

# ECPAT INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

ISSUE: 10  
JUNE, 2015



## RESEARCHING THE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN:

CHALLENGES AND METHODOLOGIES OF DATA COLLECTION



ECPAT is a global network of civil society organisations dedicated to ending the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children.

Series Editor: Rebecca H. Rittenhouse

ECPAT would like to thank the following people for their review of the articles included in this Journal issue 10:

- Dr. Simon Baker
- Rebecca Meiksin
- Dr. Afua Twum-Danso Imoh

Layout & Design: Manida Naebklang

June, 2015

Copyright © 2015, ECPAT International

This publication was produced with the financial assistance of Irish Aid, Oak Foundation, and Sida. The views expressed herein are solely those of the authors. The support received from the above-mentioned donors does not constitute endorsement of the opinions expressed.



**ECPAT International**

328/1 Phayathai Road Ratchathewi

Bangkok 10400 THAILAND

Tel: +662 215 3388, +662 611 0972 Fax: +662 215 8272

Email: [info@ecpat.net](mailto:info@ecpat.net) Website: [www.ecpat.net](http://www.ecpat.net)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>PREFACE</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>TACKLING THE DATA DEARTH: THE GLOBAL SCALE OF COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN</b>	<b>4</b>
Introduction	4
Reasons for the current lack of reliable CSEC-related data	5
Commonly used global estimates of the scale and scope of CSEC	6
Research approaches and the use of mixed-method data collection	7
Introducing better evidence-based methods into CSEC research	8
Conclusion	10
Bibliography	11
<b>CONCEPTS AND PRINCIPLES RELATED TO QUALITY RESEARCH ON THE COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN</b>	<b>13</b>
Introduction	13
Defining ‘quality research’ on CSEC	14
Basic principles and concepts	15
Conclusion	19
Bibliography	20
<b>ETHICAL ISSUES OF RESEARCHING SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN WITH VICTIMS, SURVIVORS AND THOSE AT RISK</b>	<b>22</b>
Introduction	22
Is the involvement of children the best option?	24
Protection of child participants from harm	25
Context of the victim/survivor experience	26
Selection of child participants and researchers	27
Informed consent	27
Addressing power imbalances	29
Psychosocial support	30
Right to privacy and confidentiality within a child protection framework	31
Sharing the research outcomes	32
Conclusions	32
Bibliography	33
<b>AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES</b>	<b>36</b>

# PREFACE

The lead-up to the 20th anniversary of the First World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in 2016 is a perfect opportunity for the international community to stop and take stock of the progress made and the challenges still pending in ending the sexual exploitation of children. In order to do this, it is necessary – as a first step – to analyse what is known at the national, regional and international levels about the sexual exploitation of children and the reliability and utility of this information.

While focus on the sexual exploitation of children has increased over the last several decades, there remains limited reliable, evidence-based research into the depth, breadth and scope of the phenomenon. Organisations working to combat the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) are constantly requested to provide data and information on victims affected by the principle manifestations of CSEC (trafficking of children for sexual purposes, child prostitution, child pornography/child sexual abuse materials and the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism). However, it has been generally recognised that widely circulated figures on the global scale and magnitude of these violations against children remain ambiguous or lacking, in part due to conceptual and methodological challenges. When conducting research on the sexual exploitation of children many issues should be considered, including not only the basic concepts and principles relating to quality research but the importance of including the voices of children and the ethical concerns inherent in this approach.

The reliance on limited, inaccurate and out-of-date data can have an adverse effect on advocacy, policy planning and targeted interventions related to the prevention and protection of children against sexual exploitation. In a 2013 report to the Human Rights Council, the Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, Najat Maalla M'jid, emphasised that “the collection and analysis of reliable data on the sale and sexual exploitation of children remains a major challenge. The lack of reliable data reduces the visibility of the issue and the development of adequate responses and prevention.”<sup>1</sup>

ECPAT Journal Series No. 10 seeks to highlight this problem by analysing the methodologies and challenges of reliable data collection when researching the sexual exploitation of children and suggests possible ways to address these issues.

The first article, *Tackling the Data Dearth: the global scale of commercial sexual exploitation of children*, analyses the lack of reliable studies and data on CSEC and the reasons for this. The major sources of existing information on the global scale and scope of CSEC are identified and examined, and methods of producing more reliable data are discussed. The article concludes that more scientific and evidence-based research is critical in order to more effectively combat the problem.

---

1 UN Special Procedures, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, Najat Maalla M'jid”, UN Doc. A/HRC/25/48, (2013), para. 95.

The second article, *Concepts and Principles Related to Quality Research on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children*, examines the basic principles and concepts related to “quality research” on CSEC to promote more reliable, evidence-based studies. It highlights the importance of conceptual analysis and common definitions, a rights-based approach, ethical concerns and reliable and effective data gathering and analysis. The article argues that greater prioritisation needs to be given to methodological and ethical rigour in research to maximise the pertinence and impact of the data collected and thus strengthen the implementation of effectual protection policies and interventions.

The aim of the third article, *Ethical Issues of Researching Sexual Exploitation of Children with Victims, Survivors and Those at Risk*, is to examine the ethical issues raised when conducting research on the sexual exploitation of children with victims, survivors and those at risk. The article highlights concepts from general ethical guidelines for conducting research with children such as do no harm, informed consent, right to confidentiality and power imbalances, but focuses on research with child victims, survivors and those at risk of sexual exploitation within that context. It concludes that child victims, survivors and those at risk of sexual exploitation can gain extraordinary benefits from sharing their experiences and views on matters that affect them; however, the short- and long-term effects of sexual exploitation on each child are different. For this reason, it is essential that programme managers and researchers take into consideration all the potential pros and cons of adopting a participatory approach in a study on sexual exploitation of children.

Although the true scope remains unknown, it is indisputable that the sexual exploitation of children remains a serious and widespread global problem. As organisations such as ECPAT International move forward in their battle against this phenomenon, it is vital that more emphasis and resources are put into addressing the persisting lack of empirical evidence and reliable research to inform effective advocacy and programming to end the sexual exploitation of children.

Rebecca H. Rittenhouse  
*Series Editor*  
*ECPAT International*

# TACKLING THE DATA DEARTH:

*The global scale of commercial sexual exploitation of children*

by Jordana Dawson Hayes and Mark Capaldi



## INTRODUCTION

There is little doubt that the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is a large and widespread problem. However, while great strides have been made to tackle the issue, the need to introduce and utilise methodologically sound ways to define and measure this form of child abuse is becoming increasingly apparent. It has been recognised for over a decade that widely-circulating figures on the global scale of CSEC are frequently little more than “guesstimates” that, through frequent repetition, have attained the status of fact (Huijsmans and Baker, 2012; ECPAT International, 2008).

Governments, donors and the public are now increasingly demanding evidence-based policies and thorough monitoring and evaluation techniques to demonstrate efficacy in the fight against CSEC. It is clear that a “shift [is] happening, a shift away from glossy brochures and smiling children and happy anecdotes, a shift toward data” (Kestenbaum, 2013). Not only do child rights agencies need to be able to efficiently allocate limited resources, maintain funding and evaluate their own work for the benefit of their target populations, investors and donors need to be able to demonstrate the impact of their charitable “investments” (for marketing purposes, for example). Inaccurate and inflated numbers may discourage efforts to address the problem of exploitation (Feingold, 2010) or cause duty-bearers to promote less effective policies and projects. In the worst situations, research with major methodological flaws can harm those it intends to help, by stigmatising or putting victims at risk, or by leading decision-makers to inaccurate conclusions (SIREN, 2011).

This article seeks to examine some of the issues relating to data collection in the area of the commercial sexual exploitation of children. The major sources of existing information on the global scale and scope of CSEC are identified and examined, and methods to produce more reliable data are discussed. The article concludes that more scientific and evidence-based research on CSEC is critical in order to more effectively combat this phenomenon.

## REASONS FOR THE CURRENT LACK OF RELIABLE CSEC-RELATED DATA

A quick Internet search will reveal to the interested researcher the discrepancies that exist among CSEC statistics, as well as the lack of adequate citations and references to reliable sources. Several reasons are often given for the lack of reliable data on CSEC, the most prominent of which is that child victims of sexual exploitation constitute a “hidden population” that is inherently challenging to research due to the difficulty in finding a representative sample. While this is true, this problem is not unique to CSEC. Research in a multitude of other fields such as adult prostitution (Paz-Bailey, et al., 2011) and illegal drug abuse (Dombrowski, et al., 2012; Salganik, et al., 2011), demonstrates that there

are continuously improving methodological and scientific approaches to work around this barrier.

In addition to the hidden nature of CSEC, other barriers should be addressed before data can be analysed to achieve the most reliable results. Global data on sexual exploitation is limited, but the problem is exacerbated for CSEC because figures for women and children are often combined (ECPAT International, 2008; Kelly, 2002). Data collected by researchers needs to be effectively disaggregated to achieve the most out of the data. Different interpretations of internationally recognised legal definitions of related aspects of CSEC have compounded the difficulties in disaggregating data or resulted in little information on particularly vulnerable groups such as the sexual exploitation of transgender children and adolescent boys (MenCare, 2012; ECPAT International, 2012).

Several reasons are often given for the lack of reliable data on CSEC, the most prominent of which is that child victims of sexual exploitation constitute a “hidden population” that is inherently challenging to research due to the difficulty in finding a representative sample



The commercial sexual exploitation of children is comprised of several separate but related manifestations of child sexual abuse – child prostitution, child pornography/child sexual abuse materials, sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism and trafficking of children for sexual purposes – and studies often focus on one specific manifestation rather than on CSEC in its entirety. Methods, definitions, indicators and research quality vary significantly among these studies which then make them difficult to compare or compile (Weitzer, 2014).

Other research problems include the fact that research plans and methodologies are often not made public, which limits peer-reviewability (Huijsmans and Baker, 2012; ECPAT International, 2008). There is frequent sampling bias, minimal use of controls and, most

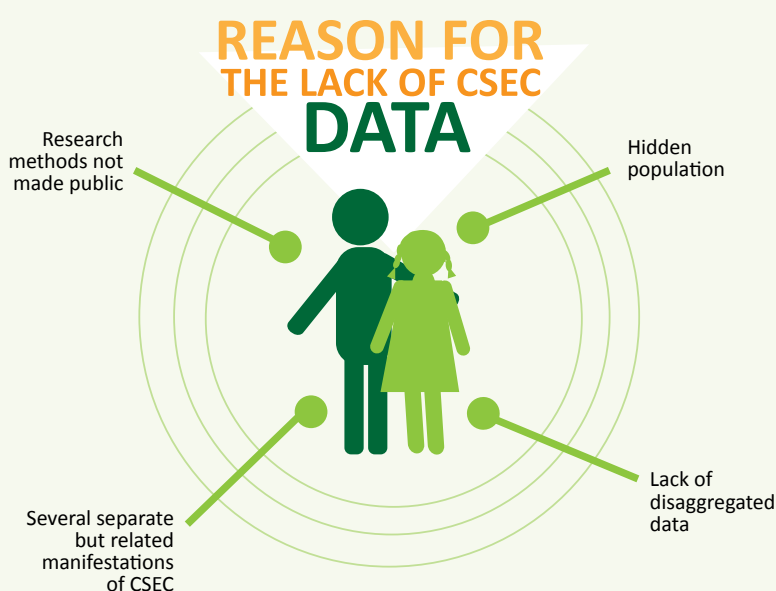
significantly, little admission of these flaws in the published research. At the secondary research level, there are often examples of poor citing and source checking among organisations and minimal use of peer-reviewed and verifiable references (Weitzer, 2014). The following section of this paper examines current global CSEC estimates and exemplifies some of these problems.

