

Respondent-Driven Sampling Study of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) in Kampala, Uganda: Revisiting Prevalence a Year Later

Context

This briefing note summarizes the methods, findings, and conclusions from the second part of a two-phase study conducted by ICF in collaboration with Makerere University's Department of Social Work and Social Administration in Kampala, Uganda. The purpose of this two time-point study is (1) to inform Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS)-funded programming to combat commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) in Kampala and Napak District, Uganda, and (2) to gain insights on the methodology by implementing prevalence estimation at two different time-points as a way to improve future estimations.

Similar to the first phase, the one year follow-up study, conducted from July to September 2022, used Respondent Driven Sampling (RDS) which involved in-person interviews with adults and children engaged in commercial sex. The studies were designed to create population-based measures of CSEC and to explore the change, if any, in CSEC prevalence over time. The studies also aimed to understand the working conditions of children involved in CSEC. Prior to the implementation of the first phase of this study, no prior studies had offered an estimate of the prevalence of CSEC in Uganda based on a probability sample, or details on the characteristics of CSEC in the country.

Key Findings

Prevalence

Approximately 27.6 percent of individuals engaged in the sex industry in Kampala are estimated to be under age 18. There was no change in the prevalence of children in CSE between Time 1 (2021) and Time 2 (2022).

Gender

The difference between the 2021 and 2022 estimates of male children engaged in CSEC is not statistically significant.

