

R E P O R T

THE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN TRAVEL AND TOURISM

CANCUN MEXICO
A FIRST GLANCE



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report *The Sexual Exploitation of girls, boys and adolescent children in travel and tourism. Cancún, México. A first glance*, is the result of a rapid assessment realized mostly in Cancún, Quintana Roo, México, over the course of four months, between January to April 2018. The study has the objective to reveal the situation of sexual exploitation of children, from the perspective of different stakeholders belonging to the travel and tourism industry, governmental institutions at federal, state and municipal level, as well as NGO's, civil society organizations, academia and groups of youth and adolescents.

The rapid assessment is the first activity realized within the framework of the project: **Together for the protection of children in tourism**. Six questions formed the basis for the assessment: 1) What are the characteristics and scale of SECTT? 2) Who are the underage victims? 3) Who are the tourists, travelers or local persons committing the crime of sexual exploitation of children? 4) What are the vulnerabilities and risks of the children facilitating the chances of them becoming involved in sexual exploitation in travel and tourism? 5) What measures are being taken at the moment by the different stakeholders to prevent, address and eradicate these crimes? And 6) What measures/activities do you propose to address,

prevent and eradicate the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism to be taken by which of the relevant stakeholders in the area.?

Methodology. 32 persons were interviewed from different sectors: from the travel and tourism industry in Cancún and Playa del Carmen, some of which are part of consortiums or hotel chains and some representatives of associations; from tourism institutions at federal level; from organizations at state level related to child protection, tourism and human rights; from government at municipal level related to tourism, child protection and justice administration; from civil society NGO's and social groups, academics, and from local key informants in the community. One workshop was realized with a group of university students and a number of the students were trained to conduct focal groups with 120 adolescent students on their views on sexual exploitation in travel and tourism, and how to prevent this. It should be noted that because of the limited time to realize this study, there was no possibility to interview victims or persons directly involved in the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism.

During the assessment period field observations were carried out in public spaces (streets, parks, beaches and squares) and in private

spaces (hotels, restaurants, bars, ‘antros’¹, night clubs and table dance joints). These observations were done at different times during the day and night in the municipalities of Benito Juárez, Isla Mujeres, Solidaridad y Tulum.

About the territory. Quintana Roo is a Mexican state where the economy, society, politics, education, communication and people are all involved with the travel and tourism industry. The airport in Cancún receives the most international visitors of all airports in Mexico, while the port in Cozumel is where most cruises and visitors arrive. 70% of international visitors are from the US and Canada. Tourism facilities range from high-end and very exclusive to the more affordable Spring Break – packages and hostels – and everything in between. Quintana Roo is not only beaches, sea and sand, it also has forests, archeological sites, water caves and natural parks. Quintana Roo is not only Cancún, and Cancún does not cover the entire tourist area. Cancún is part of the municipality Benito Juárez and the tourist zone consists of a long stretch from the north coast of the state throughout the coastal zone and includes Holbox in the municipality of Lázaro Cárdenas, Isla Mujeres (both mainland and the island), Cancún, the Mayan Riviera including Puerto Morelos, Playa del Carmen to Tulum and the island of Cozumel. More to the south there is Mahahual, with its beaches and port where cruises arrive. Due to the vastness of the territory and the development of the travel and tourism industry, the project is suggested to be carried out in the municipality of Benito Juárez (of which Cancún is part) and in some tourism areas in Playa del Carmen in the municipality of Solidaridad. In the next meeting with the stakeholders in the region, the activities and timeframe for their implementation will be specified.

Scale. There is a general consensus amongst those interviewed that sexual exploitation of

children occurs in travel and tourism in the region. The opinions range from “it exists but its magnitude is unknown”, “it exists but it happens more and more out of sight”, “it is seen less and less in Cancún”, to the necessity and urgency of having reliable data: “it exists but there is no data, there are no numbers”, “there is no mapping on the subject”, “it exists but it is complex, there are no statistics”, “the problem exists but a diagnosis is lacking”, “it does not only exist in the Zona Hotelera”², and at least one person affirmed that the situation needs urgent attention: “it exists and is a big problem”, and even more worrying: “everyone knows that the problem exists, but nobody takes the lead to raise the problem and the solutions, nobody is doing that.”

