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Online Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in a National Victim Survey

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Objective: To describe the characteristics and consequences of online commercial sexual exploitation of children using a nationally representative sample. **Method:** The online survey sample comprised 2,639 respondents aged 18–28 from the KnowledgePanel maintained by the survey research firm Ipsos. **Results:** Fifty-eight respondents or a weighted 1.7% of the sample described childhood experiences in which they used technology to exchange sexual talks, sexual images, or other sexual activities for money, drugs, or other valuable items. The episodes were very diverse. Sixty-three percent were girls, 30% boys, 7% gender fluid, and 42% sexual minorities. Half were ages 16 or 17, and half were younger at the time of the activity. Many (44%) were involved in offline sexual activity. The purchasers were not exclusively anonymous internet contacts; 19% were current or former intimate partners and another 10% friends or acquaintances. Most of the exchanges (92%) were self-negotiated, and only 8% involved a facilitator. Nonetheless, most reported negative reactions involving embarrassment, anxiety, and feeling afraid. Sexual minority youth reported more exchanging sexual talk, having a facilitator involved, feeling afraid and falling behind in school or work than heterosexual youth. **Conclusions:** This national survey reveals a high frequency of childhood commercial sex that diverges from descriptions of dynamics based on police and social agency data. Such dynamics suggest the need for alternative approaches to prevention.

Clinical Impact Statement

This article provides the first nationally representative sample of online commercial sexual exploitation of children. The incidents described by respondents were diverse and diverge from descriptions about commercial sexual exploitation of children based on police and social agency data. The diverse dynamics suggest the need for alternative approaches to prevention, particularly focusing on discouraging online selling of sexual images. Technology companies and policymakers could develop better methods of verifying age and policing age restrictions.

Keywords: online commercial sexual exploitation of children, technology-facilitated victimization, internet-facilitated victimization, sexual minority

The commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), sometimes referred to as child sex trafficking, refers to the commercial exchange of sexual acts by an individual under the age of 18 in the United States. Importantly, force, fraud, or coercion does not need to be present in cases involving CSEC, as individuals under the age of 18 cannot legally consent to commercial sex regardless of their (self-)perceived agency.

Technology may be changing the nature and dynamics of CSEC victimization, including grooming and exploitation (O'Brien & Li, 2020). The nearly ubiquitous use of technology in the United States

has provided access to new populations of victims and exploiters, new contexts for recruitment and advertising, and new sexual content for exchange. For example, technology has diversified the kind of sexual services that may be traded to include the provision of images and remote online performances, such as live-feed videos. Venues for sexual exchanges like OnlyFans, a platform widely used by individuals to earn payments from subscribers for sexual performances, are widely known among youth (Martellozzo & Bradbury, 2021). Although these and similar sites claim to ban minors, journalistic investigations show that individuals under the

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review and editing. Heather Turner played a supporting role in writing—original draft and writing—review and editing and an equal role in conceptualization, funding acquisition, and methodology. Jennifer O'Brien played a supporting role in writing—original draft and writing—review and editing.

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age of 18 do frequently end up on the platform (MacKinnon, 2021; Richardson & Palmback, 2022; Titheradge & Croxford, 2021).

CSEC has always had diverse forms. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention defines the CSEC as a “range of crimes and activities involving the sexual abuse or exploitation of a child for the financial benefit of any person or in exchange for anything of value (including monetary and non-monetary benefits) given or received by any person” (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, n.d.). Diversity in forms of CSEC have been discussed in terms of facilitators (e.g., family, intimate partners), items of exchange (e.g., money, drugs, food/shelter), and venues (e.g., strip clubs, dates, online). However, popular media continues to exclusively use the narrative that CSEC victims are manipulated or coerced by a third party into selling sexual services. However, self-negotiated exchanges by youth have been widely documented, particularly among males and also as part of so-called survival sex wherein runaway or homeless youth trade sex for food, shelter, drugs, or money (Mitchell et al., 2010). Sexual minority youth are particularly vulnerable to commercial online sexual exploitation (Turner et al., 2023) and are more likely to have been pressured to send sexts and be groomed online by adults (Rice et al., 2012; Van Ouytsel et al., 2021; Wolak et al., 2008). Harms from commercial sexual exploitation have been widely documented (Greenbaum, 2014), and harm from online exploitation has also been shown (Finkelhor et al., 2024), stemming from such elements as shame, stigmatization, and justice system involvement.