### COMMONLY USED GLOBAL ESTIMATES OF THE SCALE AND SCOPE OF CSEC

The global scale of CSEC estimates that do exist appear to stem from statistics provided by the International Labour Organization (ILO). The two main figures frequently used are that

1.8 million children are exploited worldwide through prostitution and pornography, and that 1.2 million children globally are involved in trafficking. The ILO (n.d.) states that these figures come from its 2000 child labour data which was gathered from “various secondary sources.” A UNICEF report that referred to the 1.2 million ILO figure is also frequently referenced as a data source (UNICEF, 2006) – although it is often erroneously cited as stating that 2 million children are victims of commercial sexual exploitation, including by the ILO (International Labour Organization - International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour, 2008).<sup>1</sup> In 2005, ILO estimated that 1.39 million people are victims of commercial sexual exploitation at any given time with 40-50% of these individuals being minors, putting the number of minors around 0.79 million (International Labour Organization, 2005). More detailed information on how these figures were arrived at (as well as methodological limitations) were provided in the 2005 report, unlike previous ILO reports, suggesting that the 1.39 million figure is the closest to a reliable global CSEC-related figure existing today.

These challenges are not unique to the international context and similar dubious figures can be seen at the national level where studies also lack empirical data to support the numbers given (Weitzer, 2014). However, organisations working to support and advocate for



<sup>1</sup>. UNICEF quotes the “2 million figure” in its own press release of the report (<http://www.unicef.org/sowc06/press/release.php>).



victimised youth often feel compelled to use statistics – even if the numbers are less than reliable – because larger numbers can be important awareness-raising and advocacy tools (ECPAT International, 2014). At the same time, data collection and analysis can seem insignificant when compared to the primary goal of protecting children from such a horrific crime, and organisations may be of the opinion that devoting efforts to more reliable data collection and analysis is a poor use of resources or a distraction (SIREN, 2011).

## RESEARCH APPROACHES AND THE USE OF MIXED-METHOD DATA COLLECTION

The current dearth of relevant data and the problems with existing reliable data allow conclusions to be drawn as to what research into the scale and scope of CSEC should ideally include. Preferably, research approaches need to be able to measure prevalence as well as to determine ways to identify and mitigate against the vulnerabilities and hazards that children at risk or involved in commercial sexual exploitation face (SIREN, 2011). Greater attention is needed to ensure methodological and ethical rigor in CSEC research. As no research methodology is completely superior or more definitively of use, the final selection of the most appropriate methodology should be related to the purpose

of the research and the level of description and interpretation required (Sandelowski, 2000). Qualitative research methodology has long been the most common approach of analysis when detailed descriptions of a phenomenon are required as it allows the respondents to describe their experiences in their own words (Wicks and Whiteford, 2006). Methods such as life history narratives or case studies are particularly useful when researching with adolescents as older children have the capacity to think conceptually and can be interested in contributing to meaningful conversations where they can present their experiences and views (Haglund, 2004). Done well, such qualitative research approaches provide unique standards of reliability and validity on the meaning and experiences as lived by these children which transcend concerns of representation. Critics of qualitative research point to the generally small and unscientific sampling techniques

**The current dearth of relevant data and the problems with existing reliable data allow conclusions to be drawn as to what research into the scale and scope of CSEC should ideally include**

often used with qualitative research. Frequent examples in CSEC-related research include unrepresentative samples; problems with access to respondents; selection biases by “gate-keepers” to respondents such as NGOs, social workers and police; and – where participants are referred by other participants – biased selection of participants based on friendships or other similar factors (Brunovskis and Surtees, 2010). This also leads to the inability to scale up estimates to the national or global level as the research may not be truly representative of the wider target population (Brunovskis and Surtees, 2010; Morgan, 2008).

Quantitative research typically utilises surveys or other pre-structured methods to obtain a more representative dataset on pre-selected variables. Statistics are used to interpret the findings. The researcher generally pre-selects the variables to be studied within pre-set confines and concepts (Sandelowski, 2000). Quantitative research, while meeting high standards of representation and scientifically-sound analysis, can limit what can be learned about the meanings interviewees give to certain events and therefore leave little room for the unexpected (Becker, 1996). With these challenges in mind, quantitative research (often utilising surveys or questionnaires) must first be technically strong. Research needs to be methodologically sound and must be replicable across countries and situations. Bias should be eliminated to the extent possible and any remaining bias and research

limitations must be described and discussed in the resulting publication. In determining sample size, quantitative approaches must be designed in such a way that the research: (i) covers a representative part of a clearly defined target population (i.e., child victims of commercial sexual exploitation); and (ii) identifies members of the target population and distinguishes them from non-members (Tyldum, 2009).

Mixed methods utilising both qualitative and quantitative research are particularly helpful in exploring concepts

that are complex and multi-faceted (Capaldi, 2014; Wood and Welch, 2010) and they enable the triangulation of theoretical constructs and data from generally larger sample sizes. Integrating and drawing conclusions from both quantitative and qualitative research methods responds to criticisms of reduced vigour and validity, enabling better estimations of the scale and scope of hidden crimes such as the sexual exploitation of children (Wood and Welch, 2010; Habashi and Worley, 2009).

INTRODUCING  
BETTER EVIDENCE-  
BASED METHODS  
INTO CSEC RESEARCH

When estimating the magnitude of any illicit activity such as CSEC, the need for quality data collection and verifiable sources to arrive at the figures is paramount. The continuing disparity among the numbers is leading to many organisations and academics casting doubt on the efficacy of producing global level estimates (Weitzer, 2014; Zhang, 2012).

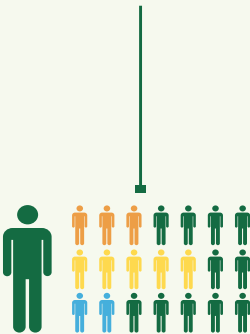


Work through a  
local community



Respondent-  
driven sampling

Stratified random sampling



There are several promising approaches to estimating the size of a hidden population. The Strategic Information Response Network (SIREN), based in Southeast Asia, recently organised a competition for good practice data gathering in the field of human trafficking. The competition format appeared to identify several good ideas that, through further investigation and collaboration, could be applied to research on the sexual exploitation of children. For example, participants at the University of Miami in the United States described a communication-based method that would enable researchers to work through a local community, rather than law enforcement systems, thereby avoiding the common problem of having to extrapolate up a multiplication factor for reported cases of CSEC. A second advantage is that the method does not rely on relationships between participants (a common trend in hidden population research designs), which may be anyway smaller in child populations. The method assumes that the commercial sex trade requires knowledge of supply and demand patterns and that local informants provide location information to potential customers and in return receive financial remuneration. Thus, this methodology seeks to locate sex trade venues and information through local informants (SIREN, 2008). Triangulation of a broad range of stakeholders is also currently being piloted by UNICEF, in partnership with national governments and the Centre for Disease Control, but in this approach quantitative surveys in

multi-country studies are used to examine violence against children (UNICEF, 2011).

A second approach – stratified random sampling – also avoids the tendency to work through law enforcement agencies and acquaintance circles as the number of assisted victims will not be similar to the estimated number of victims (Weitzer, 2014). Stratified sampling involves dividing members of a population into homogenous groups before sampling. When used to survey a town for example, it can ensure that diversity within the population is reflected and can control for population density variance within the area (SIREN, 2008).

Respondent-driven sampling (RDS) is a technique that demonstrates improvement in the more traditional link-tracing (snowball) design where respondents recruit future respondents from their circle of acquaintances. RDS improves upon snowball sampling by allowing researchers to make asymptotically unbiased estimates from snowball samples under certain conditions (Fisher and Giovanna Merli, 2014). However, one of the primary conditions of RDS is that researchers should not attempt to estimate directly from the sample to the population (Salganik, 2006); hence, RDS's most obvious use is to estimate the prevalence of a specific trait among the sample. However, there is at least one novel example of RDS being used to determine sample size (Handcock and Mar, 2012). These researchers have presented an approach to estimating the size of a target population based

**Respondent-driven sampling (RDS) is a technique that demonstrates improvement in the more traditional link-tracing (snowball) design where respondents recruit future respondents from their circle of acquaintances.**

on data collected through RDS that uses a “successive sampling approximation to RDS to leverage information” in harder to reach samples by concentrating on the data collected from the larger samples accessed first. This is an important development in hidden-population research and should not be overlooked by CSEC researchers.

Nevertheless, making macro-level claims on the scale of CSEC or human trafficking is still fraught with challenges. National level surveys offer possibilities for more standardised data collection and counting but a truly representative national survey of victims is still extremely challenging due to the hidden population whose boundaries remain largely unknown. Therefore, surveys with a larger population that is amenable to probability-based sampling through association may produce promising results (Weitzer, 2014). For example, the International Organization

for Migration (IOM) conducted multi-country national research on human trafficking in five high-risk European countries, sampling 5513 randomly selected households. Those surveyed were not asked about their own experiences of being trafficked but whether a close family member had been trafficked, with 2% of the sample reporting family members who fit the definition of a victim, according to the survey (Omae Mahmoud and Trebesch, 2010). Such methods are rarely used and there remains potential bias due to family sensitivities and stigmatisation related to illicit activities such as CSEC (Weitzer, 2014).

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that there remains a pervasive lack of quality and reliable data around the scale and scope of the commercial sexual exploitation of children globally and that figures frequently used are little more than “guesstimates.” This is a particular concern because quality data allows organisations to make the

best decisions on where to dedicate limited resources and to objectively monitor and evaluate implemented projects in terms of efficacy. It also allows donors to demonstrate the impact of their investments. Even with limited funds and victims in urgent need, it is necessary to spend resources on rigorous research to ensure resources are correctly targeted and to increase effectiveness and efficiency of policies and programmes.

All methods of data gathering will involve biases and limitations and any large scale project to determine the scale and scope of CSEC should involve a thorough analysis by researchers and statisticians as to the method(s) to be utilised; collaboration between child rights agencies and academics or research institutions are particularly beneficial. These challenges are not unique to CSEC or hidden population research. Realising and reporting on biases and limitations is equally as important as utilising a reliable and replicable survey design. Ability to disaggregate data is especially important for research into specialised topics, such as CSEC, which are often viewed as subsets of a wider problem.

Mixed methodological research that integrates both qualitative and quantitative tools provides the best opportunities to produce empirical and scientific data that is most representational of the larger target population. Truly randomised sampling and large sample sizes can reduce biases and inaccuracies. Nevertheless, dangers exist when extrapolating figures up to national, regional and global levels and the significant resources required to undertake macro-level research perhaps explains why many global estimates continue to be problematic and inaccurate.

The commercial sexual exploitation of children is a difficult area in which to gather reliable data. However, it is crucial that organisations working to combat child sexual exploitation overcome the barriers associated with this research and commit to gather evidence-based data. The data is essential to make the best use of limited funds, to set baselines and targets, to produce the most efficient and targeted programmes and to effectively monitor and evaluate efforts to eradicate the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

