

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) in Coastal Kenya – Revisiting Prevalence One Year Later

Context

Kenya is a source, transit, and destination country for commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC). Despite continued efforts on the part of the Kenyan government to eliminate CSEC and other forms of trafficking, Kenya ranks as a Tier 2 country in the U.S. State Department’s Trafficking in Persons report due to uneven prosecution of perpetrators and inadequate social protections for survivors.¹ In 2020, The Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS) launched a series of projects to combat CSEC in coastal Kenya. NORC at the University of Chicago led an independent research study

to obtain Time 1 (2021) and Time 2 (2022) estimates of the number of CSEC victims/survivors in Kilifi and Kwale counties of Kenya².

Similar to Time 1, the primary methodological approach for obtaining CSEC point estimates for Time 2 was link-tracing, a variation of two common approaches, respondent driven sampling (RDS) and mark-recapture (or “capture-recapture”), used to measure hidden and hard-to-reach populations.

Key Findings

An estimated 2,426 children in Kilifi and Kwale are currently engaged in CSEC, accounting for nearly 1 percent of the total population of 13- to 17-year-olds in the two counties (95 percent confidence interval (CI) is [1,683 – 3,169]. However, this may be an underestimation relative to pre-pandemic times,

as respondents reported a reduction in demand for CSEC since 2020.

¹ For explanation of tiers and full rankings, see <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-trafficking-in-persons-report/>

² At Time 1, Mombasa was also included. For the Time 1 briefing note, see: <https://bit.ly/3Uxnyf0>

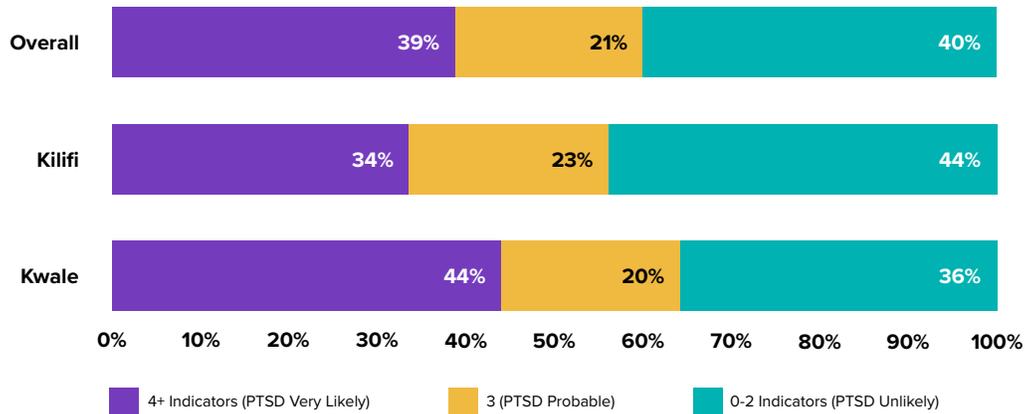
Table 1: CSEC Prevalence Estimation for Kilifi and Kwale counties for Time 1 and Time 2

Study Region	Total Population Size ³	2021		2022		Difference
		Point Estimate	Prevalence Rate	Point Estimate	Prevalence Rate	
Total	299,726	5,136	1.71%	2,426	0.81%	-2710
Female	148,256	4,003	2.70%	1,714	1.16%	
Male	151,470	1,131	0.75%	712	0.47%	

The overall CSEC prevalence rate dropped from 1.7 percent in 2021 to 0.8 percent in 2022. In 2021, an estimated 5,136 children in Kilifi and Kwale were actively involved in the sex trade, 2,710 more than the estimate.

Over 60 percent of CSEC victims are likely suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Although this proportion decreased by 12% compared with the 2021 study, the number remains very high. In addition, only 13 percent of CSEC victims have ever received any form of psychosocial support or counseling.

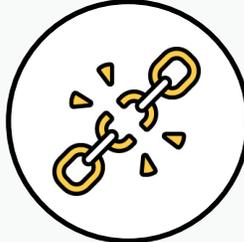
Figure 1: Number of PTSD Indicators⁴ per Respondent



Children continue to play an important role in perpetuating the cycle of child sex trafficking. While the majority of children are first introduced to the sex trade by an adult, 37 percent were first introduced by another minor and 77 percent were introduced by persons they consider their friends and peers. The average age of entry into the sex trade was 14 years, based on responses gathered in the study. In addition, one in five respondents said they personally financially benefit from arranging transactions/clients for other children in the sex trade.

Around 30 percent of CSEC victims report engaging in commercial sex acts with police officers, government officials, and/or local authorities. In addition, local Kenyans and Kenyan tourists are the primary perpetrators of CSEC, with 17 percent of respondents reporting ever engaging in commercial sex acts with foreign tourists.

Nine percent of CSEC victims in Kilifi and Kwale report being subject to online sexual exploitation, including via sexually explicit live streams, videos, or photos over the internet or through social media platforms. This varies across counties, with 14 percent in Kilifi and four percent in Kwale.



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³ Total estimated population of 13-17-year-olds in the county, per the 2019 census.

⁴ Additional resources on the PTSD screener can be accessed in the [full report](#).

The reach of this child sexual abuse material extends beyond Kenya, with 74 percent of online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC) victims reporting their buyers are from abroad.

Opportunities for alternative livelihoods outside of the sex trade are limited. While many CSEC victims receive food aid

and health education, few reported receiving support that could enable them to pursue alternative livelihoods such as educational scholarships (only 12 percent), vocational or skills training (4 percent), business support (3 percent), and job placement assistance (2 percent).