Given the nature of the crime, it is not surprising that estimates of the true scope of internet-facilitated CSEC are elusive. For example, experts are still unsure how many CSEC cases exist online or offline (Finkelhor et al., 2008/2017). Furthermore, most existing CSEC research is based on police cases, samples from intervention programs, or snowball samples recruited from networks (Mitchell et al., 2010; Swaner et al., 2016; Williamson et al., 2012), samples that may not be representative of the youth population more generally.

The Present Study

The present study focuses on the dynamics of online CSEC based on a general population survey. The goals were to explore (a) the characteristics of CSEC, such as age at first and last incident and the number of times images, sexual talk, or activity was traded; (b) the nature of the sexual exchange of the first CSEC incident, such as the number of people involved, what was exchanged, whether anyone pressured the youth to exchange with this person, how explicit the material was, and the type of technology used; and (c) the consequences of CSEC, such as how they felt afterward, whether their behavior changed like avoiding people or getting behind at work/school, and whether anything positive resulted from what happened. Because sexual minority youth may have different experiences online (Hatchel et al., 2017; Turner et al., 2023; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2016), we also explored whether characteristics and consequences of online CSEC differ by sexual orientation. Last, we examined open-ended responses in which participants describe the contexts for the sexual trade. The goal was to identify the range and patterns of internet-facilitated CSEC to gain clues useful for improving prevention and intervention.

Method

Procedure

The study was conducted using the U.S. nationally representative Ipsos online KnowledgePanel. KnowledgePanel participants were recruited by address-based sampling, from mail addresses gleaned from national universal address databases. After the mail recruitment, participants agreed to participate in regular online surveys. Digital devices were provided to any recruited sample members who lacked devices to participate. Participants get points for participation redeemable for purchases. More information is available at <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ipsosknowledgepanelmethodology.pdf>.

The KnowledgePanel panelists who were 18–28 years old (13,884) were solicited for the current survey in 2021. This age range was selected to target those who had completed childhood in the recent internet and social media era and who could be directly recruited without parental consent and other human subject protection challenges. In total, 2,639 panel members participated in the survey by the end of data collection, 20% of the solicited eligible respondents. Such response rates are not atypical of modern survey research, and the KnowledgePanel design has been shown to be on par with what more traditional survey methods can currently provide (Barlas & Thomas, 2021; MacInnis et al., 2018). The study was approved and overseen by the Human Subjects Review Board of the University of New Hampshire.

Of the 2,639 completed surveys, 1,215 endorsed one or more of the 11 screening questions about possible technology facilitated victimizations, including those that happened before the age of 18. For those with multiple victimizations, the survey gathered follow-up information on two prioritizing episodes that occurred at a younger age or less frequently in the sample overall, as determined by a survey pretest. This was done to reduce the survey length and burden for respondents with multiple types of exposures. The final participating sample was somewhat older, $M = 24.8$ ($SD = 2.76$), and more female (68.1%) compared with the U.S. population of 18- to 28-year-olds. Poststratification weights were developed to align respondent demographic distributions with U.S. population benchmarks and also to adjust for nonresponse.

Measures

Screening Question About Online CSEC

Respondents were asked:

Have you done any of the following things over the Internet or a cell phone (including texting) in exchange for money, drugs, or other valuable items: Sexual talk; Making, sending, or posting sexual pictures or videos of yourself; and/or Any other sexual activity.

Responses included “yes” or “no.”

Age and Number of Times

Respondents were then asked, “How old were you when (the first time) you did any of these things?” Because we were interested in comparing younger versus older youth, responses were grouped into two groups: “10–15 years old” and “16–17 years old.” Respondents were asked “How many times did this happen to you in your whole

life?” Responses ranged from 1 to 100, with most responses between one and three times, and were recoded into two groups: “one to two times” and “three or more times.” Participants were asked “How old were you the last time this happened?” Responses ranged from 15 to 28 and were recoded into two groups: “15–17 years old” and “18–28 years old.”