At present, figures and quantitative data of several years old is still being used. Even though in some municipalities of the region serious cases of sexual exploitation against children and adolescents have been reported, investigated and prosecuted in court/adjudicated, it is clear that there is no system of or methodology for keeping consistent records, and classifying and counting offences. Given this situation, all those interviewed raised the need to have clear and precise information about these crimes.

Concerning the different types of crimes and mechanisms detected in the area linked to the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism, the sale and trafficking of children are strongly overlapping criminal acts. There are two most significant forms of sexual exploitation: the use of children in prostitution and pornography. These are organized as follows: a) secondary and high school students who are involved in prostitution and/or pornography; b) prostitution and pornography with boys and male adolescents; c) the use of catalogues, offering children; d) the prostitution through escort; and, d) a new phenomenon are the “sugar

¹ Antros in Mexico are a specific type of bars / night clubs, playing very loud music and generating an ecstatic vibe.

² The Zona Hotelera is a zone of Cancún where a majority of large and luxurious hotels of Cancún are concentrated.

daddy's". Additionally it is important to highlight the children who are abducted or brought from communities of the same state or from other states in Mexico, who are auctioned for their virginity.

The sites. At least the following sites for sexual exploitation were identified: spas, table dance places, hotels, 'casas de cita'³, luxury apartments located in residential units and in houses where victims are locked / guarded by organized crime⁴. It was recognized that staff from travel agencies located at the airport, taxi drivers, bellboys, bracelet sellers, waiters and barmen, surveillance personnel in closed spaces as well as some police, migration personnel and public officials are part of the **supply chain** of this crime.

The victims. Related to the ages of children that are sexually exploited, it was registered that boys are victimized as of 8 years old and girls from 10 years onwards. Both international and national migrants minors of age are identified. Female victims that are migrants specifically originate from Cuba, Colombia, Brasil, Venezuela, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Belize; there were also female European victims identified, mostly from Eastern Europe and Italy. They arrive both with and without regular documentation and are victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation purposes. They are deployed as 'dancers' or escorts and their age ranges between 15 and 17 years old. Victims that are domestic, internal migrants, are often girls with little economic resources and are victims of family violence. They often migrated from the States of Guadalajara, Guerrero, Tabasco, Chiapas, Yucatán, Tamaulipas, Oaxaca and Puebla. Amongst the victims of the local population (from Quintana Roo/Cancún) are indigenous children and children of local

LGBTQI-population. Three sub groups have been identified: 1) girls (rural and urban, between 10 and 17 years old). They can be victims of sexual abuse or intrafamily sexual violence. They work as "waitresses", "dancers" or directly in prostitution. 2) boys, from 8 years onwards. They can be approached by adult men when working as a street vendor. But there is also a group that is exploited sexually by adult women (locals and internationals) in so-called spa's, 3) population considered homosexual, between 14 and 17 years old, that are encountered in public spaces considered to be pick-up places for homosexuals, such as certain parks and streets.

The abusers. There is not a unique profile, registered were tourists of senior age with a sexual preference towards children and LGBTQI, international business travelers, domestic tourists and national business travelers and sales persons coming to the region, local residents of all socio-economic levels, men and women.

Vulnerabilities and risks. Apart from being a dream destination for travelers and tourists, Quintana Roo has its social challenges, provoking situations of sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism. The interviewees indicated at least 8 situations of vulnerabilities and risks for children in the region:

- 1) the lack of public services; there is a lack of safe spaces and infrastructure for sports, culture, health and recreation; the privatization of beaches diminish the spaces to play and coexist. The lack of child day care and formative spaces for the children of workers in the tourism industry makes that children stay alone at home or are being taken care of by non-family adults.
- 2) the long days of work and job insecurity for parents, resulting in children "abandoned" at home, adults that are little involved in the school environment and little communication between parents and children.

³ Literally: a house for dates. It is a space, for example a restaurant or bar, that is a cover up for prostitution activities / a brothel.

⁴ So-called 'casas de seguridad', literally 'safe houses'.

