly accountable. The recommendations are categorised by level of action and sorted by which actor is best suited to follow through on them.

GOVERNMENT OF BRAZIL

- **Raise the legal age of sexual consent, currently set at 14, with a view to reducing the gap between this and the legal minimum age for engaging in commercial sex, which is age 18.** Any changes in the age of sexual consent should be replicated across all relevant legislation, including specific pieces of legislation that use the current age of consent (age 14) when responding to rape (Bill 739-2021) or sexual exploitation (Bill 2787-2020). This change should be accompanied by public information campaigns on the difference between sex involving a minor and CSEC, and the possible criminal penalties of engaging in either.
- **Strengthen implementation of the current policy and legislative framework for preventing and responding to CSEC perpetration.** This involves allocating sufficient funding for justice system responses to CSEC, ensuring there is a sufficient number of female professionals to support CSEC survivors and providing training for law enforcement, health and protection professionals on how to distinguish CSEC from other forms of sexual abuse and how to identify offenders. It also entails strengthening coordination between child protection actors (including judicial services) and investing in mechanisms for reducing (re)-victimisation of witnesses and CSEC survivors. This would include improving collaboration between service providers to ensure a more cohesive package of support for survivors (Teles de Mendonça et al., 2023). There is also a need to distinguish between "opportunistic" and "preferential" offenders (ECPAT, 2016), with rehabilitation programs tailored to the specific social and psychological triggers of both groups.
- **Increase investment in the detection and prevention of online CSEC.** This can build on the 12 measures to combat the sexual exploitation and abuse of children and adolescents that were announced by the new federal government in May 2023, which included measures linked to online exploitation.⁴ Where staff are tasked to work on investigations of online CSEC, it is imperative that detailed criminal background checks are carried out as part of the hiring process and adequate self-care support is provided.

⁴ See: <https://www.gov.br/planalto/pt-br/vice-presidencia/central-de-conteudo/noticias/2023/governo-federal-fortalece-combate-ao-abuso-sexual-de-criancas-e-adolescentes>

GOVERNMENT OF BRAZIL IN COLLABORATION WITH CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS

- **Support efforts by tourism-focused businesses to eliminate CSEC perpetration.** Firstly, education of owners and employees is crucial and should cover both the definition of CSEC and its criminal repercussions. Secondly, strategies for protecting children from CSEC should be implemented, such as asking for identity documents before allowing children into hotels. Thirdly, safe recruitment and hiring processes should be in place, including criminal records checks and assessing whether potential employees hold values that support CSEC prevention. Further, a review and revision of the 2012 *Code of Ethical Conduct for the Protection of Children and Adolescents in Pernambuco Tourism* is much needed – drawing on global best practices such as ECPAT’s “The Code”⁵ – and its implementation must be prioritised.
- **Strengthen children’s resilience to CSEC perpetration by increasing access to holistic, child-centred programs that address factors that heighten children’s vulnerability to CSEC perpetrators and intermediaries.** Interventions could include tackling barriers to education and reducing dropouts at all levels, including vocational trainings and professional qualifications where feasible. Additionally, gender-sensitive psychosocial support is crucial for addressing the emotional and psychological needs of children at risk. In exceptional cases, the provision of shelter may also be necessary to ensure the safety and well-being of those most at risk. Where NGOs have developed successful models for working with CSEC survivors, there is an opportunity to scale these up to other non-profit and state service providers. Furthermore, large-scale programming is required to educate children on their full range of rights (including sexual rights) and sensitise them to the risks associated with CSEC. Achieving this could involve both standalone activities and integration into school-based curricula, addressing the current gap in comprehensive sexual rights education within schools (Campos and Urnau, 2021).
- **Encourage and help develop family resilience against CSEC perpetration by promoting awareness and understanding of CSEC, alongside addressing socioeconomic factors that increase a family’s susceptibility to CSEC.** These could include linking at-risk families to relevant livelihoods and social protection programs. Interventions could also encompass sensitising parents/guardians about grooming and signs that their child may be engaged in CSEC, raising awareness on the impact of CSEC on children’s long-term well-being and providing support on how to talk to children about the dangers of CSEC.
- **Implement social norms and behaviours change interventions that aim to address harmful gender norms that excuse or justify CSEC perpetration.** These would ideally include longer-term interventions that target men and boys, as well as women and girls, to be allies and challenge gender norms that support CSEC. Drawing on models such as SASA!, receptive men and boys could then be trained as allies in their communities to promote more equitable gender norms and to speak out against CSEC.⁶ Adults engaged in commercial sex can play a particularly critical role as allies within their community, providing support with awareness raising and other CSEC prevention activities.