First-Time Characteristics

Follow-up questions asked: “Thinking of the first time this happened, in a few sentences, please describe what happened.” “With how many people did you exchange sexual pictures/videos, engage in sexual talk, or do some other sexual activity for money drugs or other valuable items?” Most exchanged with 10 or fewer people, and responses were recoded into “1” or “2 or more.” Participants were asked whether they knew the person’s identity and, if so, how did they know this person (current or former intimate partner, friend/relative, other acquaintance, online) and the person’s gender and age.

Sexually Explicit Material

Questions about the nature of the sexually explicit material included “Did the exchange(s) with this person/people involve sexual images, videos, or live performances?” Responses included “images,” “videos,” and “live performance.” For each response they were asked “How many?” The number of images ranged from 1 to 100, with most exchanging five or fewer images, and was recoded to “1” or “2 or more images.” The number of videos ranged from 0 to 25 and was recoded to “0” or “1 or more,” with most exchanging one or two videos. The number of live performances ranged from 0 to 39 and was recoded to “0” or “1 or more,” with most exchanging one performance. The survey also asked “How sexually explicit were the images, videos, or performances?” Specifically, the survey probed “Did any of them [images/videos/performance] show sexual intercourse, masturbation, naked genitals, female breasts, full nudity without visible breasts or genitals, sexual poses in revealing clothing, like underwear or a bathing suit, something else.” Respondents could check more than one response.

Nature of Exchange

Questions about the exchange included the following: “Did any exchange involve sexual talk?” Responses included “yes” and “no.” “Did any exchange involve in-person (offline) sexual activity?” Responses included “yes” and “no.” “What did you receive in exchange for sexual pictures, videos, sex talk or sexual activity?” Responses included “money,” “drugs,” or “other items” and were not mutually exclusive. Participants were asked “Besides the person/people you exchanged sexual pictures/videos, sexual talk or sexual activities with, was someone else involved who forced, pressured, or helped you to make these exchanges?” Responses included “Another person was involved,” “No one else was involved,” or “Don’t know/Not sure,” with no and do not know combined for the analysis.

Types of Technology Used

Respondents were asked:

What types of technology (such as apps, social media sites, text messages) were used when you sent or posted sexual pictures, videos or

engaged in sexual talk or other sexual activity in exchange for money, drugs, or other valuable items?

Responses included “text messages”; “social networking websites or apps such as Facebook, Tagged, Instagram, others”; “messaging or photo messaging apps such as Kik, Snapchat, others”; “gaming sites or apps such as Twitch, Discord, Fortnite”; “video chatroom and webcam sites such as Omegle, Chat Roulette, others”; “video voice call programs such as Facetime, Skype, others”; “image board sites such as 4chan, Pinterest, other”; “video sharing social media sites such as Vine, ooVoo, Tumblr, TikTok, others”; “dating sites or apps such as OkCupid, Tinder, others”; “adult content sites such as OnlyFans, Sugarbook (sugar daddy/sugar baby), others”; “email such as Gmail, Yahoo!, others”; “classified ads website such as Craigslist, etc.”; “a personal website—this person’s website or your own website”; “anonymous online chat website/app”; or “any other sites, apps or other online services.” More than one response could be chosen. Categories endorsed by 6% or more of the sample are described.

Consequences

Respondents were asked “When this happened, how much did you feel the following: Angry, Afraid, Sad, Embarrassed, Anxious or worried, Flattered, Like you couldn’t trust people, Like you were alone, Ashamed.” Responses to each were “not at all,” “somewhat,” “quite a bit,” or “extremely.” The list was custom-designed for this survey about online sexual abuse.

For the purpose of comparing those who experienced emotional responses to those who did not, the responses “extremely,” “quite a bit,” and “somewhat” were collapsed. Respondents were also asked: “Because of what happened, did you: Lose friends; Stay at home more often; Avoid people at school, work, or anywhere else; Skip school or classes; Get worse grades or get behind at work; Lose days at your job; Have trouble concentrating at school or work; Change your school or job; Move to a different house/apartment; Move to a new neighborhood, community, or town; See a doctor or counselor for mental health problems; Begin to take or increase/change prescription medication for mental health problems; Drink alcohol more often or in larger amounts; Take recreational (non-prescription) drugs more often or in larger amounts.” Respondents could endorse multiple consequences.