Sampling and Measurement Approach

Link-tracing combines the strengths of RDS and mark-recapture to provide an efficient way to estimate the size and characteristics of a hidden population of interest. In summary, (1) link-tracing occurs in the same fashion as RDS but does not place any sampling constraints on the individuals and therefore the network sample is not restricted to forming a tree-like structure; (2) the design allows for “overlaps” between networks to be observed, through multiple observations (i.e., redemption of more than one referral coupon) of individuals, giving rise to a more comprehensive and accurate representation of the population network; and (3) overlaps in networks can be exploited in a mark-recapture fashion for population size estimation. As such, link-tracing can produce hidden population counts cost-effectively and on a relatively broad scale.

For this Time 2 study, the target sample size was 1,000 children (500 per county) who self-reported having exchanged sex for money or things worth money (like a place to stay, food, or gifts) in the past 12 months. Consistent with the Time 1 approach⁵, all study participants were provided with a referral coupon they received from either a partner NGO (the “seeds”) or another study participant (the “waves”). Respondents received 1,200 KSH (approximately 11 USD) for completing the survey, as well as an additional 500 KSH (approximate 4.5 USD) for each eligible person they recruited who completed the survey. This referral coupon contained a unique identification number that allowed tracking network relations between study participants.

All respondents (both seeds and waves) were required to have met the following eligibility criteria to participate: (1) be 13-17 years of age at the time of scheduling the interview, (2) lived and/or worked in the target county in the past 12 months, (3) engaged in sexual activities in return for money or things worth money like a place to stay, food, or gifts at least once in the past 12 months, and (4) in possession of a valid referral coupon. At the end of the interview, referral procedures and eligibility criteria were explained to the respondent, and the respondent was asked to refer up to three other children who met the eligibility criteria (1) – (3). Sample recruitment continued for two waves to reach the desired sample size. Respondents were also asked to nominate up to five individuals in their personal network who intersected with the study population and corresponding region.

Data collection activities included a CSEC victim survey administered in two counties of coastal Kenya (Kilifi and Kwale). Supporting activities included a phone screener to determine potential respondents’ eligibility to participate in the study (i.e., whether they fit the inclusion criteria). Data collection instruments for the CSEC victim survey were structured around CSEC statistical definitions used by the TIP Office, International Labour Organization (ILO), and Government of Kenya, and were refined in consultation with GFEMS and through a formative assessment period. A final analysis sample of 974 unique responses was achieved.

Limitations

The primary limitations of the study are as follows. First, since the initial sample forms the basis for both the design and inference components of the link-tracing strategy, a moderately sized and representative initial sample is critical for efficient inference of population level quantities. Obtaining such a sample can be challenging for especially rare or elusive

populations. Second, link-tracing requires post-data collection mapping based on covariate information which will always be subject to a degree of error. And third, while efforts were undertaken to minimize validity threats, the study relies on self-reporting which may be subject to response bias such as social desirability bias and incentive scheme gaming.

Recommendations

Enhance the provision of trauma-informed mental health services to CSEC victims/survivors. The high rates of probable PTSD among respondents suggest a strong need for high-quality mental health services to supplement other basic services for survivors. While there are governmental and non-governmental organizations offering psychosocial support services locally, only 13 percent of CSEC victims have ever benefited from such services suggesting low awareness

and/or supply. In addition, service providers should educate caregivers of reintegrated survivors on recognizing and coping with the aftereffects of trauma.

Help community members see CSEC victims/survivors as children needing care and protection rather than criminals. Further research should be done on how effective policies and programs can be designed in order to change

5 For the briefing note on the baseline study, see: <https://bit.ly/3Uxnyf0>

community behavior. For example, well designed education and awareness raising programs for the public on PTSD may help community members and policymakers become more sensitized towards victims, and therefore more proactive agents of change. Programs should integrate data from this study on PTSD rates among victims/survivors and the age of entry into the sex trade (14 for the average respondent in the study), alongside information on the negative psychosocial effects of CSEC.

Enhance peer-to-peer education for CSEC victims and other at-risk children. Implement community- and school-based prevention programming with current CSEC victims/survivors to help them understand the harmful effects of CSEC to enable them to protect themselves and others. Helping children understand the harmful effects of CSEC may also discourage them from recruiting, and financially benefiting from, other child victims. This approach showed positive outcomes in the Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices study NORC conducted in parallel to this prevalence estimate that evaluated Terre des Hommes and Kesho Kenya’s ‘Building a Future’ (BAF) program. One of the main activities under BAF was to establish and/or train child rights clubs at schools that create peer-to-peer education and support networks for children at risk of CSEC. For further details, see full report at: <<[insert link to KENYA KAP report](#)>>

Educate community members on existing CSEC reporting channels, besides police and local authorities. According to a 2021 report,⁶ only three percent of adults in the study area know of ‘Childline Kenya’. Childline offers an anonymous reporting pathway which may make community members less fearful of retaliation from complicit authorities. Given the growth of online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC), web and social media users should also have clear and anonymous platforms for reporting suspected OSEC cases online.

Provide alternative livelihoods for CSEC victims/survivors, particularly those who are unable to return to formal schooling. Sixty-three percent of respondents said they continue to engage in commercial sex acts because they have no other way to earn a living. Providing high-quality, demand-based education, training, and job placement support could help these children find alternative ways to earn money so they can leave the sex trade for good.



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6 NORC at the University of Chicago (2021). GFEMS Kenya CSEC KAP Survey. Available at <https://www.gfems.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/GFEMS-CSEC-KAP-Baseline-Report.pdf>