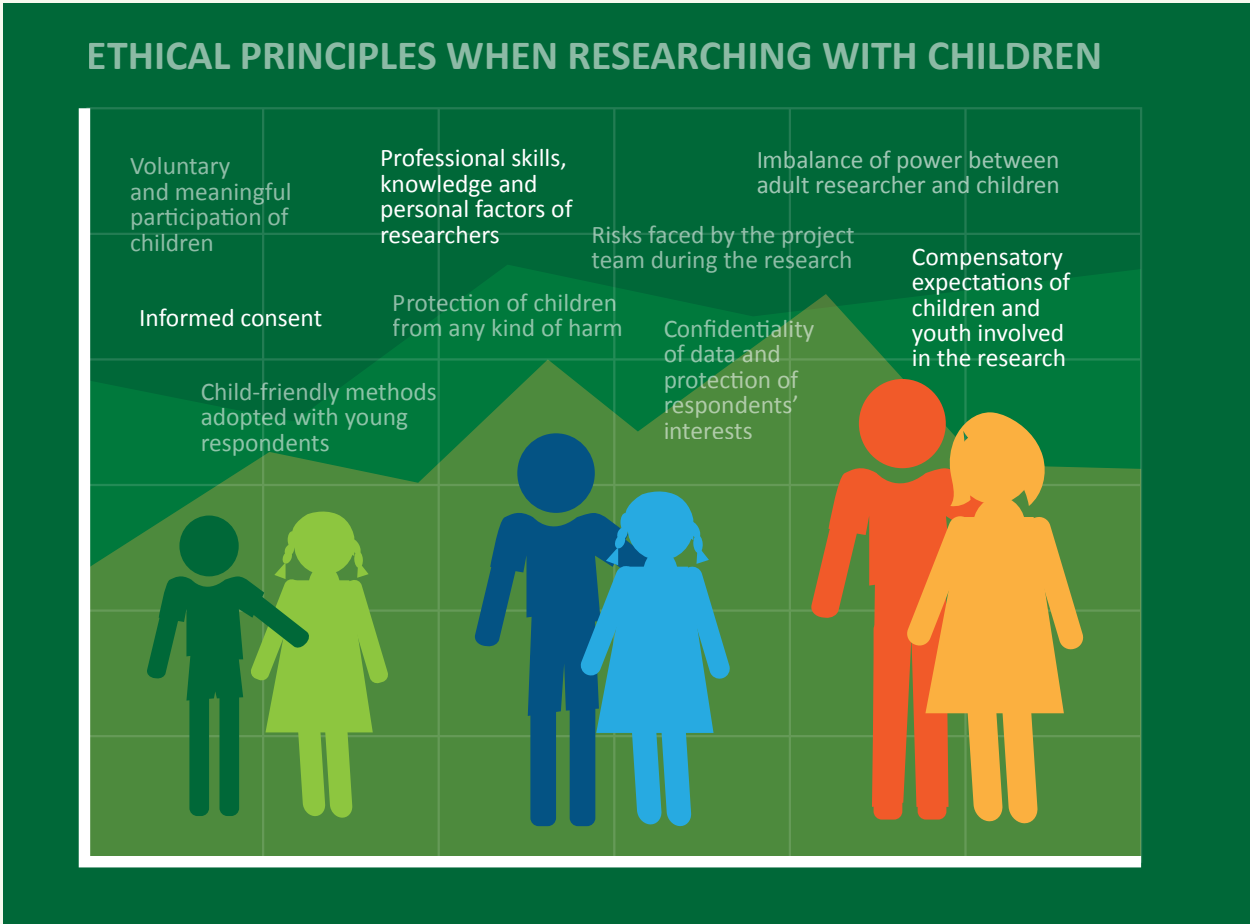
- Asquith, S. and E. Turner (2008). *Recovery and reintegration of children from the effects of sexual exploitation and related trafficking*. Geneva: Oak Foundation.
- Becker, H. (1996). "The epistemology of qualitative research". In R. Jessor, A. Colby and R. Shweder, eds. *Ethnography and human development: context and meaning in social inquiry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Brunovskis, A. and R. Surtees (2010). "Untold Stories: biases and selection effects in research with victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation". *International Migration*. Vol. 48, no. 4 (2010): 1-37.
- Capaldi, M. (2014). *The child's journey in search of rights: determining and addressing points of vulnerability in independent child migration in Thailand*. Bangkok: Terre des Hommes Netherlands.
- Dombrowski, K., B. Khan, T. Wendel, K. McLean, E. Misshula, and R. Curtis (2012). "Estimating the size of the methamphetamine-using population in New York City using network sampling techniques". *Advances in Applied Sociology*. Vol. 2, no. 4 (2012): 245-252.
- ECPAT International (2008). *Exploitation of children in prostitution: Thematic Paper for the World Congress III*. Bangkok: ECPAT International.
- ECPAT International (2012). "Hidden violence: preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of adolescent boys". *Compendium of articles: rights in practice in combating sexual exploitation of children*, Journal Series No. 3. Bangkok: ECPAT International.
- ECPAT International (2014). *Ending child prostitution, child pornography and trafficking for sexual purposes: unfinished business*, External Scan. Bangkok: ECPAT International.
- Feingold, D. (2010). "Trafficking in numbers: the social construction of human trafficking data". In P. A. eds. *Sex, drugs and body counts: the politics of numbers in global crime and conflict*. p.14. Cornell University Press.
- Fisher, J. and M. Giovanna Merli (2014). "Stickiness of respondent-driven sampling recruitment chains". *Network Science*. Vol. 2, no. 2 (2014): 298-301.
- Habashi, J. and J. Worley (2009). "Child geopolitical agency: a mixed methods case study". *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*. Vol. 3, no. 1 (2009): 42-64.
- Haglund, K. (2004). "Conducting life history research with adolescents". *Qualitative Health Research*. Vol. 14, no. 9.
- Handcock, M.G., K. Gile and C. Mar (2012). "Estimating hidden population size using respondent-driven sampling data". *Stat.ME*. arXiv: 1209.6241v1.
- Huijsmans, R. and S. Baker (2012). "Child trafficking: 'worst form' of child labour or worst approach to young migrants?". *Development and Change*. Vol. 43, no. 4 (2012): 919-946.
- ILO (n.d.). "Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents: The I.L.O.'s Response". Accessed on 30 November 2014 at: <http://www.ilo.org/ipec/areas/CSEC/lang--en/index.htm>
- International Labour Organization (2005). "A global alliance against forced labour: global report under the follow-up to the ILO declaration on fundamental principles and rights at work". Report I(B), ILO Conference 93rd session 2005. pp.12,15. Geneva: ILO.
- International Labour Organization - International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (2008). *Commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents: the ILO's response*. Geneva: ILO-IPEC.
- Kelly, L. (2002). "Journeys of jeopardy: a review of research on trafficking in women and children in Europe". *IOM Migration Research Series No. 11*.



- Kestenbaum, D. (2013). "I was just trying to help". Podcast. Chicago, Illinois, USA.
- MenCare (2012). Hidden violence: preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of adolescent boys. A Briefing Paper by MenCare.
- Morgan, D. (2008). The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods. pp. 816-817. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Omae Mahmoud, T. and C. Trebesch (2010). The Economics of Human Trafficking and Labour Migration: Micro-Evidence from Eastern Europe. Accessed at: [http://www.iza.org/conference\\_files/Lelli2010/trebesch\\_c4269.pdf](http://www.iza.org/conference_files/Lelli2010/trebesch_c4269.pdf)
- Paz-Bailey, G., J.O. Jacobson, M.E. Guardado, F.M. Hernandez, A.I. Nieto, M. Estrada and J. Creswell (2011). "How many men who have sex with men and female sex workers live in El Salvador? Using respondent-driven sampling and capture-recapture to estimate population sizes". Sexually Transmitted Infections. Vol. 87, no. 4 (2011): 279-282.
- Salganik, M. (2006). "Variance estimation, design effects, and sample size calculations for respondent-driven sampling". Journal of Urban Health. Vol. 83, no. 1 (2006): 98-112.
- Salganik, M., M.B. Mello, A.H. Abdo, N. Bertoni, D. Fazito and F.I. Bastos (2011). "The game of contacts: estimating the social visibility of groups". Social Networks. Vol. 33, no. 1 (2011): 70-78.
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). "Whatever happened to qualitative description?". Research in Nursing and Health. Vol. 23 (2000): 334-340.
- SIREN (2008). Statistical methods for estimating numbers of trafficking victims. Bangkok, Thailand: United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking: Phase III.
- SIREN (2011). The state of counter-trafficking research: researcher, programmer and donor perspectives. Bangkok, Thailand: United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking: Phase III.
- Tyldum, G. (2009). "Coping with Biases in Trafficking Data". In Human trafficking: new directions for research. International Organization for Migration.
- UNICEF (2006). The state of the world's children: excluded and invisible. New York, USA.
- UNICEF (2011). Violence against children in Tanzania: findings from a national survey 2009. Tanzania: UNICEF, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences.
- Weitzer, R. (2014). "New directions in research on human trafficking". The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science. Vol. 653, no. 6.
- Wicks, A. and G. Whiteford (2006). "Conceptual and practical issues in qualitative research: reflections on a life-history study". Scandinavian Journal of Occupational Therapy. Vol. 13, no. 2 (2006): 94-100.
- Wood, M. and C. Welch (2010). "Are 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' useful terms for describing research?". Methodological Innovations Online. Vol. 5, no. 1 (2010): 56-71.
- Zhang, S. (2012). "Measuring labour trafficking: a research note". Crime, Law and Social Change. Vol. 58, no. 4 (2012): 469-482.

# CONCEPTS AND PRINCIPLES RELATED TO QUALITY RESEARCH ON THE COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN

by Elisa Felicini and Mark Capaldi



## INTRODUCTION

Whilst child trafficking and the sexual exploitation of children have remained in the spotlight over the last two decades, there is still limited quality research into the depth, breadth and scope of the problem.



Organisations that are working to combat the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) are constantly requested to provide evidence-based data and information on the child victims affected by the various manifestations of sexual exploitation. However, accurate estimates, descriptions or evidence of the extent and magnitude of these violations against children remain ambiguous or lacking, in part due to conceptual and methodological challenges (UNICEF, 2008). This results in limited, inaccurate and out-of-date knowledge on the phenomenon which has an adverse effect on advocacy, policy planning and targeted interventions (Weitzer, 2014; Huijsmans and Baker, 2012). Furthermore, poor quality research can even harm those it is intending to help through stigmatisation or putting victims at further risk (SIREN, 2011). When advocacy is based on vague, non-scientific and misleading data it is not reliable and, as a consequence, it fails in achieving the goal of pushing duty-bearers to properly engage in addressing exploitation (Feingold, 2010).

Quality research on a hidden phenomenon such as the sexual exploitation of children is complex and more variegated than many of the studies that currently exist. This article therefore distils some of the core concepts and principles needed to undertake better quality CSEC research in the hope that it can motivate key stakeholders to commit to more superior and evidence-based studies. It argues that much greater prioritisation needs to be given to methodological and ethical rigour in research in order to maximise the pertinence and impact of the data collected and thus, to strengthen the implementation of effectual protection policies and interventions.

## DEFINING 'QUALITY RESEARCH' ON CSEC

Research on commercial sexual exploitation of children is often criticised for being unscientific, non evidence-based and “unsubstantiated, misleading, exaggerated and sensational” (Ennew, 2008).

In order to overcome such challenges and gaps in research, a major effort towards ‘quality research’ is required. The quality of research depends on the level of reliability (in scientific terms) and appropriateness of research methods. This is often perceived as to do with the type of information collected during the research, i.e. whether it is numbers and statistics (quantitative data) or narratives and images (qualitative data).

Despite there not being a hierarchical relation between these two types of information (as both are equally important and mutually supportive), qualitative research is often criticised as less reliable and not scientific (Sandelowski, 2000). As regards CSEC, the bulk of research on this issue – and on children in general – is mainly qualitative research, which means that policymakers and programme designers may not take the information seriously.

In order to change this perception, it is necessary to highlight the function and importance of all methods of research and to demonstrate that even qualitative approaches to data collection can be conducted in a scientific way and thus be sufficiently reliable to inform policies and programmes. In fact, quantitative and qualitative

The quality of research depends on the level of reliability and appropriateness of research methods. This is often perceived as to do with the type of information collected during the research, i.e. whether it is numbers and statistics or narratives and images.

data are inter-related because it's impossible to collect quantitative data without

first having a preliminary knowledge of the subject based on qualitative data of what the numbers mean (Sandelowski, 2000). Descriptions are the basis of numbers, which means that qualitative data must be first collected when there is weak knowledge about the phenomenon that is being studied. Although qualitative approaches tend to involve fewer participants compared to quantitative research (which is typically looking for trends or estimating population sizes), in qualitative studies the researchers generally know more details about each participant and can therefore develop theories and new meanings to describe or explain evolving realities of a complex phenomenon. This can be compared to quantitative research where the participants' responses are recorded as 'numbers', often in order to extrapolate or scale up data (Keele, n.d.).

No one research methodology is necessarily better than another. There is a need to develop more rigorous qualitative and quantitative research promoting a *mixed* methodology (Beije, et al., 2013) or 'umbrella' approach to research which recognises the different combinations of approaches to data collection.

## BASIC PRINCIPLES AND CONCEPTS

### A. CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS AND DEFINITIONS

The study of sexual exploitation of children cannot be adequately conducted if definitions of the main concepts related to the phenomenon and to the specific object of the study are not established so as to avoid misunderstandings and vagueness of the data itself. Defining theories, concepts and terminology is not an unnecessary theoretical exercise but a substantial need in research (Ennew, 2008). Theoretical and conceptual inaccuracies impede quality data collection which then becomes over simplistic, insufficiently disaggregated and rarely comparable with other contexts or studies (Weitzer, 2014).