Finally, respondents were asked “Did anything positive result from what happened?” If endorsed, respondents were asked “What positive thing(s) resulted?” Available responses included “made money,” “became more popular,” “became more confident,” “learned to protect myself,” “felt more attractive or desirable,” and/or “made friends.”

Demographics

Respondent demographics, including sex, race/ethnicity, education, and sexual orientation, were available in KnowledgePanel panel data. Sex options included “male,” “female,” “trans male,” “trans female,” “gender fluid/nonconforming,” “don’t know,” or “prefer not to answer.” Responses “trans male,” “trans female,” and “gender fluid/nonconforming” were recoded into “gender minority.” Race/ethnicity options included White, non-Hispanic, Black non-Hispanic, other non-Hispanic, Hispanic, and two or more races. Education options included some high school or less, high school graduate, some college,

associate's degree, bachelor's degree, master's degree, and professional or doctorate degree. Sexual orientation included "heterosexual" or "sexual minority," which included responses "gay/lesbian," "bisexual/pansexual," "not listed," and "prefer not to answer."

Sample Characteristics

The analytic sample included 54 participants, 62.8% female, 29.6% male, and 7.6% gender minority. Most participants were White, non-Hispanic (62.4%); Hispanic (15%); Black, non-Hispanic (13.6%); and other ethnicities (8.5%). There was a range in education level, with 9.2% having less than a high school degree, 36.2% were high school graduates, 36.2% had some college, and 18% were college graduates. Most participants in this subsample were heterosexual (58.0%), and 42.0% were sexual minorities (0.9% gay/lesbian, 31.8% bisexual, 7.1% something else, 2.2% prefer not to answer).

Analysis

Data were analyzed using Stata/SE Version 17.0. Survey weights were applied during analyses to obtain population prevalence estimates. To determine whether there were significant differences across sexual orientation (heterosexual vs. sexual minority) in CSEC characteristics and consequences, survey-adjusted Pearson's chi-square tests were conducted. Because of the small sample size comparing heterosexual and sexual minority youth, we report results approaching significance at $p < .10$. However, we need to be cautious in interpreting such differences in a small sample, and these results should be considered exploratory. We used conventional content analysis to analyze the open-ended questions to allow an inductive approach that was appropriate given the short responses and the limited research literature on this topic (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Codes were developed by the first author and discussed with the second author by reading through the set of responses and pulling out common themes.

Results

Online CSEC Prevalence

Fifty-eight of the respondents disclosed at least one episode of commercial sex before the age of 18. Applying the weights

associated with the survey, this yielded a population prevalence of 1.7% (SE 0.3%).

Online CSEC Characteristics

The analytic sample for the following analyses included the 54 victims who were under the age of 18 at the first episode of commercial sexual exploitation and for whom we had reliable responses (see Table 1). Half were ages 16 or 17 at the time of the first incident, and half were 10–15 (41.7% were ages of 13–15, and 8.1% were ages of 10–12). Two thirds of the identified victims (63.5%) reported three or more incidences of commercial sexual exploitation in their lives at the time of the survey. The majority (59%) of youth who experienced online CSEC continued the activity into their adulthood. However, many appeared to age out of such activity, with 43.4% of those who started between ages 10 and 15 continuing in adulthood compared with 80.9% of those who started between ages 16 and 17, $\chi^2(1,147) = 4.09$, $p < .05$. There was no significant difference between sexual orientation and age at first incident, number of times traded, and age at last time.

Nature of Exchange of First Incident

Given the skip pattern, 50 participants who experienced online CSEC were asked a set of follow-up questions. In the case of respondents with multiple experiences of CSEC, we gathered information on the first time it happened. Over half (61.4%) of participants had exchanged sexual services with more than one person the first time it happened (Table 2). Importantly, the purchasers of sexual services were not known in 58% of the episodes. For 18.9% of the victims, the purchaser was a current or former intimate partner and for 10% friends or acquaintances. Of the 41% of purchasers whose ages were known, about a third were other juveniles. Of those with known ages, most were under 26.

