

Criminological strategies for the prevention of criminal offences and the reduction of victim risks

Abstract

Human trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation severely affects those in highly vulnerable situations, stemming from factors such as organized crime, gender-based violence, corruption, poverty, and high levels of impunity. This situation is particularly delicate in tourism settings, where the main victims are women, both adults and minors. Illegal pornography and forced prostitution are incidents that must be reported and investigated, requiring the joint work of the public and private sectors, seeking to prevent, identify, address, and eradicate these scourges. This work, developed from the perspective of criminal and social sciences, aims to contribute to the design and implementation of criminological strategies for the prevention of commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents (CSEC), as well as for the reduction of victim risks. It takes as an example the case of Mexico, internationally considered a country with a high incidence of sexual tourism, whose successes and areas of opportunity can be used in future comparative studies. It is concluded that there is a need to create or improve legal instruments that oblige individuals and legal entities providing transportation and lodging services to report any suspected criminal activity and to display preventive materials.

Keywords: human trafficking, sexual exploitation, victim risks, prevention, childhood

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Introduction

Considering that one of the objectives of democracy and human rights is the comprehensive protection of all persons, particularly those in vulnerable situations, safeguarding their physical and moral integrity, the Mexican State is obligated to take all necessary actions to prevent the denial or restriction of human and fundamental rights. In the case of children and adolescents, as well as those who lack the capacity to understand the facts that affect them and behave accordingly, one of the acts that most damages their dignity, free development of personality, sexual integrity, and normal psychosexual development is sexual exploitation, in its commercial and non-commercial forms. Regarding this exploitation, in its forms of human trafficking, sex tourism, trafficking in persons for sexual purposes, pornography, and pimping, action plans based on scientific evidence are required to address these problems, so this work is a contribution in this regard.

Human trafficking: a global problem

According to the *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024*, in 2022 children accounted for 38% of trafficking victims worldwide, with girls being the most affected by sexual exploitation, forced marriages and forced labor.¹ To prevent this, it is necessary to coordinate public policies and legislative work at all three levels of government, as well as conduct studies in five areas: criminology, law, public policy, sociology, and victimology. This will allow for adequate prevention of sexual exploitation and its impact on the tourism sector.²

The above is in compliance with international commitments such as the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography*,³ as well as the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, which complements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*.⁴

Furthermore, it's worth remembering that in April 2010, Mexico became the first country in the world to officially adopt the "Blue Heart" campaign, a global movement that sought to raise awareness

about human trafficking and its social impact.⁵ For these reasons, it is necessary to update legal norms and public policies to protect the physical and psychological integrity of children and adolescents, given the violations of their most basic rights, which are committed in various tourist destinations with the complicity or silence of service providers in this sector.

In this regard, the successful identification, containment, and reduction of criminogenic and victimogenic factors (everything that contributes to causing something) goes far beyond the criminal justice system when analyzing complex problems such as human trafficking. Hence, legal analysis is necessary, but insufficient, to explain one of the most lucrative activities of organized crime, second only to arms and drug trafficking. Its approach, therefore, must be from the perspective of the social and criminal sciences, interested in understanding its areas of action, causes, effects, extent, modalities, and protagonists, particularly the economic rationale behind it.⁶

The common objective of all countries must be to develop a public policy that, from the legal and social sphere, assists in the prevention, identification, reporting, response, and eradication of commercial sexual exploitation, particularly in the form of sex tourism, against persons under eighteen years of age or who lack the capacity to understand the meaning of the act. To achieve this, it is necessary to understand the varieties, scope, actors, causes, and effects of sex tourism, as well as to contribute, both from the public and private sectors, to preventing illegal and harmful acts that domestic and foreign tourists commit against children.

No further legal basis is needed, as there are dozens, both national and international, relating to child protection. These conventions point out the obligation of countries and each state to provide comprehensive protection in all spheres of social and community life. Examples include the Hague Conventions on the protection of children, particularly in matters of intercountry adoption and the civil aspects of child abduction; as well as ILO Convention 182 on the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor.⁷

Types of commercial sexual exploitation

Sadly, in cyberspace, there is the buying and selling and sharing of illicit pornography, but there is also live physical abuse, activism to legalize sexual abuse, emotional support between perpetrators; exchange of propaganda, stories, and texts; dissemination of strategies and advice to avoid suspicion; cyberbullying; networks for sex tourism and child trafficking, as well as online sexual solicitation.