- 3) the irresponsible use of internet communication tools, applications and social media, generating an unsafe space to socialize, including doing so sexually (leading to extortion and blackmailing). The ICT's as well facilitate the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism for instance the modality of Sugar Babies and Sugar Daddies: girls of a stable socio-economic background that seek or accept the invitation of rich and old(er) men.
 - 4) transformation of the social fabric; the set of little presence of parents in the daily lives, the lack of education on citizenship in schools and the high level of violence in the schools; the normalization of prostitution and public expressions of sexuality in Cancún by Spring Breakers; the coming and going of persons in the region, all have an impact on the social fabric that diversify and normalize practices that present different levels of risks and dangers for children.
 - 5) gender violence; there is a strong and growing problem of gender violence: disappearances, femicides, violations, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation perpetrated against girls and women from Mexico and foreign countries. According to the interviewees, a high percentage of women report having suffered from intrafamily sexual abuse and in the past years the violent murders and femicides have increased.
 - 6) the growing presence of criminal networks and mafias; those interviewed recognize that narcotrafficking networks are growing very rapidly: "there is a latent danger for children and adolescents to become trapped in the narcotrafficking networks." Many of these groups are also involved in trafficking of persons, which in turn can facilitate the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism. According to data of 2016, 8 of 10 potential victims were female and 3 of 10 were minors of age. Therefore, on a daily basis, children experience varying degrees of violence and insecurity.
 - 7) the unprotected work of children and adolescents; children are exposed in streets, markets and at the exits of bars, restaurants and antros as of a very young age, selling handicrafts, sweets, flowers and cigarettes.
 - 8) a lack of (correct) implementation of the laws. **Impunity.** The actors involved in the study report the lack of implementation of laws, including in the ambit of gender violence and violence against women, human trafficking and the sexual exploitation of children. They indicate that there is a lack of security and a lack of capacity (knowledge) within the police, as well as a lack of coordination between the system of administration and legal enforcement. There is a lack of assistance to victims, there is no shelter available. **Lack of denunciation.** "People do not denounce crimes due to fear" and a mechanism for children to independently denounce, lacks.
- Current interventions and actions.** At national level, a National System for Integral Protection of Children (SIPINNA) has been established in 2015. Consequently, a SIPINNA has been created for Quintana Roo and in the municipality of Benito Juarez. The SIPINNA in Benito Juarez has the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism as one of its four focus areas of work. Some of the stakeholders interviewed indicated the realization of specific activities in relation to sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism, e.g. the promotion of the National Code of Conduct for the industry where government institutions, private initiative and civil society organization are united in a collaboration; some companies in the sector have promoted actions for the implementation of The Code⁵, NGO

⁵ Short for The Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism, an international mechanism. In Mexico, there is also a National Code of Conduct in place, next to The Code.

implement preventive actions with children and adolescents, a public university has incorporated contents of The Code into its curricula. In 2018, the institution of the municipal government responsible for tourism development developed a specific Code for tourists visiting the region on Spring Break, as these visitors annually are a source of problems.

Conclusions. According to the interviewees, it is necessary to lay down their suggestions in a plan of action with clear commitments of the different participating actors, with measurable and time-bound goals, indicating shared responsibilities among the committed actors from the sectors, considering the actions within a broad territory. This is deemed important because of the scale of the problem and its characteristics; the growth of the travel and tourism industry in the region, not only by creating new activities, but also because of the exponential growth in the construction of rooms and, lastly this is deemed important because of the interest expressed by the people interviewed of the different social sectors in the state.

Recommendations for the preparation of a general plan of action and what needs to be included. All interviewees indicated the necessity of realizing a thorough study, including measurable indicators to correctly identify the sale and scope of the sexual exploitation of children, to generate reliable data on the situation. The present rapid assessment is a solid basis, to be strengthened by documenting the progress and results of activities and their effect during the implementation of the entire project. The following proposals were put forward by interviewees:

- 1) the training and education of staff working in the travel and tourism industry based on The Code;
- 2) the development of an agenda for action for each company to have an action protocol on combating sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism, fitting the size and organization of the company;
- 3) awareness raising and training of those responsible in local government, law enforcement and administration of justice on the human rights of children and the various laws for the prevention of sexual exploitation of children, including in travel and tourism;
- 4) to elaborate mechanisms of communication and multi-stakeholder cooperation between relevant stakeholders in the tourism sector, the institutions of the federal, state and municipal governments responsible for the rights of children and tourism, law enforcement agencies and justice administration, and community organizations, with the aim to combat and prevent these crimes;
- 5) Promote the provision/creation of spaces, shelters, specialized in providing services attending to the problems of children victims and at risk, in different ages
- 6) promote actions of awareness raising and education and the (self-)organization of children, for them to assume an active role in the creation of a protective environment for themselves and their peers.

A roundtable with all actors involved in the rapid assessment is planned for May-June, to discuss the results and specify next steps, activities and the timeframe for their implementation.



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