About half (55.0%) exchanged more than one image (7.5% of participants skipped this question; Table 2). Most (55.0%) participants also exchanged videos, and it was common to exchange more than one. While only 24.7% exchanged live performances, those that did often exchanged more than one. There was a range in how sexually explicit the images, videos, or performances were:

Table 1
Internet-Facilitated CSEC Characteristics (Weighted Percentages)

Characteristic	Percentage of			χ^2
	Entire sample ($N = 54$)	Heterosexual ($n = 33$)	Sexual minority ($n = 21$)	
Age at first CSEC incident				
10–15	49.8	54.8	43.0	
16–17	50.2	45.2	57.0	0.49
Number of times traded sexual images, talk, or sexual activity in your whole life				
One to two	36.1	32.3	41.5	
Three or more	63.9	67.7	58.5	0.29
Age at last time traded sexual images, talk, or sexual activity ^a	($n = 48$)	($n = 29$)	($n = 19$)	
15–17	41.0	49.3	30.7	
18–28	59.0	50.7	69.3	1.03

Note. CSEC = commercial sexual exploitation of children.

^aSix people skipped this question.

Table 2*Nature of Exchange of First Internet-Facilitated CSEC Incident (Weighted Percentages)*

Nature of exchange	Percentage of ^a			χ^2
	Entire sample (<i>N</i> = 50)	Heterosexual (<i>n</i> = 31)	Sexual minority (<i>n</i> = 19)	
How many people did you exchange sexual images, talk, or sexual activity with the first time it happened?				
One	38.6	44.6	28.1	
Two or more	61.4	55.4	71.9	0.75
Know person/people's identity				
Yes	41.6	43.0	39.5	
No	58.4	57.0	60.5	0.17
Number of images exchanged				
One	45.0	49.9	38.0	
Two or more	55.0	50.1	62.0	0.43
Number of videos exchanged				
0	45.0	43.2	47.4	
One or more	55.0	56.8	52.6	0.05
Number of live performances				
0	75.3	76.2	74.0	
One or more	24.7	23.8	26.0	0.02
How sexually explicit were the images, videos, or performances				
Naked genitals	54.9	51.2	60.3	0.25
Sexual poses in revealing clothing	52.5	56.3	46.9	0.28
Female breasts	50.4	55.0	43.7	0.40
Masturbation	46.3	45.7	47.1	0.01
Full nudity without visible breasts or genitals	42.9	34.9	54.6	1.27
Sexual intercourse	12.3	17.4	4.7	2.13
Exchange involved				
Sexual talk	82.0	72.6	95.7	5.31*
Offline sexual activity	43.6	40.9	47.6	0.14
What was received				
Money	52.4	40.7	69.4	2.45
Other items, such as rides	34.2	27.4	44.3	0.96
Drugs	22.8	32.8	8.2	3.29 [†]
Beside the person you exchanged with, someone forced/pressured/helped you to make exchange.	8.8	3.7	15.6	2.67 [†]
Types of technology used				
Messaging apps	38.2	42.3	32.1	0.34
Text messages	37.5	31.4	46.4	0.81
Social networking sites	25.2	20.7	31.7	0.45
Video voice call programs	21.7	17.0	28.6	0.54
Email	16.7	9.9	26.7	1.16
Anonymous online chat	15.8	14.6	17.5	0.05
Adult content sites	14.3	16.8	10.6	0.38
Dating sites	14.2	9.6	20.8	1.21
Gaming sites	9.7	3.8	18.4	2.23
Classified sites	6.4	1.0	14.3	7.82**

Note. CSEC = commercial sexual exploitation of children.

^a Sample size varies by question.

[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

naked genitals (54.9%), sexual poses in revealing clothing, like underwear or a bathing suit (52.5%), female breasts (50.4%), masturbation (46.3%), full nudity without visible breasts or genitals (42.9%), and sexual intercourse (12.3%). Most of the exchanges involved sexual talk (82.0%). Sexual minority youth were more likely to exchange sexual talk (95.7%) compared with heterosexual youth (47.6%). A large percentage (43.6%) of exchanges involved offline sexual activity. Juveniles received money (52.4%), other items (34.2%) such as rides, or drugs (22.8%). Sexual orientation approached significance, with heterosexual youth more likely to exchange drugs (32.8%) compared with sexual minority youth

(8.2%, $p < .10$). Importantly, it was rare for there to be someone else involved in the episode, like a third-party pimp or facilitator, who forced, pressured, or helped promote these exchanges (8.8%). The vast majority of victims were engaged in these activities on their own initiative or in response to the buyers' request. This also approached significance, with sexual minority youth more likely to say someone else forced, pressured, or helped them in these exchanges (15.6%) compared with heterosexual youth (3.7%, $p < .10$).