⁵ See: <https://thecode.org/>

⁶ SASA! is a comprehensive, evidence-based program targeting men and boys that aims to transform harmful and inequitable gender norms. It was developed by Raising Voices, an international NGO started in Uganda that works towards the prevention of violence against women and children. For more information, see <https://raisingvoices.org/women/sasa-approach/>.

- **Pilot community-based mechanisms for deterring and responding to CSEC perpetration.** These could include intelligence-sharing, referral pathways and protection groups that are based on existing community structures and are tasked with educating community members on CSEC risks, how to respond to suspected cases and how to seek support. Any such groups would ideally include adults engaged in commercial sex. Community-based protection groups can be connected to local child protection actors and representatives of state judicial and social services to strengthen referral pathways and increase survivors’ access to response services.
- **Focus on CSEC in Pernambuco’s next 18th May Campaign (“Make it Beautiful”) for the National Day to Combat Abuse and Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents.** The campaign could build on the CSEC research recently conducted in the state. Rather than generic population-wide messaging, we recommend that the messaging be tailored to specific audiences – such as truck drivers, taxi drivers, app drivers and tour guides – and to alert potential perpetrators and intermediaries about criminal repercussions of CSEC. Messaging can also be delivered close to locations where CSEC is likely to occur, including bars, pubs and tourist hotspots, and offered through schools so that children and adolescents receive tailored messages about the risks associated with CSEC and how to report it. Finally, the campaign could target law enforcement actors, such as the police, who are critical to reducing CSEC prevalence and increasing survivors’ access to response services.

SAMPLE OF RECOMMENDATIONS SUGGESTED BY RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Finally, we conclude with a series of recommended actions proposed by the research participants themselves, people who are deeply immersed in contexts where CSEC occurs. These insights highlight the necessity for increased awareness of CSEC risks among children and their families, and for government bodies to play a more proactive role in detecting violations and taking stronger enforcement actions against perpetrators.


Woman working in context that favours CSEC, 01:

Go to residents’ councils and have a person responsible for going to the neighbourhoods, [going] house to house, to warn about this [CSEC].

Subject specialist, 03:

I think what is lacking [in CSEC response] is perceiving the [response] system as a single web... [where] this whole network is actually acting together. I think we still have many blind spots... that we don’t see... So, for example, [we should consider] hospital teams from all hospitals...not just [focusing on] paediatricians.

Male tour guide, 04:

The government should come and hold meetings in the communities to combat this kind of exploitation of minors. And...the government should support families who are living in chaos – unpleasant situations [which include] lack of food, lack of structure, lack of everything. 



Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 03:

I think that [CSEC prevention] can first be done, throughout Brazil, in people's minds [through] awareness-raising. Because if there were no men looking for [children], abuse wouldn't exist. First, there has to be awareness in the minds of the men themselves.

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 10:

I think there should be more programs for mothers, talking about different issues. Mothers will care more about their daughters. Because if the daughters grow up alone, I think [CSEC] will happen.

Male tour guide, 05:

[There is a need to] explain more about how exploitation works... That it's a crime.