A further weakness in the current research on CSEC is the almost total absence of context analysis, in particular, as regards the local prostitution mechanisms, economies, social environment and cultural perceptions (such as ideas about children and childhood, gender and sexuality and power relations). This has resulted in broad generalisations about root causes of CSEC, especially family breakdown, poverty, child migration and social tolerance (ECPAT International, 2014). Conversely, it can also lead to the compartmentalisation of the exploitation of children within either sex trafficking, sex tourism or child pornography. In fact, these are phenomena

that beyond being interlinked are also heavily inter-related with and influenced by the contexts in which they occur (Ennew, 2008). The lack of context analysis in research on CSEC prevents a holistic and reliable understanding of the complex nature of sexual exploitation of children and the interplay between the various manifestations. Conceptual differences of distinct situations of CSEC will inevitably result in the need for different responses (ECPAT International, 2014).

Greater awareness and knowledge conceptually of the nuances, distinctions and terminology around CSEC will help to strengthen the design, effectiveness and monitoring of counteraction (NGO Group, 2005). Furthermore, clarity and analysis within the context of conceptual frameworks on existing national and international legal frameworks also needs to be provided, so that the use and enforcement of legislation continues to promote and support global harmonisation of disaggregated data collection, cutting edge research and good practices (ECPAT International, 2014).

### B. RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO RESEARCHING WITH CHILDREN

Article 12.1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child makes it clear that children are not merely 'objects' of concern and protection but 'subjects' entitled to human rights among which includes the right to express their views in all matters concerning them. Whilst the

Convention does not specifically recognise it, children's 'right to be properly researched' may be identified in it (Knowing Children, 2009). This right, that children are indirectly entitled to, is based on the interpretation of Articles 3, 12, 13 and 36 of the UN CRC which suggest direct implications in the research about children.<sup>1</sup> The meaningful participation of children in research can accordingly improve the quality and reliability of the findings and if handled correctly can be both therapeutic and empowering (Edmunds, 2003).

As regards research on CSEC, the involvement of children and adolescents can occur at different levels and with a variable intensity. Children can participate in focus groups or interviews as respondents, or it can be deeper and more intense, such as in peer research and youth-led studies in which children and young people are involved as researchers themselves (Akerstrom and Brunnberg, 2013). This means that the nature and level of participation of children and young people in research may differ significantly, but the principle on which the participatory approach is based remains unchanged.

It is evident that in carrying out research the participation of victims of CSEC raises some extremely sensitive ethical issues. Research can be exploitative in itself and participation is potentially harmful or dangerous for children and young people who take part in the research (as discussed in the section below). For this reason, research that adopts a participatory approach has to use *rights-based* methodology in order to be meaningful and not harmful for the participants (Alderson, 2004). As such, research with children must be based on and oriented by fundamental human rights and the main principles of dignity, equality, non-discrimination and participation (Knowing Children, 2009).

### C. ETHICAL CONCERNS

The involvement of children and young people, in particular experiential children and youth, in research on commercial sexual exploitation of children obviously raises major ethical concerns, such as whether this kind of research is worthwhile or 'fair'. One response might be that despite all the ethical issues raised by the participatory approach, it would also be

unethical to do research on CSEC and deny children the right to be heard on something that affects them (Laws and Mann, 2004). However, serious considerations need to be given to the ethical and protection framework in participatory research on CSEC.

In order to prevent harmful or poor quality data collection, risk-benefit assessments need to be made at different levels: by the researchers; by ethics and scientific review committees and advisers;<sup>2</sup> by the people who are asked to take part in the research (children and young people) and, if relevant, their carers (Alderson and Morrow, 2004). In the planning of the study, it is important for the research team to explore the motivations for seeking to involve children in the project; the risks they face by embarking on the project; and their abilities and responsibilities towards the children with whom they are engaging (Harcourt and Quennerstedt, 2014).

An ethical approach to research with children refers not only to traditional areas of concern like voluntary participation and informed consent, but to many other aspects as shown in Table 1 on the next page.

<sup>1</sup> See Article 3.3: "State parties shall.....conform with the standards established by competent authorities"; Article 12: The child has ".....the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child"; Article 13.1: "The child shall have the right to freedom of expression.....either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice"; and Article 36: Children must be protected "against all forms of exploitation" (Knowing Children, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Ethical/Scientific/Advisory Committees generally consider three key criteria: scientific and methodological validity; the welfare of the participants; and the respect for the dignity and rights of participants (Allmark, 2003).

TABLE 1: ETHICAL PRINCIPLES WHEN RESEARCHING WITH CHILDREN

PRINCIPLES	ISSUES TO CONSIDER
Voluntary and meaningful participation of children	Ensure no repercussions for respondent opting-out and that the child is not coerced into participating; child-centred and child-friendly research methodologies should be utilised so that the child can fully and appropriately engage (Ansell, 2009).
Informed consent	Consent is only viewed as valid if the person giving it is sufficiently competent and informed to give their decision and it is made completely voluntarily as an on-going consideration (Alderson, 2004).
Protection of children from any kind of harm	No interview should take place if it is likely to put a child or youth in a worse position, either in the short or long term; Access to referral mechanisms for child victims of sexual exploitation needing support should be available.
Risks faced by the project team during the research	As CSEC is a criminal activity, a risk management assessment should be undertaken to ensure that members of the research team do not face security risks or reprisals from criminal elements or corrupt officials in authority.
Confidentiality of data and protection of respondents' interests	Personal details such as real/full names, locations/addresses (or any other information which may help to identify the child respondent) should be kept in a secure and private place and not used in the research report. Researchers and translators should sign a confidentiality agreement and respondents should be informed of the precautions being taken to protect their identity (Capaldi, 2014).
Compensatory expectations of children and youth involved in the research	There are pros and cons associated with the different types of remuneration (reimbursement, compensation, appreciation or incentive) that may be given to a child respondent – explicit policies and guidelines justifying the approach used should be developed (Alderson and Morrow, 2004).
Professional skills, knowledge and personal factors of researchers	Persons undertaking research should be adequately trained. Researchers should be of relevant gender; have experience of interviewing children; be trained in victim support work; and have at least a basic knowledge and understanding of child sexual exploitation (Bejerken, 2005).
Child-friendly methods adopted with young respondents	Create a comfortable environment for interviewees. Develop a friendly and appropriate relationship of trust with the respondents (Kovačević and Mirović, 2007). Use a range of participatory methodologies such as through 'drawing and stories', role play, photo essays, etc. (Knowing Children, 2009).

PRINCIPLES	ISSUES TO CONSIDER
Imbalance of power between adult researcher and children	Be aware that positionality and relations of power (due to age, gender, nationality, socio-economic aspects, etc.) can intimidate respondents or result in biases or prejudices in the data collected (Ennew, 2008).
Responsibilities/responses of researchers to children who show signs of distress or who are currently being sexually exploited	Respect children’s ongoing right to refrain from answering any question or withdraw from the research project if necessary. Facilitate access to available support should they feel uncomfortable and show signs of distress during and following the interview process. Explain limits to confidentiality and possible implications such as appropriate referral should a child report current abuse, including mandatory reporting in some countries (Kovačević and Mirović, 2007).
Opportunity to return something back to children for their participation	Through participation, CSEC victims/survivors can feel empowered, validated and actively heard by having their insights and concerns taken seriously; share research results with the respondents, including with children (Laws and Mann, 2004).

Although these principles and guidelines are necessary, it must be noted that they cannot replace ‘contingent ethics’ (Morrow and Richards, 1996). Ethical guidelines are unlikely to provide specific, clear applications to all of the dilemmas that researchers face (Alderson, 1995). Researchers need to be aware that ethical considerations are ongoing and that ethical dilemmas may arise at any stage of the research. Decisions must be made in specific cultural, gender and social contexts on the basis of the appropriate professionalism of the researcher (Morrow and Richards, 1996).

D. DATA GATHERING AND ANALYSIS

Quality research depends upon a rational and well-considered combination of adequate sampling, penetrative data collection and interpretative data analysis techniques (Sandelowski, 2010). Researchers should be obliged to defend their sampling and analysis strategies. Qualitative studies generally have smaller sample sizes than quantitative research (Richie et al., 2003) as it is a manually intensive approach and large population sizes would be unrealistic in light of the usual budget constraints

and timeline limitations. The concept of ‘saturation’ is often used in these instances and a sample size is deemed sufficient once the collection of further data is not giving any significantly new information and the point of diminishing returns has been reached (Mason, 2010; Richie et al., 2003). Random selection of the target group is particularly difficult in hidden populations so non-probability sampling techniques (such as ‘snowball sampling’ or ‘respondent driven sampling’)<sup>3</sup> can help in sufficiently exploring concepts around complex phenomena such as CSEC, although it cannot claim to be fully representative

3. With snowball sampling, each respondent (or ‘snowball’) links the researcher up to another in the target group until the preferred sample size is reached. In the case of respondent driven sampling (RDS) an initial participant (a ‘seed’) is asked to identify other contacts within the target population. Each then recruits perhaps up to three more which enables the final sample to be independent and thus more random than the initial subjects (see Goel and Salganik, 2010).

4. They can include: “fear, depression, low self esteem [and] self worth, poor social skills, anger [and] hostility, inability to trust [and] build meaningful relationships in later life, blurred roles and boundaries, appearing ‘older’ (pseudomaturity), sexualized behaviour, guilt, shame, feeling ‘different’ from others, isolation, substance use [and] misuse, self harm (including suicide) [and] post traumatic stress disorder.”



of the wider target population (Morgan, 2008).

As child victims of sexual exploitation are a challenging target group to collect data from due to the difficult circumstances these children find themselves in and the links to criminal activities and networks, this can lead to hesitancy to disclose or re-call bias. Using a mix of research methodologies and including 'ask-back' checks can minimise biased answering (Hassan, 2005).

Both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis requires recording, categorising and counting of data, although with qualitative analysis 'counting is a means to an end, not the end itself' (Sandelowski, 2010: 338). Qualitative data analysis moves much more into the sphere of interpretation, rather than quantitative statistical analysis as it is particularly helpful in studies which wish to answer the questions *who*, *what*, *how* and *where* of a phenomena (Capaldi, 2014).

## CONCLUSION

When advocacy is based on vague, non scientific and inaccurate data it is not reliable. Whilst quality research cannot overcome all the undeniable difficulties related to the accessibility of data concerning an illegal activity such as CSEC, it allows relevant stakeholders to gain reliable and detailed evidence-based knowledge and understanding. This is essential in order to design valid and effective policies and programmes to eradicate CSEC. Moreover, a scientific approach in research on CSEC is likely to increase the political will and commitment of relevant duty-bearers to eradicating this crime against children. The value of children's participation is particularly significant in research on CSEC as their involvement gives access to quality information, thus filling large gaps of knowledge about CSEC. Secondly, a participatory approach ensures that the views and concerns of those most directly affected by a problem (in this case, children who are or have been sexually

exploited) are heard. However, participatory research on CSEC has to be governed by a rights-based approach. This includes following strict ethical principles and guidelines that ensure the protection of children involved in the research so as to avoid any kind of physical and psychological harm that their participation may cause to them. Knowledgeable, reflective and adequately trained researchers can avoid prejudicial behaviour, undue influence and the dangers of conflict of interest. Persons undertaking research should know how to relate to the child respondents, especially when psychological assistance and the duty of confidentiality need to be suspended for the protection and security of the child. Partnerships between child rights experts, civil society groups and academics and research institutions can greatly help in this regard.