A wide range of applications were used in the exchange (see Table 2). The most common applications were messaging apps

(38.2%), text message (37.5%), and social networking sites (25.2%). More than one in 10 (14.3%) involved adult content sites, such as OnlyFans and Sugarbook, or dating sites or apps, such as OkCupid and Tinder (14.2%). Sexual minority youth were more likely to use classified ads, such as Craigslist (14.3%) compared with heterosexual youth (1.0%).

Consequences

Approximately three quarters of participants said that as part of the exchange, they felt embarrassed, anxious or worried, or afraid (see Table 3). Heterosexual youth (91.2%) were more likely to feel embarrassed than sexual minority youth (62.5%). It was also very common for youth to feel ashamed (73.0%), like they were alone (72.9%), and to feel like they could not trust people (71.8%). Other reactions were feeling sad (60.5%), flattered (55.3%), and angry (53.7%). More than one third of participants reported that because of what happened, they had trouble concentrating at school or work (38.4%). Approximately one third of participants stayed at home more often (34.6%); avoided people at school, work, or anywhere else (34.1%); and lost friends (34.0%). Over one quarter of participants reported that in connection with the experience, they got worse grades or got behind on work (28.8%), with this more common for sexual minority youth (46.6%) compared with heterosexual youth (16.7%).

Nearly one third of participants (29.4%) said something positive that resulted from what happened. Those who reported positive consequences ($n = 14$) mentioned learning to protect themselves

($n = 10$), making money ($n = 9$), feeling more attractive or desirable ($n = 9$), becoming more confident ($n = 8$), and making friends ($n = 3$).

Contexts for Sexual Trade

In response to an open-ended question, participants described a variety of contexts for the sexual trade. Some participants needed money, some described casual exchanges for drugs or other “perks” such as video game currency or homework assignments, and some had harrowing stories of threat and dire circumstances (see Table 4).

Discussion

This national survey provided prevalence information for internet-facilitated CSEC—a specific form of child sexual exploitation that has had few scientifically derived estimates (Franchino-Olsen et al., 2022). The estimate, 1.7% with a range of 1.4%–2.0%, suggests that internet-facilitated CSEC victimization affects tens of thousands of youths when considered in the context of the total U.S. youth population. Moreover, this estimate does not include youth who exclusively experienced face-to-face CSEC victimization with no internet facilitation.

The present study suggests that internet-facilitated CSEC is a form of sexual abuse that applies disproportionately to girls. However, boys did make up 30% of the victims. Furthermore, youth aged 16–17 made up half of the victims, situating it more prominently during late adolescence. Both of these findings are consistent with the current extant literature (e.g., Franchino-Olsen, 2021; E. Williamson & Flood, 2021).

Table 3

Consequences of Internet-Facilitated CSEC (Weighted Percentages)

Consequence	Percentage of ^a			χ^2
	Entire sample ($N = 50$)	Heterosexual ($n = 31$)	Sexual minority ($n = 19$)	
When this happened, did you feel				
Embarrassed	78.8	91.2	62.5	6.01*
Anxious or worried	76.5	70.3	88.5	0.95
Afraid	75.5	65.8	89.6	3.60†
Ashamed	73.0	81.9	60.1	2.03
Like you were alone	72.9	74.6	70.4	0.07
Like you could not trust people	71.8	67.8	77.5	0.34
Sad	60.5	56.2	66.7	0.34
Flattered	55.3	46.6	67.9	1.40
Angry	53.7	52.1	55.9	0.04
Because of what happened, did you				
Have trouble concentrating at school or work	38.4	30.0	50.7	1.41
Stay at home more often	34.6	30.1	41.2	0.47
Avoid people at school, work, or anywhere else	34.1	26.0	46.1	1.41
Lose any friends	34.0	39.1	26.5	0.52
Get worse grades or get behind on work	28.8	16.7	46.6	3.88†
Skip school or classes	27.1	29.4	23.7	0.12
Drink alcohol more often or in larger amounts	21.7	23.4	19.2	0.09
Take recreational (nonprescription) drugs more often or in larger amounts	17.3	21.3	11.4	0.70
See a doctor or counselor for mental health problems	16.9	16.7	17.3	0.003
Begin to take or increase or change prescription medication for mental health problems	10.6	9.0	12.3	0.18
Did anything positive result from what happened				
Yes	29.4	25.3	35.4	
No/do not know/not sure	70.6	74.7	64.6	0.38

Note. CSEC = commercial sexual exploitation of children.