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 03:

Yes. I don't see anyone [police] in plain clothes looking for a man who is abusing an underage girl. I see them looking for drug dealers, potheads... But I don't see the police looking for a man who's abusing an underage girl... That's the point, people marginalise the man who sells drugs, but he's far from a rapist.

Cisgender woman engaged in commercial sex, 03:

I think [there is a need for more] policing on websites, more rigour in [moderating] these applications.



ANNEX A: DETAILED OVERVIEW OF METHODS

The study used a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative methods were used in round one of data collection, then complemented by a quantitative approach in round two. Both methods are based on the premise that information reported by those who frequent locations where CSEC occurs can be used to strengthen knowledge of perpetrators' and intermediaries' behaviours and shed light on perceptions of CSEC within the targeted communities.

QUALITATIVE METHODS

FGDs and KIIs were conducted with **5 subject specialists and 41 adult participants** who worked in areas known for CSEC to ascertain their perceptions of CSEC perpetration (Table 8). The latter included women and men (cis and trans) currently engaged in commercial sex, tour guides, taxi drivers, and people working in locations that favour CSEC, including bar owners, hotel staff, street vendors, and housekeepers. Participants were identified using a purposive sampling approach, with support from the Pernambuco Association of Sex Professionals, local bodies of the Judiciary and other institutions that work directly with CSEC survivors, and tourist guide associations. Participants were included provided they worked in the target areas, were over 18 years of age, and were residents of the RMA. Although the RMA comprises 14 municipalities⁷, data collection predominantly took place in the capital of the state of Pernambuco, covering only part of the aforementioned municipalities. The five subject specialists were selected through Promundo Institute's contacts with local universities, interlocutors from the municipal government of Recife, the state of Pernambuco, and the federal government, and contacts provided by The Freedom Fund. The study excluded foreigners, except for subject specialists.

The sampling approach for community participants assumed that their frequentation of locations that favour CSEC meant they would either have first-hand experience interacting with CSEC perpetrators and intermediaries or would have observed them during the course of their work. Validating this assumption, almost all participants discussed actual cases of CSEC. Nonetheless, participants who were more likely to have regular contact with CSEC perpetrators and intermediaries, such as adults engaged in commercial sex, typically gave the most detailed information.

Table 8: Qualitative method participants

Participants	Gender		Number of people
Woman currently engaged in commercial sex	Cis	Interview	10
	Trans	Interview	4
Man currently engaged in commercial sex	Cis	Interview	2
Professional women working in locations that favour CSEC	Cis	Interview	5
Professional men working in locations that favour CSEC	Cis	Interview	4
Women taxi drivers or mobility apps	Cis	FGD	6
	Cis	FGD	5
Men taxi drivers or mobility apps	Trans	FGD	1
	Cis	Interview	7
Women tour guides	Cis	Interview	2
Subject specialists	-	Interview	5

⁷ These are Abreu e Lima, Araçoiaba, Cabo de Santo Agostinho, Camaragibe, Igarassu, Ilha de Itamaracá, Ipojuca, Itapissuma, Jaboatão dos Guararapes, Moreno, Olinda, Paulista, Recife and São Lawrence da Mata

QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION

Three data collection tools were developed: one for experts, one for perpetrators of violence (in the event this approach was feasible) and one for participants working in areas where CSEC is known to be prevalent. The tools were pre-tested with people in commercial sex and professionals who work in locations that favour CSEC. The pre-test made it possible to analyse a) the appropriateness of the language for participants; b) the likely duration of the interview; c) the flow of the interview, and d) the validity of the questions for empirical investigation of the research questions.

Following pre-testing, the interviews and focus groups were carried out in person in hotels and coworking spaces in the city of Recife. A small proportion were carried out by telephone due to the challenges meeting face-to-face, such as the limited availability of the individuals recruited for the study. All data collection took place between the hours of 9:00 A.M. and 5:00 P.M., with the exception of the interviews with specialists. The KIs lasted about one hour, while the FGDs were an average of one hour and 45 minutes.