Children's right to be properly researched can result in appropriately scientific, evidence-based and comparable data from children and about children that forms the basis for successful advocacy, policies and programme interventions.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

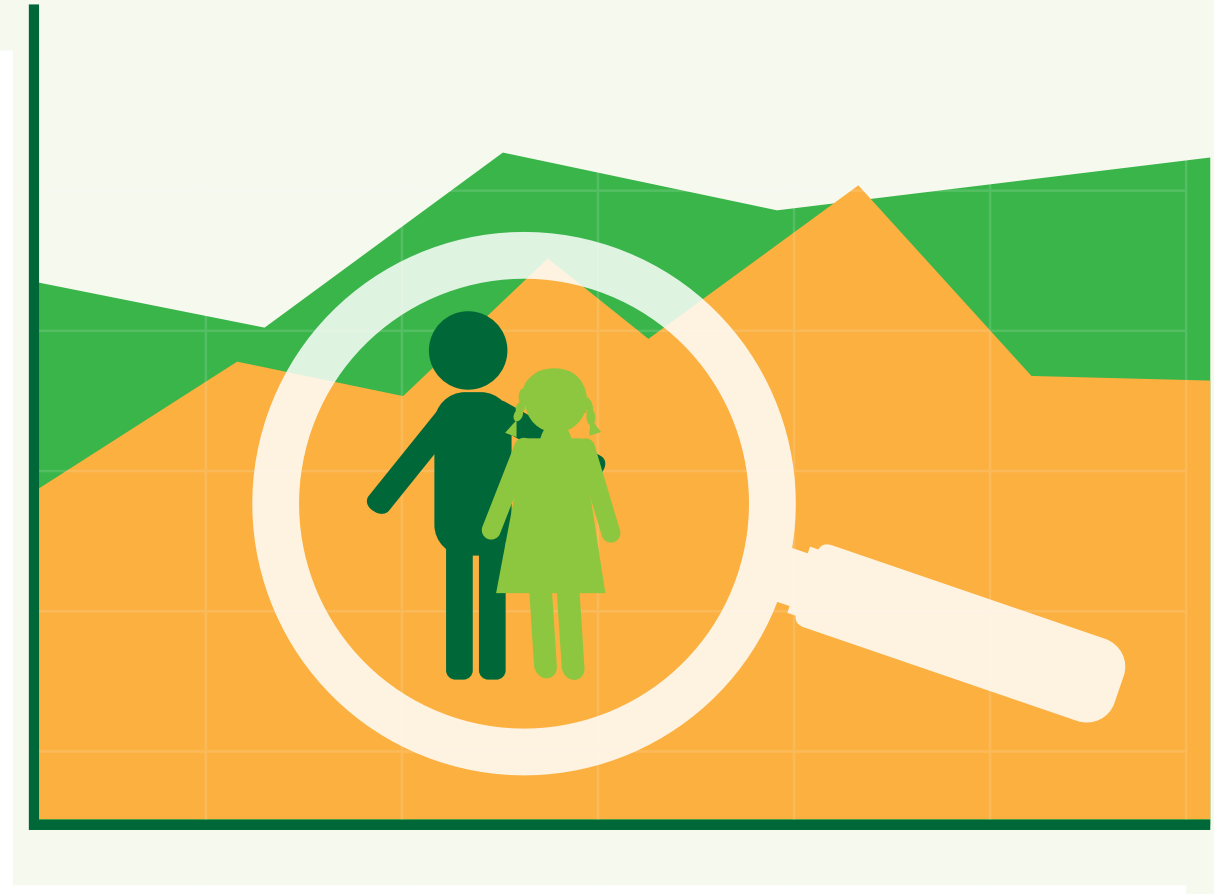
- Akerstrom, J. and E. Brunnberg (2013). "Young people as partners in research: experiences from an interactive research circle with adolescent girls". *Qualitative Research*. Vol. 13, no. 5, 528-545.
- Alderson P. (1995). *Listening to children, ethics and social research*. London: Barnardo's.
- Alderson, P. (2004). "Ethics". In Fraser S., V. Lewis, S. Ding, et al., (Eds). *Doing Research with Children and Young People*. Essex: Barnardo's.
- Alderson P. and V. Morrow (2004). *Ethics, social research and consulting with children and young people*. Berkingside: Barnardo's.
- Allmark, P. (2003). "The ethics of research with children". *Nurse Researcher*. Vol. 10, no. 2, 7-19.
- Ansell, N. (2009). "Unpacking Children in Migration Research". *Children's Geographies*. Vol. 7, Issue 3.
- Bjerkman, L. (Ed.) (2005). A Life of One's Own: Rehabilitation of victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. [http://lastradainternational.org/lsidocs/808%20bjerkman\\_l\\_rehabilitation.pdf](http://lastradainternational.org/lsidocs/808%20bjerkman_l_rehabilitation.pdf)
- Boeije, H., M. Slagt, and F. van Wesel (2013). "The Contribution of Mixed Methods Research to the Field of Childhood Trauma: A Narrative Review Focused on Data Integration". *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*. Vol. 7, 347-369.
- Capaldi, M. (2014). *The Child's Journey in Search of Rights: A Child-Centred Study*. Terre des Hommes Netherlands.
- ECPAT International (2014). *Ending Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking for Sexual Purposes: Unfinished Business*. Bangkok: ECPAT International (not yet published).
- Edmunds, C. (2003). *Ethical Considerations When Conducting Research on Children in the Worst Forms of Child Labour*. Geneva: ILO-IPEC.
- Ennew, J. (2008). *Exploitation of children in prostitution: Thematic Paper for the World Congress III Against the Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents*. Bangkok: ECPAT International.
- Feingold, D. (2010). "Trafficking in numbers: the social construction of human trafficking data". In P. A. (Eds.). *Sex, drugs and body counts: the politics of numbers in global crime and conflict*. Cornell University Press, p. 14.
- Goel, S. and M. Salganik (2010). "Assessing respondent-driven sampling". *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. 107:6743-6747. <http://www.princeton.edu/~mjs3/rds.shtml>
- Harcourt, D. and A. Quennerstedt (2014). "Ethical Guardrails When Children Participate in Research: Risk and Practice in Sweden and Australia". *SAGE Open* 2014 (4).
- Hassan, E. (2005). "Recall Bias can be a Threat to Retrospective and Prospective Research Designs". *The Internet Journal of Epidemiology*. Vol. 3, no. 2.
- Huijsmans, R. and S. Baker (2012). "Child trafficking: 'worst form' of child labour or worst approach to young migrants?". *Development and Change*. Vol. 43, no. 4, 919-946.
- Keele (n.d.). "Quantitative versus Qualitative Research, or Both?". Chapter 3. [http://samples.jbpub.com/9780763780586/80586\\_CH03\\_Keele.pdf](http://samples.jbpub.com/9780763780586/80586_CH03_Keele.pdf)



- Kovačević, I. and V. Mirović (2007). "Children Speak Out: Trafficking Risk and Resilience in Southeast Europe: Montenegro". *Save the Children in Montenegro Child Trafficking Response Programme Southeast Europe*. Montenegro: Podgorica.
- Knowing Children (2009). *The right to be properly researched: How to do rights-based, scientific research with children*. Bangkok: Black on White Publications.
- Laws, S. and G. Mann (2004). *So You Want to Involve Children in Research? A toolkit supporting children's meaningful and ethical participation in research relating to violence against children*. Stockholm, Sweden: Save the Children Sweden.
- Mason, M. (2010). "Sample Size and Saturation in PhD Studies Using Qualitative Interviews". *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. Vol. 11, no. 3, Art. 8. <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1428/3027>
- Morgan, D. (2008). *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. SAGE Publications, Inc. pp. 816–817.
- Morrow V. and M. Richards (1996). "The ethics of social research with children: an overview". *Children and Society*. Vol. 10, 90-105.
- NGO Group for the CRC (2005). *Semantics or Substance?* [www.ecpat.net/sites/default/files/Semantics%20or%20Substnce.pdf](http://www.ecpat.net/sites/default/files/Semantics%20or%20Substnce.pdf)
- Ritchie, J., J. Lewis and G. Elam (2003). "Designing and selecting samples". In Jane Ritchie and Jane Lewis (Eds.). *Qualitative research practice. A guide for social science students and researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. pp. 77-108.
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). "Focus on Research Methods: Whatever Happened to Qualitative Description?". *Research in Nursing and Health*. Vol. 23, 334-340.
- SIREN (2011). *The state of counter-trafficking research: researcher, programmer and donor perspectives*. Bangkok, Thailand: United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking: Phase III.
- UNICEF (2008). *Child Trafficking in Europe: A broad vision to put children first*. [http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/ct\\_in\\_europe\\_full.pdf](http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/ct_in_europe_full.pdf)
- Weitzer, R. (2014). "New directions in research on human trafficking". *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Vol. 653, no. 6.

# ETHICAL ISSUES OF RESEARCHING SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN WITH VICTIMS, SURVIVORS AND THOSE AT RISK

*by Rebecca H. Rittenhouse and Elisa Felicini*



## INTRODUCTION

Although the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) has existed throughout history, it is only in the last two decades that the phenomenon has been brought to the attention of the international community. As the focus on CSEC grows and increased measures are taken to address it, there is a tremendous need for reliable, evidence-based data to support advocacy for

improved protection for sexually exploited and at-risk children.<sup>1</sup> There is therefore a vital need to conduct well-designed and varied (qualitative and quantitative, longitudinal and cohort), peer-reviewed research on the issue. Research on the sexual exploitation of children should also be child-centred, which ensures that the opinions, perspectives and voices of children are respected and taken into account, including those at risk of exploitation as well as victims and survivors of sexual exploitation.<sup>2</sup>

The participation of children in research, whether it is as a researcher or respondent, can add to the improvement of research methodologies and data collection, which can lead to more accurate and useful results. In some cases, participation may allow a survivor to step out of “victimization, passivity and silence,” and for those children at risk of exploitation, it has been asserted that “a participative approach helps overcome fear and build skills to resist exploitation” (Laws and Mann, 2004).

These benefits of participation may be particularly true for victims and survivors of CSEC who, due to the stigmatisation, fear of retribution and “culture of silence” that many times accompany sexual exploitation, often are not able to express or share their experiences or opinions. It has been asserted that “[r]esearching with hidden populations, valuing children’s expertise and understanding children’s lived experience through...sensitive research has the potential to lead to positive outcomes in research and in children’s lives” (Morris et al., 2012). Additionally, it has been suggested that excluding certain groups from research, such as abused children, may violate the principles of justice (Becker-Blease and Freyd, 2006).

Research that involves children does raise specific ethical issues due to its sometimes sensitive nature as research questions, especially those focused on violence, abuse and exploitation, can have a harmful effect on what may be an already vulnerable child. Research that focuses on “sensitive topics”<sup>3</sup> has been recognised as “having the potential for creating or enhancing (existing) vulnerability among research participants” (Aldridge, 2012). These risks to a child’s physical, emotional and psychological health should be assessed at the beginning of the research process and should be taken into consideration when evaluating whether children should be involved in research. While participatory research with children can be beneficial to both researchers and children, it is important that children are not included in research simply for the sake of including them or because researchers are curious about a certain issue, but because the participation will add to the quality and effectiveness of the research to improve protection interventions for children (Schenk and Williamson, 2005).

<sup>1.</sup> ECPAT International defines CSEC as: “sexual abuse by the adult and remuneration in cash or kind to the child or a third person or persons.” The primary manifestations of CSEC include: child prostitution, child pornography/child sexual abuse materials, trafficking of children for sexual purposes and the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism (ECPAT International, 2008). In this article, children are defined in accordance with Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, as “every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (United Nations, 1989).

<sup>2.</sup> For the purposes of this article, a victim or survivor is a child who has experienced sexual exploitation. The terms “victim” and “survivor” can be used interchangeably, although “victim” is generally preferred in the legal and medical sectors, and “survivor” in the psychological and social support sectors (IRC, 2012). In the context of this article, “survivor” is used to identify those children who have fully recovered from the trauma of their exploitation.

<sup>3.</sup> It has been recognised that “[t]here are greater barriers to participation when the research topic is sensitive, although there is a lack of consensus between researchers, gatekeepers, parents and children as to what constitutes a sensitive topic.” One definition of “sensitive topics” that has been adhered to in research studies is “those that either seem threatening, or contain an element of risk in some way...[and] include areas which are private, stressful or sacred, or potentially expose stigmatising or incriminating information” (Powell and Smith, 2009).

These ethical considerations are particularly vital when conducting research on CSEC with children, which poses additional, specific ethical risks due to the sensitive subject matter and/or the child's individual experience as a victim, survivor or at risk individual. The short- and long-term effects of sexual abuse and exploitation of children are extensive and complex<sup>4</sup> (Delaney and Cotterill, 2005). If researchers ignore the ethical dimensions of involving children in research on CSEC, not only will the participation not produce beneficial results, it may also harm the children involved.