^a Sample size varies by question.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$.

Table 4
Contexts for Sexual Trade

Context	Example
Needed money	<p>“When I was younger, we had no money living house to house, and barely had any food. I was about 16 years of age, and we had a couple of friends/neighbors that always wanted us to be with them. Well one day we had nothing to eat. Me and my sisters didn’t even have electricity, so he offered me money for a sexual act and since we had hit rock bottom I felt like it was my only option at the time.” (16-year-old female, heterosexual)</p> <p>“I was 17 and needed money for one of my legitimate prescription medications because my mother had put me out on the street and several adult men online said they would paypal me money for dirty pics. The third guy wanted videos of me using sex toys on myself while me best friend watched, he wanted her to use them on me too.” (17-year-old gender minority, sexual minority)</p> <p>“I was homeless so I would do anything for money.” (16-year-old female, sexual minority)</p> <p>“I have sent panties before in exchange for money. I have posted pictures of genitals and engaged in sexual talk.” (14-year-old female, sexual minority)</p>
Casual exchanges	<p>“Had an older girlfriend when I was about 15–16 and we used to sext and talk sexual over the phone. She’d usually give me weed and money and other perks (like rides and stuff) for keeping her satisfied.” (15-year-old male, heterosexual)</p> <p>“I sent pictures and videos to the guy for answers on homework I didn’t have time to complete.” (15-year-old female, heterosexual)</p> <p>“I was young and wanted to smoke weed. The adult selling it offered me weed for sex and I agreed.” (15-year-old female, sexual minority)</p>
Extreme abuse	<p>“I had been molested since I was 5 up until the age of 11. Then when I was 11, the person started raping me. As an out and to have some kind of control, I felt that I could choose to have phone sex with men I was meeting on phone sex lines and hook up apps and chat rooms online. ... I would digitally penetrate myself while on the phone. ... The man would send me money through electronic pay cards that he set up for me and mailed them to me under a fake name.” (11-year-old female, heterosexual)</p> <p>“About 17 I was held captive and put in a site called Backpage.” (17-year-old female, sexual minority)</p>

Individuals defining themselves as sexual minorities made up a disproportionately large share (42%) of the youth engaged in CSEC. Extant literature has repeatedly noted that gender and/or sexual minority status may be important risk factors for this type of victimization (Franchino-Olsen, 2021; E. Williamson & Flood, 2021). Their large representation may reflect a segment of children and youth that are more open to sexual experimentation, who already are coping with stigma and risk and may feel less constrained about another potentially stigmatizing or risky experiences. They may also have more need for money because of suffering mistreatment and marginalization (E. Williamson & Flood, 2021). Further, it may be that sexual minority youth are particularly engaged in internet-facilitated CSEC because these youth may have difficulty meeting and connecting with members of their community face-to-face. Research shows that sexual and gender minority youth more often use the internet for acquiring sexual information and finding sexual interactions (Hatchel et al., 2017; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2016). However, seeking such online connections may put gender minority youth at greater risk of internet-facilitated exploitation, including CSEC.

We found more similarities than differences when comparing characteristics of incidents and sexual orientation. However, sexual minority youth were more likely to exchange sexual talk, to use classified ads, to feel afraid, and to report worse grades or getting behind at work because of what happened than heterosexual youth. By contrast, heterosexual youth were more likely to receive drugs as part of the exchange and to feel embarrassed. Because of the small sample size, these results should be considered exploratory. More research is needed to explore the experiences of sexual minority and heterosexual youth.

Two other conclusions that stand out from the data are the diversity of episode dynamics and how much they depart from stereotypes in the media about sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation.

For example, one third of victims engaged in this activity only once or twice and in ways that were self-characterized as casual, with youth saying they received drugs, money, or rides in exchange for the sexual images. Approximately 40% of youth engaged in offline sexual activity with the person. Nearly one in five of the exchanges was with current or former intimate partners and another one in five with acquaintances.