Content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. The material was first transcribed before being coded by the researchers, who sought recurring themes that might (or might not) align with the research questions. This process was followed by several meetings between the research team to compare data and conduct new rounds of analysis. The data was first analysed by looking at differences and similarities within specific participant profile types. Then, a cross-sectional analysis of the data across the different types of participant profile was carried out. To finalise the research, a general synthesis was elaborated with the main information presented in a summarised way. The conclusions and priority recommendations were primarily based on the notes of specialists.

QUANTITATIVE METHOD

After the difficulties of recruiting convicted CSEC offenders became apparent (see Box A) a survey was added which targeted men who frequent spaces known for CSEC. We sought to understand ideas, attitudes and behaviours that tend to be associated with CSEC, either as a potential perpetrator or intermediary or as an individual who socially validates the occurrence of this type of crime. The hypothesis of this phase was that the attitudes and behaviours relating to CSEC of men who frequent locations known for CSEC may have points of convergence with actual perpetrators. Nonetheless, recognising the potential for selection bias, the aim was also to describe the main characteristics of men who frequent these areas.

Participants were recruited using an opt-in convenience sampling approach based on their presence in the 10 places or establishments most mentioned as areas where CSCE occurs in the qualitative phase. In the case of male tourists, several places were visited, such as beaches, hotels, and bars, where these men were found in groups. In initial conversations, many admitted that sex tourism was one of their reasons for visiting Recife and nearby towns. Several also reported preferences for *novinhas*, a term used in several Brazilian territories to refer to adolescent or young adult women. However, when we tried to consolidate the participation of these same men in the study, none accepted. This group was therefore replaced by tour guides who interacted regularly with tourists. In total, the survey questionnaire was completed by **80 male participants**. A detailed overview can be viewed in Table 9.

Table 9: Collected demographic characteristics of male participants at locations that favour CSEC

	Age ≤ 30 N (%)	Age >30 N (%)	Total N (%)
Race	13 (16.5%)	66 (83.5%)	79 (100%)
White	4 (22.2%)	14 (77.8%)	18 (22.8%)
Brown	4 (8.5%)	43 (91.5%)	47 (59.5%)
Black	5 (38.5%)	8 (61.5%)	13 (16.5%)
Indigenous/other	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	1 (1.3%)
Civil status	13 (16.5%)	66 (83.5%)	79 (100%)
Single	9 (24.3%)	28 (75.7%)	37 (46.8%)
Married	4 (13.8%)	25 (86.2%)	29 (36.7%)
Divorced/widowed/other	0 (0%)	13 (100%)	13 (16.5%)
Has 1+ children	6 (9.1%)	60 (90.9%)	66 (83.5%)

QUANTITATIVE DATA COLLECTION

The survey was administered in situ in each of the 10 locations. Following training on the tool, the survey was initially applied to 12 men in two different locations to test comprehension. In an attempt to diversify the participant pool, the interviewers arrived at each place and got used to the dynamics of the establishments before starting to approach the individuals. The researchers also verified the number of men present to capture the flow of individuals and their dynamics within the locations. Some owners or managers allowed the interviews to take place inside the premises, although this was not the case for all. Where the latter applied, survey interviews took place in the vicinity of the location. In the case of motels and hotels, interviewers did not enter the spaces but instead focused on adjacent bars or corners where intermediaries negotiate with perpetrators before sending the children to the hotels or motels for the purpose of CSEC.

The first 12 men found the instrument was perfectly understandable and the interview format appeared adequate for the purpose of the study. However, although most approached men agreed to participate, some seemed 'suspicious' of the interviewers. To reduce this suspicion, we excluded the need to sign the consent form in subsequent rounds of data collection but did record audio of participants expressing their consent. We also expanded interview hours from 5:00 P.M. to 8:00 P.M. to cover more visitors to the locations. With these measures in place, we completed 18 more interviews on different days in three different locations. The results were encouraging, with the barriers perceived by the researchers in the early round decreasing significantly. All interviews from the first two rounds were integrated into the final database. The average duration of the survey administration was about 20 minutes, including the initial approach, consent process, and application of the survey.

QUANTITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

The data was analysed using descriptive analysis, although inferential models were not undertaken. Instead, the results helped us to verify clues and trends from the qualitative data, strengthening our understanding of the profile of men who engage in CSEC, either as perpetrators or intermediaries, and community members' perceptions of these men.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Given the sensitive research topic, a research protocol was developed which highlighted the proposed rigorous measures that would be used to ensure adherence to global ethical standards. These included

obtaining written or verbal informed consent from all participants, ensuring participants understood that they could withdraw from the study or stop the interviews at any time, and anonymising all participants' identities in the analysis and written reports (Bryman, 2012). Ethical approval for both phases of data collection was granted by the Research Ethics Committee – CEP of the University Center of Brasília – UNICEUB, located in the city of Brasília-DF, Brazil. The approval opinion considered the research to have 'social and academic relevance, involving a topic of interest for the development of public policies'.

Box A: The challenges of speaking with convicted perpetrators

The research initially aimed to speak with convicted perpetrators of CSEC to better understand their attitudes, behaviours, and motivations. However, even with the support of the State Secretariat for the Resocialisation of Prisoners, it was extremely difficult to find, recruit, select, and interview men who had already been convicted of CSEC. There were no men arrested under Articles 228 and 229 of the Penal Code (relating to sexual exploitation) in the main penitentiary units investigated, whether for closed or semi-open conditions. Detainees incarcerated for sexual violence against children had been detailed under criminal articles of child sexual abuse, but not sexual exploitation. This may be due to abuse crimes being associated with more rigorous and faster penalties as they are more easily characterised.

We therefore carried out pre-interviews with 5 men incarcerated for crimes associated with the sexual abuse of children and adolescents to see if any mentioned an exchange of material goods for the sexual act. However, only one partially admitted to having abused a girl. A professional who works in a penitentiary unit was not surprised by their reluctance to open up, saying: "the prisoner says he killed 30 but does not assume the crime of abuse". One of the reasons for this is that inmates who are known to be incarcerated for sexual violence crimes may suffer severe reprisals from other inmates. A convicted perpetrator of potential CSEC, who was currently on parole, was identified after an intense search in places close to assistance services that provide benefits to prison populations. This man was interviewed for the study. However, once he started describing his crimes, it was not clear whether the acts had been sexual exploitation or sexual abuse. We have therefore omitted his data from the report.

LIMITATIONS

As noted above, the study faced insurmountable challenges interviewing known perpetrators and intermediaries of CSEC, so instead consulted people who work in locations that favour CSEC. As such, there is no guarantee that the participants had actual knowledge of CSEC perpetrators or intermediaries. Many certainly did, as they recalled first-hand experiences interacting with perpetrators and intermediaries. This was especially clear in the interviews with women and men currently engaged in commercial sex. However, other participants provided vague answers, particularly on questions exploring the frequency and preferences of perpetrators, suggesting less first-hand experiences. The data should therefore be understood clearly as perceptions rather than concrete profiles. In the quantitative data, though, perceptions about CSEC did not vary greatly between different profiles, meaning some generalisations can be drawn.

Other limitations include the possibility for social desirability bias, given the sensitive topic, and the fact that the study was conducted predominantly in capital of the state of Pernambuco. Therefore, the findings, conclusions and suggestions of this study cannot be generalised to other Brazilian or international territories. Moreover, most of the participants lived and worked in the capital, Recife, where the highest population rates in the state reside. The extent to which the findings apply to the whole RMA is therefore unclear. In the qualitative data, it was also clear that some participants did not always see a difference between CSEC and child sexual abuse more generally. The interviewer therefore needed to provide additional explanations which might have influenced participants' answers. Finally, the survey only asked questions relating to adolescent girls rather than boys or transgender survivors.

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