In recent years, there has been an increase in discussion and literature revolving around the ethical considerations of the participation of children in research (Gorin et al., 2008; Powell et al., 2012; Morrow, 2013) as well as in social research that includes children's opinions and experiences (Morrow, 2008). However, it has been observed that the discussions and participation in research need to further analyse "specific groups of vulnerable children" (Eriksson and Näsman, 2012). The purpose of this article is to examine some of the ethical issues which are raised when conducting research on the sexual exploitation of children with victims, survivors and those at risk as well as to highlight the key and sometimes unique ethical challenges this research poses. This article will highlight concepts from the general ethical frameworks/guidelines for conducting research with children that have already been identified by others in the field such as do no harm, informed consent, right to confidentiality and power imbalances, but will focus on research with child victims, survivors and those at risk of sexual exploitation within that context.

## IS THE INVOLVEMENT OF CHILDREN THE BEST OPTION?<sup>5</sup>

Although it may have a positive impact on the research and the children involved (see Laws and Mann, 2004; Mishna et al., 2004; Schenk and Williamson, 2005), involving children as respondents in research on CSEC is not always the best option from an ethical point of view. In part, this is due to the fact that there is limited research

on the potential impact that research procedures, such as sensitive questions, may have on child participants (Runyan, 2000; Ybarra et al., 2009). The process of holding consultations or conducting research with children is very challenging and there are serious considerations to be taken into account from the outset in order to assess if children and young people should be involved in a specific research project. When in doubt, the best interests of the child should be the primary consideration for all researchers involved in research with

children.

In order to prevent harmful or unprofessional research, risk-benefit assessments need to be made at different levels: by the researchers; by ethics, funding and scientific review committees and advisers; and by the people who are asked to take part in the research (children and young people) and their care givers (Alderson and Morrow, 2004). In short, the research team has to first assess, on one hand, the potential benefits/added value and, on the other hand, the

4. They can include: "fear, depression, low self esteem [and] self worth, poor social skills, anger [and] hostility, inability to trust [and] build meaningful relationships in later life, blurred roles and boundaries, appearing 'older' (pseudomaturity), sexualized behaviour, guilt, shame, feeling 'different' from others, isolation, substance use [and] misuse, self harm (including suicide) [and] post traumatic stress disorder" (Delaney and Cotterill, 2005).

5. There are various forms that a "participatory approach" to research involving children can take (children as research respondents, children as data collectors/interviewers, children as observers, children involved in the design and/or analysis of the research, etc.). While the ethical considerations addressed in this article can apply to most, if not all, of these roles, for the purposes of this article, "participation" refers primarily to children as research respondents.

risks/negative implications at different levels resulting from children's participation in the specific research or consultation. Second, the project team should weigh the risks of the research against the benefits it hopes to achieve in order to decide if directly involving children is the best option in each specific situation or stage of the research. In other words, the best and most ethical research strategy allows the collection of useful and accurate data that responds to the research questions while ensuring the highest protection for the children involved, the latter being the priority.

In the planning phase of the research, it is important for the project team to explore the motivations for seeking to involve child victims, survivors or those at risk in the project, the risks the children and the project team face by embarking on the project; and the abilities and responsibilities towards the children involved. As part of its Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) Project, UNICEF provides a list of "Questions to Guide Ethical Research Involving Children." In the planning and preparation stage, these questions ask what new knowledge children will contribute, what will be the likely benefits for the individual child participating in the research and how children's safety will be ensured during the research process (Graham et al., 2013).

It has also been asserted by some that the research itself should aim to produce "nontrivial" findings; for example, "results that provide answers to questions important to the welfare of children – or

that hold substantial promise of benefit to children" (King and Churchill, 2000). These considerations and questions prior to the start of the research are vital when seeking to include victims, survivors and/or children at risk of sexual exploitation to ensure not only that they are not harmed, but that child victims and survivors are not re-victimised by their participation in the research.

## PROTECTION OF CHILD PARTICIPANTS FROM HARM

The protection of the physical, psychological and social well-being of children and young people who are involved in research is paramount and must be the main concern of researchers who have the responsibility to ensure that no harm will affect children as a result of their participation in the research, as well as to guarantee that children's rights and interests are protected throughout the research process. This means that potential risks and the impact of participation on the child must be assessed *before* the research process begins (see Alderson, 1995; Morrow and Richards, 1996; King and Churchill, 2000; Morris et al., 2012). Researchers must evaluate to what extent the participation of a child in the research will increase his or her exposure to violence and other risks. Specific protection measures, provisions and support will need to be included in the research design when involving vulnerable children in the research such as those

at risk or victims and survivors of CSEC (see Gorin et al., 2008; Mudaly and Goddard, 2009; Graham et al., 2014).

The commercial sexual exploitation of children may include many different forms of physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Regardless of their stage in recovery, involving children and young people in research on sensitive topics, such as CSEC, means potentially exposing them to "[p]hysical retribution, punishment or harm from others for participating in research activities" (Graham et al., 2013; see Alderson and Morrow, 2011).

Beyond potential physical harm, children involved in research on CSEC have to deal with distress that may be caused by talking about their past traumatic

harm may occur "through the revealing of stigmatising information about a child within the community as a consequence of research participation. This may occur, for example, when children...are exploited. There may be a risk of detrimentally affecting a child's position in their social sphere or network"

experiences of violence, abuse and exploitation. Although children may be willing to talk about their experiences, recalling the details may cause them pain and further emotional trauma (Twum-Danso, 2004).

In addition to the psychological and physical harm, the participation of children in research may lead to negative consequences at a social level. According to UNICEF, harm may occur “through the revealing of stigmatising information about a child within the community as a consequence of research participation. This may occur, for example, when children...are exploited. There may be a risk of detrimentally affecting a child’s position in their social sphere or network” (Graham et al., 2013).

Possible risks at a social level can be identified and avoided by involving children in the risk assessment phase. However, children must be aware of such risks; therefore, before the research starts, the project team must clearly illustrate to children the aims and the outcomes (both expected and unexpected) of the research and thus obtain children’s “informed consent” (as discussed in detail further below).

Given all these risks, although it is not always easy to determine in advance what might be emotionally or psychologically hurtful to someone - especially a child - the project team must explore from the outset of the

research project all the potential physical and psychological risks to which children may be exposed during the research and make it a priority when designing their research methodologies and tools to avoid “harm, re-traumatisation, and emotional draining of the respondents” (Bjerkan, 2005).

Researchers interviewing child victims, survivors and those at risk should be trained to construct supportive questions and to recognise signs of distress in the children throughout the interview and how to handle these situations. This requires “recognition that responsibility towards the child is more important than responsibility for the continuation of the research.” One way researchers can accomplish this is to limit discussions with children to those areas with which they feel comfortable or are trained to deal (Mann and Tolfree, 2003). Interviewers and supervisors should be trained before any research begins, “to ensure that they know how to put children at ease and respond to needs that they might reveal during the interviews, such as psychosocial support” (Schenk and Williamson, 2005).

Some studies with children have dealt with this issue by concentrating on using research questions that are focused on the present and future situations of the children, rather than the past. The reasoning behind this strategy is that, “by focusing on coping strategies

in the present rather than on traumas of the past, the respondents would be able to highlight – and perhaps also engage in an empowering process of realising – their own strengths” (Bjerkan, 2005).

Due to the very realistic possibility that questions posed to a victim or survivor, even if not directly related to the trauma/exploitation he or she experienced, could trigger a negative emotional response, researchers must be flexible enough to carry out an unstructured interview.<sup>6</sup>

## CONTEXT OF THE VICTIM/SURVIVOR EXPERIENCE

Broad ethical guidelines and frameworks for research with children<sup>7</sup> are useful and widely accepted, but cannot be applied universally and should allow room for personal choices by researchers regarding ethical considerations (see Morrow and Richards, 1996; King and Churchill, 2000; Christensen and Prout, 2002; Morrow, 2013; BabyLaw Okoli, 2014). The participation of children in research is shaped by the social, cultural, economical and political contexts in which it takes place (Morrow, 2013; Graham et al., 2014). As one researcher put it, broad guidelines and frameworks “are

<sup>6</sup>. This includes stopping the questioning that is causing distress and changing the topic of discussion to something with which the child is more comfortable or, in some cases, gently stopping the interview.

<sup>7</sup>. Eg. UK National Children’s Bureau Guidelines for Research with Children and Young People. See: <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/schools/developing-young-researchers/NCBguidelines.pdf>



minority world constructs which cannot be applied prescriptively and can easily be misconstrued and misunderstood in majority world contexts as they do not take cognisance of other cultures' meanings, understandings and experiences of children" (BabyLaw Okoli, 2014).

The flexibility of researchers when conducting research with child victims, survivors and those at risk of sexual exploitation is particularly needed, as it has been asserted that general ethical guidelines "frequently lack...the capacity to address the complexity of working with vulnerable populations" (Pittaway et al., 2010). It can also be useful when designing a mixed-methodology approach to research with children which can help children express themselves more freely and make them more comfortable (see Morrow and Richards, 1996; Morrow, 2008; Dockett et al., 2009; Pinter and Zandian, 2012), especially those that are most vulnerable such as child victims and survivors of sexual exploitation (see Pinter and Zandian, 2012).

## SELECTION OF CHILD PARTICIPANTS AND RESEARCHERS

An ethical approach must be adopted during the identification and selection of children at risk, victims or survivors as participants in

research. In order to minimise the harms that can result from participation in research, the age and maturity of the child as well as the stage a victim or survivor has reached in the recovery process should be decisive factors. It is vital that child victims or survivors who participate in the research have reached an advanced stage in the recovery process, meaning that they have overcome the suffering they have endured and feel able to talk about their experiences without regressing in the healing process. This requirement plays into their ability to consent as well as greatly minimises the risk of re-victimisation. In this way they will be able to positively gain from their participation and further develop their self-esteem, self-worth and confidence.

When conducting research with child victims, survivors or those at risk of sexual exploitation, specialised interviewers should be recruited with the skills and expertise to conduct research on sensitive issues and with vulnerable children. These interviewers should have experience working with children and be trained to respond to the victims'/ survivors' specific needs; if the appropriate interviewers are not available then the research should not be carried out (Schenk and Williamson, 2005).

In research involving children and young people, researchers should be recruited not just on the basis of professional skills, but also on their ability to relate to and work with

children – especially vulnerable children such as child victims, survivors or those at risk of sexual exploitation. In particular, researchers should have the skills that enable them to establish a relationship based on trust with the child participants and allow the children to feel at ease in talking about their experiences.

An agreement on a Code of Conduct, in which the acceptable role and responsibility of researchers when interacting with children is determined, should be drafted before the research begins (Edmonds, 2003). As with the ethical guidelines, the Code of Conduct does not provide researchers with all the answers they need, but it contains the basic principles and approaches that should inform the researchers' decisions.

## INFORMED CONSENT

Each victim, survivor, or at-risk child's story is unique and their personal capacities and willingness to speak of their (or others') experiences of exploitation differs. For this reason their participation should always be based on the principle of "informed consent."<sup>8</sup>

"Informed consent" consists of four main features: (1) an explicit act (for example, verbal or written agreement); (2) can only be given if the participants are informed about and have an

<sup>8</sup>. Informed consent has been defined as: Agreement for voluntary participation of a participant in research, based on the individual fully understanding the goals, methods, benefits and risks of the study. Informed consent is given on the understanding that the participant can change his or her mind about taking part in the research at any time (RWG-CL, 2002).



understanding of the research; (3) must be given voluntarily without coercion; and (4) must be renegotiable so that children may withdraw at any stage of the research process (Gallagher, 2009 *cited in* Graham et al., 2013).

The principal challenge in this area of research with children is how to determine if real “informed consent” by a child is achieved. It has been asserted that consent is “informed” only “if participants understand the nature of the research and the uses to which it will be put” (Mann and Tolfree, 2003). This understanding can include, among other things, the nature of the study and how it will be conducted, the different stages of the research process, the researchers’ expectations of the child and his or her role in the process, how the findings will be shared and how the results will be used (Dockett et al., 2009). It is important to keep in mind that although information on a project is provided, it is not possible to guarantee that a child has understood it, even when clear and simple language is used.