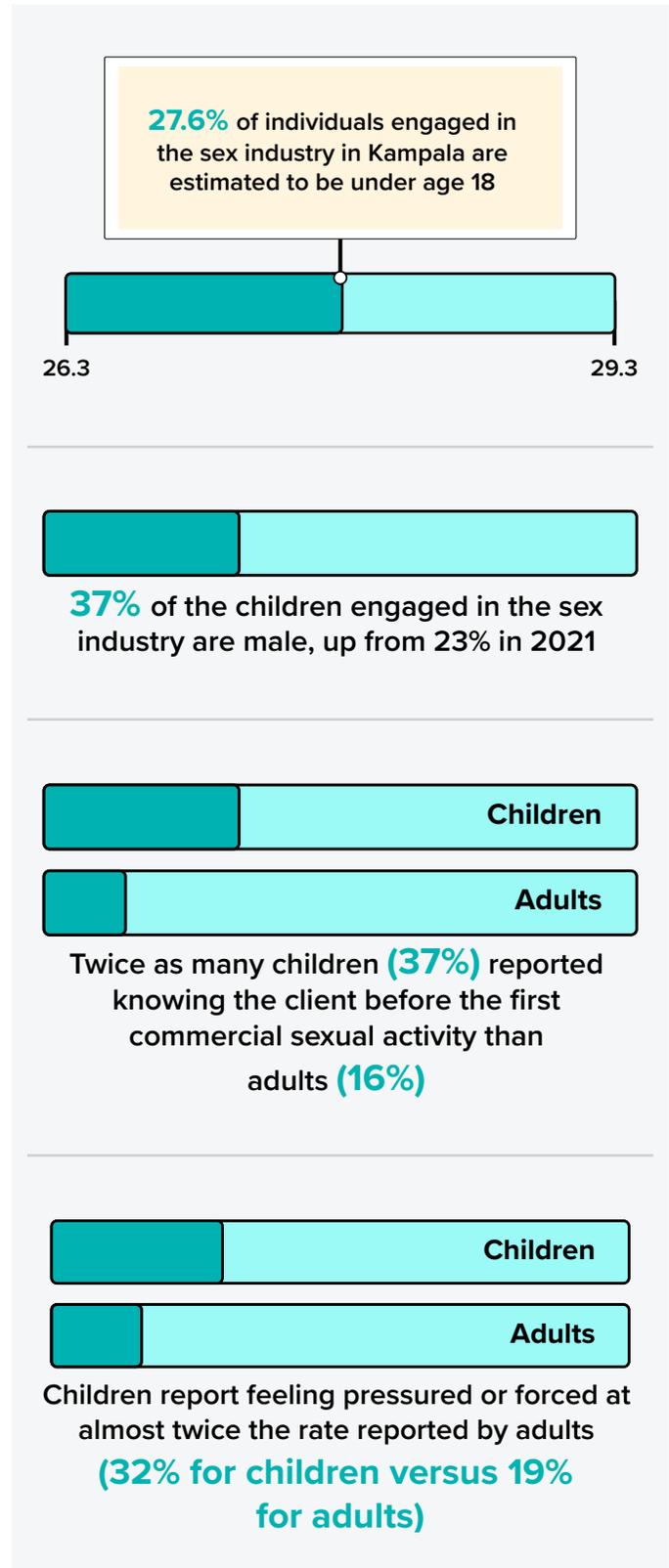
Means of connecting with clients

Just over one-fourth of people engaged in the sex industry (27 %) knew the client before the first commercial sexual activity. The percentage is more than twice as high for children (37%) compared to adults (16%). Regarding the most recent commercial sexual activity, children were nearly twice as likely to know the client beforehand compared to adults (32% versus 18%). There were also notable differences by age in how the client was identified. Nearly 70 percent of adults met the client in a bar or on the street, compared to 42 percent of children. A greater proportion of children compared to adults reported having an existing friendship with the client or being neighbors with the client.

Decision-making and coercion

A significant proportion of those engaged in the sex industry—nearly half of children (42%) and one-third of adults (34%)—worked for a pimp or broker occasionally. Nearly all respondents reported they are a decision-maker regarding whether they do sexual things and with whom they do sexual things. The decision about where the respondent will go for the sexual activity is more often dictated by the client, particularly for children. Only around half of children report that they are a decision-maker about where they will go (compared to 85% of adults). For all of these decisions, a greater proportion of children than adults reported that a pimp or broker was a decision-maker.

Close to one-fourth of individuals involved in CSE are pressured or forced to do sexual things.



Children report feeling pressured or forced at almost twice the rate reported by adults (32% for children versus 19% for adults). Nearly one-fifth (19%) of all individuals involved in CSE have felt they would be hurt if they did not do something they were told to do. One-tenth (11%) of all individuals involved in CSE have been hurt because they did not do something they were told to do.

Possible effects of COVID-19 restrictions on the Kampala sex industry

The study found an increase in new entrants to the sex industry during Time 1 compared to Time 2. A larger number of people may have been driven into the industry during the pandemic and subsequent restrictions because they had no other means of economic support during the closures.

At Time 1, 14 percent only worked for a pimp or broker, but at Time 2, this number had decreased; just 2 percent only worked for a pimp or broker. It is possible that individuals who operated exclusively through a pimp or broker during pandemic-induced restrictions may have begun operating independently since the restrictions have been lifted. Additionally, there was a large decrease in the percentage of respondents who sometimes or always feel pressured or forced to do sexual things, from 45 percent at Time 1 to 23 percent at Time 2. This decrease may be partially attributed to the decreased involvement with pimps and brokers, but it also likely relates to the decreased vulnerability of individuals once the pandemic-related restrictions eased and other income-earning avenues re-emerged.

Impact of ending COVID-19 restrictions

Respondents agreed that the easing of restrictions improved their ability to support themselves through commercial sex. Respondents indicated that the reopening of bars and similar establishments has

made it easier to find clients, and the reopening of public transport has made it easier to get to clients. Many respondents noted that the decreased police presence and end of the curfew makes their work, which takes place primarily at night, much easier.

Key insights from the survey of children

More than three-fourths (78%) of children engaged in the sex industry would like to be provided with employment support. Nearly half of children (44%) mentioned educational support. One-third (34%) of children discussed cash transfers. A small number of children stated the need for health support and the prosecuting of traffickers and rapists.

What do children need?



78% of children engaged in the sex industry would like employment support



44% of children mentioned educational support



34% of children discussed cash transfers

Children also noted the need for health support and the prosecuting of traffickers and rapists

Methodological Approach

The sample was recruited using RDS, a network-based sampling method that overcomes the traditional biases associated with similar approaches (e.g., chain-referral and snowball sampling) by approximating probability sampling methods and allowing for the calculation of selection probabilities and survey weights.

The RDS weights reflect the varying sizes of respondents' social networks as established in RDS theory, which adjusts for recruitment biases. Initial respondents in an RDS study (i.e., seeds) are recruited through convenience sampling methods. Each of these seeds recruits peers by referral, allowing researchers to access members of typically hard-to-reach populations who may not otherwise be accessible. A greater number of seeds would, therefore, require fewer referral rounds to capture a representative sample of the social network, and vice versa.