Sexual violence against children, in its forms of abuse and exploitation, requires precise terminology to facilitate understanding and comprehension. An example is the document developed by ECPAT International: *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse*, through which he sought to eradicate terms like “child prostitute” and “child pornography” (child pornography), as they are incompatible with the protection and rights of those who have not yet reached adulthood.⁸ Situations in which technology plays an important role, whether in falsifying or altering official documents for transportation purposes, producing pornography, exchanging information with potential clients, advertising sex tourism destinations, and contacting, persuading, and intimidating potential victims. In any case, this involves cybercrime, so the profile of the perpetrators of the crime must be updated with new criminological analyses that account for their biopsychosocial characteristics, as well as their *modus operandi*.

In 2002, in Mexico, the “Open Your Eyes” campaign, coordinated by the United Nations Children’s Fund, the National Institute for Women, the Attorney General’s Office, and the National System for the Integral Development of the Family, openly addressed the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), prioritizing four crimes: pornography, prostitution, trafficking, and sex tourism, all targeting minors. Today, the term “prostitution” applies only to adults who engage in it freely, with information, and with their consent.

In 2025, regarding our study population, the correct term is: commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents (CSEC). There are many victims worldwide, but there is no reliable data due to the grim figure and prevailing impunity. However, it is known that there are areas with high levels of sex tourism and trade. In Africa, countries such as Cameroon, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Morocco, Namibia, Somalia, and South Africa. In the Americas, countries such as Belize, Brazil, Costa Rica, Cuba, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic.

A similar situation exists in Asia: Cambodia, the Philippines, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Russia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Taiwan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. Finally, in Europe, with significant international migration and a large number of tourists, the situation also exists in Bulgaria, Hungary, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Turkey, and Ukraine.

In the case of Mexico, the country this paper focuses on, destinations such as Acapulco, Cancún (Benito Juárez), Ciudad Juárez, Puerto Vallarta, and Tijuana have historically been hot spots for sex tourism. Therefore, the commitment remains to prevent the sexual exploitation of persons under 18, whether by foreign or domestic tourists.

Criminals who, through seduction, deception, or economic compensation, commit this illegal activity, which includes promoting places as accessible points for the unpunished exercise of this activity, the exchange of information, the establishment of contacts and the transfer to tourist destinations where they can access the sexual trade with girls, boys, adolescents and people who do not have the capacity

to understand the meaning of the act, whether through pimping (forced prostitution), attending nude shows and/or the acquisition of pornographic material in which one or more of the subjects mentioned above participate, in a real or simulated manner.

In 2025, almost thirty years after its adoption, we must remember the *World Tourism Organization’s Declaration on the Prevention of Organized Sex Tourism*, which reaffirms the need to learn from history and the diplomatic work that has been done.⁹ We do not want prostitution tourism or sexual exploitation in tourism! This is especially true when victims lack sexual freedom or agency, precisely because human trafficking denies the free development of personality and seriously violates dignity, the guiding principle and foundation of human rights.

Final considerations

Exposing the trafficking of children and adolescents for commercial sexual exploitation in tourism contexts is not only an ethical obligation, but also a legal one. Therefore, a broad national agreement is required to build protective environments, involving the public, business, academic, and civil society sectors. This includes those offering transportation services (air, sea, and land), as well as accommodation, including hotel management and logistics, along with complementary services such as nighttime recreational activities, which are often borderline illegal. The truth is that while large hotel chains have adopted protocols, instilling a sense of pride and social responsibility, informal tourism, with small accommodations, lacks prevention and detection mechanisms. Therefore, strict regulation is required for children and adolescents’ access to tourist accommodations, including bungalows, cabins, hostels, motels, and temporary property rental companies. Computer tools are good, but insufficient, as personal agreements and transactions leave no digital evidence. Codes of ethics are useful, but lack legal binding force. Therefore, legal instruments are needed that oblige individuals and corporations to report any suspected criminal offense and to permanently display preventive materials, under penalty of license revocation and criminal sanctions in case of noncompliance. Travel agencies and operators, drivers and passenger transporters, tour guides, accommodation providers, and event organizers must participate in this national and international crusade, as only by working together will we be able to prevent CSEC and reduce the risk of fatalities.

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None.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

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