Although there is no way of guaranteeing that children have understood the information (it cannot be assumed that they will tell you if they have not understood), researchers must do their best at the beginning of the research process to provide full, clear and honest information about the research project and what

the participation of children will involve in simple, clear and concise language (Edmonds, 2003). This is especially important when conducting research with vulnerable children such as CSEC victims and survivors, as they may not always understand the long term affects of participation on their lives (*see* Pittaway, 2010).

Biological age has long been used as a factor to determine children’s ability to understand the information provided and thus give their consent to participate in a project (Morrow and Richards, 1996). However, it can be argued that it is less a question of age than of maturity, as children mature at different rates, dependant on such variables as their social and cultural environments, backgrounds, experiences and gender. Gillick-competence<sup>9</sup> highlights that a person’s age does not necessarily determine competence and states that “a competent child is one who ‘achieves a sufficient understanding and intelligence to enable him or her to understand fully what is proposed’” (Morrow and Richards, 1996).

A child’s ability to consent to participate in research depends on the context of the research and each participant’s experiences and should be determined on an individual basis (Morrow and Richards, 1996; King and Churchill, 2000; Graham et al., 2013). Thus,

parental consent can be waived when it “is not a reasonable requirement under the circumstances and when special safeguards are in place to protect the child subject’s rights and interests, for example, when parents are unavailable or when the request for permission might put the child at risk of harm”

rather than using age as a measuring stick for obtaining children’s consent, it is advisable for researchers to focus on their maturity (or lack thereof), and this can only be done within the context of building a relationship with them.

In general, in order to involve children in research it is usually necessary to seek the consent of parents or care givers. While adult consent is important, consent of the child should be obtained as well. (Twum-Danso, 2004; Laws and Mann, 2004). There is also precedence to show that parental consent can be waived when it “is not a reasonable requirement under the circumstances and when special safeguards are in place

<sup>9</sup>. Gillick competence is a term originating from a legal case in the United Kingdom and refers to “the assessment that doctors [] make in regards to whether a child under 16 has the capacity to consent to treatment without parental or guardian consent.” For further information, see: <http://www.ministryofethics.co.uk/index.php?p=7&q=2> and <http://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-protection-system/legal-definition-child-rights-law/gillick-competency-fraser-guidelines/>.

to protect the child subject's rights and interests, for example, when parents are unavailable or when the request for permission might put the child at risk of harm" (King and Churchill, 2000).<sup>10</sup> Even when conducting research on sensitive issues such as abuse and violence, children can be capable of consenting if deemed mature enough (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1996; King and Churchill, 2000; Morris et al., 2012). It has been asserted that, regardless of age, children should be permitted to consent to participation without the consent of their parents if they can demonstrate understanding of the research and their rights (Coyne, 2010).

Obtaining support for research on CSEC with children from communities is not an easy task as parents, employers and others may show resistance and unwillingness to allow their children to participate in research addressing the issue of commercial sexual exploitation of children. This may be due to: (1) The sensitive nature of the topic, which is still taboo and not recognised in many parts of the world as a problem; (2) The stigmatisation that accompanies victims and survivors of CSEC; (3) Concern about how the research/consultation will affect them (both children and the community as a whole); (4) Concern that the project may interfere with the income-generating activities in which the children are involved; (5) Lack of trust of members of the research team (this is especially the case if

the team are strangers with no prior connection to the community). In order to address this resistance, alliances and partnerships can be made with local organisations that are committed to the same issues. However, "the need for children to be given a voice must not be forgotten in responding to the views of adults" from the affected communities (Laws and Mann, 2004).

Regardless of the consent given, child participants must be aware that *during* the research they have the right to change their minds, to withdraw or to answer some questions but not others (King and Churchill, 2000; Alderson and Morrow, 2004; Mishna et al., 2004). This is in part because the implications of participation may become clear to a child only during the process of the research. The researcher should make clear to the children that saying "no" is acceptable and that their wishes will be respected without any negative consequences (Laws and Mann, 2004).

Consent is an ongoing process and should be considered during each phase of the research project (Morrow, 2008).

## ADDRESSING POWER IMBALANCES

It has been recognised that one of the biggest ethical challenges for researchers working with children is the inherent

imbalance of power between an adult researcher and a child who is participating as a respondent (Morrow and Richards, 1996). Although in research on CSEC children are encouraged to participate, it is common that when adults and children work together on a project, adults tend to hold the power no matter how participatory the environment. This power dynamic needs to be counter-balanced in the research on sexual exploitation of children in order to avoid the manipulation of children's contribution and allow children to effectively participate and voice their points of view.

When conducting research with child victims, survivors and those at risk of abuse and exploitation, it is recommended to take a child-centred approach (see Mudaly and Goddard, 2006; Överlien and Hydén, 2009; Morris et al., 2012). Among other things, this can aid in addressing the power imbalance between researchers and participants by including children in decision-making and making them collaborators throughout the research process (Hart, 1992; Eriksson, 2010; Morris et al., 2012).

Involving children in the design and management of the research project can include the participation of children in co-determining the data or using a variety of data collection methods to encourage children to participate and speak more freely (Morrow and Richards, 1996). Their involvement at this level of the research can

<sup>10</sup> Other possible exceptions to parental consent include when children have the status of "emancipated" or "mature" minor (See King and Churchill, 2000).

add to their understanding of the research process and enable them to feel a sense of ownership of the project as well as help to develop their confidence and a greater sense of self-worth. As a result, this may “facilitate the communication and interaction between children and adults” (Twum-Danso, 2004).

Another way to address the power imbalance is for researchers to build trust with the children. Researchers involve victims and survivors in studies on CSEC in order to collect first-hand information and their contributions can be invaluable. The risk is that researchers may treat these children as mere providers of information, forgetting that they are particularly vulnerable due to their young age and the exploitation they have experienced. This often means that researchers organise a single meeting or consultation with children, ignoring who they are as individuals and not involving them in follow up activities and feedback processes. This approach not only fails to respect the dignity, life history and sensibility of the children, which can contribute to the power imbalance, but is also likely to result in low quality research due to the possibly unreliable information the children will provide.

This power imbalance can also affect children’s informed consent. As previously mentioned, children have the right to withdraw from research at any time; however, due to the differing social and power dynamics of each context, children may not feel able to do this. For example, it may

be difficult for children to voice their discomfort or stop their participation due to a perceived anger or disapproval by the adult researcher. To address this, researchers can discuss and practice various withdrawal strategies with children. It is equally important for researchers to “attend to children’s visual, verbal and non-verbal cues to monitor unspoken expressions of unease or dissent” (Graham et al., 2013).

In the case of research with child victims and survivors of sexual exploitation, the power imbalance can be addressed to a certain extent, as in many situations project teams do not have direct experience with the issue. This is an opportunity for researchers to present themselves not as experts, but as novices who want to learn from the children. In this way the power dynamics can be reversed to some extent, “as the researcher becomes the student and the child, the expert” (Twum-Danso, 2004).

## PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

Through their involvement in research, children and young people are likely to face psychological and emotional distress, depending on the subject matter and their own individual experiences. This is especially true when involving victims and survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation in research (see King and Churchill, 2000). While CSEC victims

should be included in research only when they have reached an advanced stage of the recovery process or transitioned into survivors, re-victimisation is still possible. Disclosure of on-going abuse is also a possibility when conducting such research (Peled, 2001; Mudaly and Goddard, 2009; Morris et al., 2012).

It is important not to confuse research with therapy and members of the research team should not assume the role of therapist if not trained. It is crucial that researchers/facilitators know what type of questions can be asked and which should be omitted, in part based on the relationship they have built with the child. A comprehensive research plan should be developed to avoid re-traumatisation of child victims and survivors of sexual exploitation. This research plan can include a “disclosure protocol” which describes the steps researchers should take if the child reports abuse by a parent or other known person, or reports engaging in “risky, self-harming behaviours.” This plan can also include a list of available support services and a follow-up process for children once the research is completed such as debriefing sessions, counselling or referrals (Morris et al., 2012).

The psychosocial support provided needs to be structured and local organisations working on such issues can be invited to provide such support. If there is no local NGO working on the commercial sexual exploitation of children or sexual abuse with the capacity to provide such support, it may be worth considering

partnering with organisations working on other sensitive areas relating to children who require psychosocial care, like organisations working with children with HIV/AIDS or suffering from domestic violence (Laws and Mann, 2004). If appropriate psychosocial support cannot be provided, the project team will need to seriously consider whether to involve children in the project.

## RIGHT TO PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY WITHIN A CHILD PROTECTION FRAMEWORK

It is vital when conducting research with children that their identities are protected and that the information they provide is kept confidential. Child victims and survivors of abuse and exploitation may be particularly concerned about anonymity when involved in the research process due to the fear of retribution by abusers for speaking about their experiences or the stigma that accompanies CSEC-related offences in many parts of the world. It is therefore vital that, when conducting research with child victims and survivors of sexual exploitation, the research team creates a strategy of how to deal with issues of confidentiality. This strategy should identify the specific situations in which information shared by a child would be disclosed in order to protect the

child's – or another's – safety (Shaw et al., 2011). According to UNICEF, “[t]he lack of consistency across international contexts, within countries and across ethical review boards underscores the importance of researchers considering the issue of reporting prior to starting data collection and creating a plan or protocol to follow if required” (Graham et al., 2013).

When a research project is focused on a specific target group (eg. research on sexual abuse of children working on the streets in a limited area or research on HIV/AIDS prevalence among children involved in commercial sexual exploitation), it can be difficult to protect the identity of children participating in the research. One strategy used to address this concern is to increase the sample size to include a wider target population with a variety of children and relevant questions can be asked to specific segments of the target groups (Edmonds, 2003).

Even when these additional protective measures are taken, project teams need to give careful thought to what they mean when they tell a child or parent/guardian that their participation in the research or consultation will take place on a confidential basis. Some organisations make it a policy that complete confidentiality should not be assured, either to parents or children themselves, as during the project a child may take the opportunity to disclose that he or she or others are at risk. It is widely acknowledged that there must be limits to confidentiality in

research when child protection in certain contexts is a concern (Wilkinson, 2000; Peled, 2001; Shaw et al., 2011). Specifically, a child's confidentiality cannot be protected if he or she discloses, during the course of the research, information that puts the child in harms way (James and Christensen, 2008; Morris et al., 2012).

Breaching confidentiality can be controversial and opinions and practices vary in regard to how to handle such a situation (Cashmore, 2006). For example, the child's right to confidentiality may clash with the ethical responsibility of the researcher to ensure that he or she is protected from harm (Graham et al., 2013). Researchers also need to be aware of requirements for mandatory reporting as “[t]he decision to report concerns or knowledge regarding harm or potential harm to children may be a legal one as well as an ethical one” (Fisher, 1994 *cited in* Graham et al., 2013).

Researchers should discuss the issues of confidentiality with child victims, survivors and those at risk at the beginning of the research process to ascertain what concerns them, which may vary on the basis of each child, the situation, as well as the social and cultural context he/she comes from (Twum-Danso, 2004). They should inform children of the limits of the confidentiality agreement from the outset of the research and again during the interview when it appears that a child is about to disclose sensitive information.

## SHARING THE RESEARCH OUTCOMES

The participation and contribution of child victims, survivors and those at risk in research on sexual exploitation is of paramount importance before and during the study; however, once the data is collected, they often get left behind and forgotten. In fact, very often, children and their communities, especially those who are isolated and hard to reach, do not receive any feedback on the outcomes of a project in which they participated. For child participants, it is critical that the outcome of the child-centred research is shared (Edmonds, 2003), especially those whose voices have traditionally been silenced such as child victims of commercial sexual exploitation.

Therefore, once the project has been completed, it is important that researchers not only share the final results of the research with the children, but give them the opportunity to contribute their input before the final dissemination so that they can validate the information and correct any misinterpretations (Twum-Danso, 2004). Sharing results with children can be challenging due to language barriers, illiteracy and lack

of accessibility. However, the benefits for the children involved and the research results are so important that “a determined effort must be made to include such an activity within the overall framework of the research process” (Edmonds, 2003).