The study used a repeated cross-sectional design. Repeating the study at a second time point allowed further investigation of questions raised by the findings of the first phase and exploration of whether the prevalence of children among those involved in CSE changed from 2021 to 2022. An independent sample was selected at each time point using the same sampling methodology.

The seeds were enlisted with the aid of four local NGOs that provide support to survivors of CSE in Kampala. Half of the seeds were ages 15-17 (12 seeds) and half were ages 18 years and older at Time 2. Around two-thirds of seeds recruited during Time 2 were females (17) and the remainder were males (7). Respondents were offered a maximum of three referrals and provided a small financial incentive to encourage participation and referrals. At Time 2, a total of 492 coupons were issued to invite potential peers of respondents to participate, and these coupons yielded 216 respondents. The yield per coupon was slightly higher at Time 1, which aligns with anecdotal data from NGOs indicating that it was easier to recruit seeds at Time 1 because of people's greater economic need due to COVID-19 closures. The greater ease of recruitment may also reflect people's increased availability at Time 1 during the closures. For more details on the methodology that was repeated at Time 2, see [the full report](#).

Limitations and Considerations

A limitation of all peer referral methods, such as RDS, is that eligibility may be falsified in an attempt to receive the incentive. While it is impossible to eliminate the possibility of fraud, the study attempted to mitigate the likelihood through regular quality control (e.g., tracking coupon numbers for duplicates and tracing referrals).

Another general limitation of RDS methods is that while weighting compensates for the reduced probability of capturing eligible individuals who are not well connected, the approach cannot cover persons who are not connected at all.

Similar to Time 1, this study had a relatively large number of seeds, and therefore relatively short referral chains, largely due to the narrow data collection window. Half of the seeds were minors (under age 18) and this may skew the estimated prevalence of minors among individuals engaged in the sex industry generated using the weighted sample.

Weights and estimates based on RDS are premised on a semi-probability sampling method (at best). Therefore, it is difficult to compute the variance of the RDS sample estimates, including the estimated prevalence. Estimated standard errors involve approximations related to the RDS assumptions.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This two-phase study is perhaps the first to systematically explore the characteristics of CSE among children in Kampala and the first to offer a prevalence estimate of CSEC at two time-points for the same target population. Likewise, it is one of the first studies in Uganda to include males who engage in the sex industry.

Not only does the study offer insights into the experiences of those engaged in the sex industry to allow for more relevant and effective programming targeting this population, it also helps test the viability of using RDS as a methodology and its limitations by repeat application.

Several key recommendations for future programs and policies that seek to reduce child trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of children emerge from this two-phase study:

For government and implementing organizations

Provide education and employment support for vulnerable girls and boys. The finding that up to 27.6 percent of individuals engaged in the sex industry in Kampala are under age 18 suggests a need for significant intervention in this area to reduce the numbers of children involved in CSE. This prevalence did not change over time, validating Time 1 estimates. Interventions should target both girls and boys, given the finding that a significant proportion of children involved in CSE in Kampala are male. Interventions could include programs offering accelerated learning to out of school youth and seed funding for business development. When asked how NGOs and the government could best provide support, most children recommended employment support, and almost half mentioned education support.

Employment support and education support for children were identified as the most needed forms of social assistance programs.

Organizations and government agencies working with those involved in commercial sex should institutionalize the incorporation of *YOUTH FEEDBACK* into programming and policymaking.

Raise awareness of grooming. In addition, the observation that the share of children who engage in commercial sex with clients they knew is twice as high than the share of adults suggests a need for future interventions targeted at raising awareness to include education around grooming.

Listen to and incorporate children's feedback. With more than one-fourth of those involved in the sex industry estimated to be minors and nearly a third of those minors reporting experiencing force or coercion, it is important to give this group a voice to continue to understand their circumstances, identify options for employment choice, and increase their agency and decision-making. Organizations and government agencies working with those involved in commercial sex should institutionalize the incorporation of youth feedback into programming and policymaking.

For researchers

Forge strong local partnerships. Lastly, RDS as a method to estimate prevalence of CSEC, proved to be consistent over time. However, a year may be insufficient time to observe sufficient change in the prevalence of CSEC. The methodology requires recruitment of seeds as it leverages a social network-based recruitment process that is relatively easier to achieve in higher density areas such as in an urban setting. Recruitment of seeds requires partnering with local NGOs who are able and willing to recruit the initial wave of study participants that are a part of the network of the hidden population of interest.



This research was funded by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the author[s] and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.