Perhaps most striking, only 8% of the current sample described having a third-party facilitator who brokered the activity in any way. Sexual minority youth were more likely to have a third party involved (15.6%) compared with heterosexual youth (3.7%). Sexual exchanges without a third party were mostly exploitation situations that the youth themselves navigated independently, although that does not mean that they were not fraught, frightening, or unpleasant. There were considerable negative feelings attached to the experiences. However, the lack of pimps and facilitators stands in strong contrast to the narrative that dominates discussions of CSEC.

The differences between the findings from this survey and the prevalent narratives of commercial sexual exploitation may have several explanations. One is that general population surveys typically uncover more minor and divergent episodes of crimes than cases that get reported or identified by police and victim agencies. Such divergent cases are less likely to come to official attention or be treated as criminal by authorities. Another factor is that technology may be changing the dynamics of commercial sex. The search for customers may have been simplified by social media, dating sites, and apps like OnlyFans. The remoteness and the image-making options may make recruitment and sexual interactions less risky, and the payments can be made through technology applications. Hence, some of the protection and business functions of facilitators may have been made obsolete.

Limitations

This study comes with some limitations that should be kept in mind. First, the cases identified in the survey may not be representative for a variety of reasons. The analyses comparing sexual orientation and characteristics of the incident should be considered exploratory given the sample size. Sexual identity was measured at the time of the study when participants were young adults not at the time of the CSEC episodes. The survey may also have been unable to access more of the seriously or stereotypically victimized youth who would not have been sampled or had the time or skills or be too ashamed to participate. The screening question and the questions on consequences were specifically designed for the survey and have not been tested or validated in other studies. As a self-administered online survey, answers could have been fabricated. Given that some states allow the age of consent to be 17, some of these acts may have been done by an individual who is technically of age by their state standard. Another limitation is that the information about commercial sex was gathered about episodes that could have been as many as 15 years in the past (a 28-year-old recollecting about something at age 13). This means that memory distortion could be a problem. It also means that some kinds of episodes might have been more readily memorable. Finally, the cases described here may no longer be representative of the experiences of the current generation of youth.

Implications

These findings have some important implications. First, if technology applications are facilitating the entry of juveniles into commercial sex, the developers and custodians of these applications have a greater obligation to keep juveniles off their sites. App developers throughout the digital revolution have systematically failed in their obligation to address the predictable negative effects of their rogue usage by children. Recently, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and California passed legislation to require technology companies to develop better methods of verifying age and policing age restrictions in the way that is done for alcohol and cigarette purchases (Lee, 2020; Ostwal, 2022). This and other monitoring systems should be a high priority for policymakers.

Second, findings suggest that more prevention education needs to be directed toward youth about how to avoid the possible lures of commercial sexual exchanges online. This education may be very different in its content from the warnings about pimp-facilitated sex trafficking that may dominate current educational programs. Unfortunately, we do not yet know enough about the kinds of messages that would be persuasive with predisposed youth. Warnings about physical and reputational dangers may not always be effective. Educators need to work with willing survivors to brainstorm the best approaches for messaging and education.

Finally, the research also highlights the limitations of the terminology and typification that surround the term "sex trafficking." Trafficking intuitively connotes physical movement and the presence of "trafficker," and thus it seems to poorly characterize the dynamics of a youth making money by posting self-made sexual images. The term commercial sexual exploitation better applies to the episodes described in this study and harkens to other forms of labor and child exploitation where vulnerable persons voluntarily take jobs or engage in activities that are nonetheless harmful or violate their rights. The present study offers evidence that this sex

trafficking stereotype may not be helpful in highlighting the true realities of CSEC victimization for children and youth.

Conclusions

CSEC has always had diverse forms. However, technology may be changing the nature and dynamics of commercial exploitation of children. This article provides the first nationally representative sample of online CSEC. The episodes diverged from common descriptions about CSEC based on police and agency data. The diverse dynamics suggest the need for alternative approaches to prevention for practitioners and educators. Technology companies and policymakers could develop better methods of verifying age and policing age restrictions. Additional research is also merited about how the digital technology and culture may be changing norms and providing incentives to early-onset commercial sex for status as well as income.

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