## CONCLUSIONS

Although there are significant benefits and positive implications to involving child victims, survivors and those at risk to sexual exploitation in research, it is clear that such an approach is not immune to ethical concerns that may arise during all stages of the research process. The participation of children should be generally encouraged in order to respect their right to voice their point of view on a phenomenon that affects many of them. It should be emphasised, however, that this approach is not always the most effective option or in the best interests of the child, especially when dealing with vulnerable children such as child victims, survivors and those at risk of sexual exploitation.

Child victims and survivors of sexual exploitation can gain extraordinary benefits from sharing their views on matters

that affect them and feeling as though, through their participation in research, they are helping other vulnerable children. The short- and long-term effects of sexual exploitation on each child are different, however, and the experience of each victim, survivor or at-risk child is based on his or her own cultural, social and economic background, resilience and support system.

For this reason, it is essential that programme managers and researchers take into consideration all the potential pros and cons of involving children in studies on the sexual exploitation of children. Involving victims, survivors and at-risk children in a study on sexual exploitation presents potential invaluable benefits, not only for the research itself but also for the children who participate. However, the project team cannot ignore the risks and ethical concerns that adopting such an approach may entail. From the pre-planning stages through to the dissemination of the research, these concerns and limitations should be carefully weighed against the best interests of the child, which should be the highest priority for all participatory research, especially research focused on the commercial sexual exploitation of children.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alderson P. (1995). *Listening to children: children, ethics and social research*. Barking, United Kingdom: Barnardos.
- Alderson P. and V. Morrow (2004). *Ethics, social research and consulting with children and young people*. Ilford, United Kingdom: Barnardo's.
- Alderson, P. and V. Morrow (2011). *The ethics of research with children and young people*. London: Sage Publications.
- Aldridge, J. (2012). "Working with vulnerable groups in social research: dilemmas by default and design". *Qualitative Research*. Vol. 14, no. 1 (2012): 112-130.
- BabyLaw Okoli, R.C. (2014). "Ethical Issues and dilemmas in doing research with itinerant street vending children and young people: Experiences from Nigeria". *Qualitative Social Work*. pp.1-16.
- Becker-Blease, K.A. and J.J. Freyd (2006). "Research Participants Telling the Truth about Their Lives: The Ethics of Asking and Not Asking About Abuse". *American Psychologist*. Vol. 61, no. 3 (2006): 218-226.
- Bjerkan, L. (2005). *A Life of One's Own: Rehabilitation of victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation*. Norway: Fafo.
- Cashmore, J. (2006). "Ethical issues concerning consent in obtaining children's reports on their experience of violence". *Child Abuse & Neglect*. Vol. 30, no. 9 (2006): 969-977.
- Christensen, P. and A. Prout (2002). "Working with Ethical Symmetry in Social Research with Children". *Childhood*. Vol. 9, no. 4 (2002): 477-497.
- Coyne, I. (2010). "Research with children and young people: the issue of parental (proxy) consent". *Children and Society*. Vol. 24 (2010): 227-237. In M.A. Powell, R.M. Fitzgerald, N. Taylor and A. Graham (2012). *International literature review: ethical issues in undertaking research with children and young people*. Dunedin, NZ. [http://epubs.scu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1041&context=ccyp\\_pubs](http://epubs.scu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1041&context=ccyp_pubs).
- Delaney S. and C. Cotterill (2005). *The Psychosocial Rehabilitation of Children who have been Commercially Sexually Exploited: A Training Guide*. Bangkok: ECPAT International.
- Dockett, S., J. Einarsdottir and B. Perry (2009). "Researching with children: ethical tensions". *Journal of Early Childhood Research*. Vol. 7, no. 3 (2009): 283-298.
- ECPAT International (2008). *Questions & Answers about the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, 4th Edition*. Bangkok: ECPAT International. [http://ecpat.net/sites/default/files/faq\\_eng\\_2008.pdf](http://ecpat.net/sites/default/files/faq_eng_2008.pdf)
- Edmonds C. N. (2003). *Ethical Considerations When Conducting Research on Children in the Worst Forms of Child Labour*. Geneva: ILO-IPEC.
- Eriksson M. (2010). "Children who's witness' violence as crime victims and changing family law in Sweden". *Journal of Child Custody*. Vol. 7, no. 2 (2010): 93-116.
- Eriksson, M and E. Näsman (2012). "Interviews with Children Exposed to Violence". *Children & Society*. Vol. 26 (2012): 63-73.
- Fisher, C. (1994). "Reporting and referring research participants: ethical challenges for investigators studying children and youth". *Ethics & Behaviour*. Vol. 4, no. 2 (1994): 87-95.
- Gallagher, M. (2009). "Ethics". In E.K. Tisdall, J. Davis and M. Gallagher, eds. *Researching with children and young people: Research design, method and analysis*. London: Sage Publications.

- Gorin, S., C.A. Hooper, C. Dyson, and C. Cabral (2008). "Ethical challenges in conducting research with hard to reach families". *Child Abuse Review*. Vol. 17 (2008): 275-287.
- Graham, A., M. Powell, N. Taylor, D. Anderson and R. Fitzgerald (2013). *Ethical Research Involving Children*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti. <http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/eric-compendium-approved-digital-web.pdf>
- Graham, A., M.A. Powell, and N. Taylor (2014). "Ethical Research Involving Children: Encouraging Reflexive Engagement in Research with Children and Young People". *Children & Society*. First published: 21 August 2014. DOI: 10.1111/chso.12089.
- Hart, R. (1992). "The ladder of participation". In UNICEF. *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF ICDC.
- International Rescue Committee (IRC) (2012). *Caring for Child Survivors of Sexual Abuse: Guidelines for health and psychosocial service providers in humanitarian settings*. New York: IRC.
- James A. and P.M. Christensen (2008). *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices*. New York: Falmer Press.
- King, N.M.P. and L.R. Churchill (2000). "Ethical Principles Guiding Research on Child and Adolescent Subjects." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. Vol. 15, no. 7 (July 2000): 710-724.
- Laws, S. and G. Mann (2004). *So you Want to Involve Children in Research? A toolkit supporting children's meaningful and ethical participation in research relating to violence against children*. Stockholm: Save the Children Sweden. [http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/So\\_you\\_want\\_to\\_involve\\_children\\_in\\_research\\_SC\\_2004\\_1.pdf](http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/So_you_want_to_involve_children_in_research_SC_2004_1.pdf)
- Mann G. and D. Tolfree (2003). *Children's Participation in Research: Reflections from the Care and Protection of Separated Children in Emergencies Project*. Stockholm: Save the Children Sweden.
- Mishna, F., B.J. Antle, and C. Regehr (2004). "Tapping the Perspectives of Children: Emerging Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research". *Qualitative Social Work*. Vol. 3, no. 4 (2004): 449-468.
- Morris, A., K. Hegarty and C. Humphreys (2012). "Ethical and safe: Research with children about domestic violence". *Research Ethics*. Vol. 8, no. 2 (2012): 125-139.
- Morrow, V. (2008). "Ethical dilemmas in research with children and young people about their social environments". *Children's Geographies*. Vol. 6, no.1 (February 2008): 49-61.
- Morrow, V. (2013). "Practical Ethics in Social Research with Children and Families in Young Lives: A longitudinal study of childhood poverty in Ethiopia, Andhra Pradesh (India), Peru and Vietnam". *Methodological Innovations Online*. Vol. 8, no. 2 (2013): 21-35.
- Morrow V. and M. Richards (1996). *The ethics of social research with children: an overview*. *Children and Society*. Vol. 10 (1996): 90-105.
- Mudaly, N. and C.R. Goddard (2006). *The Truth is Longer than a Lie – Children's Experiences of Abuse and Professional Interventions*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Mudaly, N. and C.R. Goddard (2009). "The ethics of involving children who have been abused in child abuse research". *International Journal of Children's Rights*. Vol. 17 (2009): 261-281.
- Överlien C. and M. Hydén (2009). "Children's actions when experiencing domestic violence". *Childhood*. Vol. 16, no. 4 (2009): 479-496.
- Peled, E. (2001). "Ethically sound research on children's exposure to domestic violence: A proposal". In S.A. Graham-Bermann and J.L. Edleson. *Domestic Violence in the Lives of Children: The Future of Research, Intervention and Social Policy*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.



- Pinter, A. and S. Zandian (2012). "I thought it would be tiny little one phrase that we said, in a huge big pile of papers': children's reflections on their involvement in participatory research". *Qualitative Research*. Vol. 15, no. 2 (2012): 235-250.
- Pittaway, E., L. Bartolomei and R. Hugman (2010). "'Stop Stealing our Stories': The Ethics of Research with Vulnerable Groups". *Journal of Human Rights Practice*. Vol. 2, no. 2 (June 2010): 229-251.
- Powell, M.A., R.M. Fitzgerald, N. Taylor and A. Graham (2012). *International Literature Review: Ethical Issues in Undertaking Research with Children and Young People*, for the Childwatch International Research Network, Southern Cross University, Centre for Children and Young People, Lismore NSW and University of Otago, Centre for Research on Children and Families, Dunedin, NZ.
- Powell, M.A. and A.B. Smith (2009). "Children's Participation Rights in Research". *Childhood*. Vol. 16, no. 1 (2009): 124-142.
- Regional Working Group on Child Labour in Asia (RWG-CL) (2002). *Handbook for action-oriented research on the worst forms of child labour, including trafficking in children*. Bangkok.
- Runyan, D. (2000). "The ethical, legal and methodological implications of directly asking children about abuse". *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. Vol. 15, no. 7 (2000): 675-681.
- Schenk, K. and J. Williamson (2005). *Ethical Approaches to Gathering Information from Children and Adolescents in International Settings: Guidelines and Resources*. Washington, DC: Population Council.
- Shaw, C., L.M. Brady and C. Davey (2011). *Guidelines for Research with Children and Young People*. London: National Children's Bureau.
- Twum-Danso, A. (2004). *Involving Children and Young People in Research and Consultations: Ethical Guidelines from a CSEC perspective*. ECPAT International (unpublished).
- United Nations (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1996). *Protection of Human Subjects*. 45 C.F.R. Part 46, Subpart D – *Additional DHHS Protections for Children Involved as Subjects in Research*.
- Wilkinson, J. (2000). *Briefing Facts. Children and Participation: Research, Monitoring and Evaluation with Children and Young People*. London: Save the Children.
- Ybarra, M.L., J. Langhinrichsen-Rohling, J. Friend and M. Diener-West (2009). "Impact of Asking Sensitive Questions about Violence to Children and Adolescents". *Journal of Adolescent Health*. Vol. 45 (2009): 499-507.

## LINKS

<http://www2.le.ac.uk/institution/committees/research-ethics/research-concerning-children-and-young-people-guidelines>

<http://www.unicef-irc.org/>

<http://childethics.com/>

[http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/briefings/ethical-research-factsheet\\_wda97712.html](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/briefings/ethical-research-factsheet_wda97712.html)

# AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

## *Mark Capaldi*

has worked in South and East Asia with Concern Worldwide, PACT Inc., Save the Children UK and currently with ECPAT International. In June 2011, he started a Doctorate programme at Mahidol University, Bangkok.

## *Elisa Felicini*

has a Master's Degree in Human Rights and Peace Studies from the University of Padua in Italy. She has carried out field research about the trafficking of children and CSEC in Romania in 2008 and has worked with various NGOs – in Italy as well as in other countries – committed to protecting children's rights, including ECPAT International in Bangkok from June 2013 – April 2014.

## *Jordana Dawson Hayes*

Jordana Dawson Hayes obtained a Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Law (Hons) from the University of Waikato, New Zealand. She has worked with a variety of NGOs in the areas of law, policy and evaluation. She currently works at the Fred Hollows Foundation NZ as an Evaluation and Policy Analyst.

## *Rebecca H. Rittenhouse*

obtained her law degree from New England Law/Boston in the United States in 2011. She has worked as a researcher for the Human Rights Foundation in New York City and is the Research and Monitoring Officer for the ECPAT International Secretariat in Bangkok, Thailand.





## **ECPAT International**

328/1 Phayathai Road  
Ratchathewi, Bangkok  
10400 THAILAND  
Tel: +662 215 3388, +662 611 0972  
Fax: +662 215 8272  
Email: [info@ecpat.net](mailto:info@ecpat.net)  
Website: [www.ecpat.net](http://www.ecpat.net)