

# Assessing Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Napak District of Karamoja, Uganda

GLOBAL  
FUND  
TO  
**END  
MODERN  
SLAVERY**

## Context

This briefing note presents a summary of methods, findings, and conclusions from a study conducted by ICF in collaboration with Makerere University in Napak District of Karamoja, Uganda. Karamoja is a rural region in northeast Uganda. The majority of internal trafficking child victims in Uganda are ethnically Karamojong<sup>1</sup>. Karamoja's extremely high rate of multidimensional child poverty (84%) and a traditional acceptance of migration for livelihood increase children's vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC). Although child sex trafficking is believed to be a serious problem in the Karamoja region, there have been no previous studies of the knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding child trafficking and child migration in the region. The prevalence of CSEC and a thorough identification of vulnerabilities and risk factors among certain populations have not been fully studied in Uganda more broadly. No prior studies offer an estimate of the prevalence of CSEC in Uganda based on a probabilistic sample.

This population-based survey explored the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of Napak children and adults related to child migration and child trafficking as well as the prevalence of CSEC. This study provides baseline estimates and findings to inform the GFEMS-Funded Community Action to End Child Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation project. This study offers the first CSEC prevalence estimate for any region in Uganda that is based on a probabilistic sample. The data reveal interesting insights on the scope of CSEC in the region and adults' and children's calculation of the risks and benefits regarding migration.



This study offers the **FIRST CSEC PREVALENCE ESTIMATE** for any region in Uganda that is based on a probabilistic sample.

## Key Findings

### Socio-economic characteristics

- Two-thirds of the sampled households (68.4%) live below the international poverty line of \$1.90 a day. 71% of children report going to bed hungry at least one night the previous week. 71% of adult respondents and 38% of child respondents (ages 12-17) have never attended school.

### CSEC prevalence and vulnerability

- The study finds that 11.9% (95% CI: 7.7–18.0) of children ages 12-17 have ever experienced CSEC and 11% (CI: 7.0, 17.1) have experienced CSEC in the last year. There were no statistically significant differences in the prevalence of CSEC by gender or age group. A multivariable logistic regression found three significant predictors of CSEC: having been ridiculed by a caregiver, having close friends who have engaged in CSEC, or keeping secrets from a caregiver. An at-risk index based on these predictors indicates 20.9% of children are at high risk of CSEC.

### Risks and allure of migration

- Adults and children are highly aware of the potential risks to children when they travel from their hometown for new opportunities, including not making any money, not having enough food to eat, contracting a disease, being beaten, and being trafficked for sex. Despite the risks, nearly half of adults (42%) agree that children should go look for food and money in another town. One-fifth of children (21%) believe that migrating is the only way to make enough money to survive.

### Knowledge and risk of child trafficking

- Most adults (76%) are familiar with the concept of child trafficking, and nearly all adults (97%) and children (90%) would report concerns about a child being trafficked. Most adults (82%) can identify at least one sign children are at risk of trafficking, and more than half of adults (54%) have observed these signs in their own households. Nearly half of adults (43%) believe there to be a large risk of trafficking in their communities.

### Parenting roles and challenges

- Most adults (77%) agree parents should make the decision about whether a child migrates. Adults almost universally agree (98%) that parents have a responsibility to protect their children. However, more than one-third of children (35%) have experienced ridicule or being put down by their caregivers. About one-third of children (36%) report keeping secrets from their caregivers all the time or some of the time.

### Attitudes towards CSEC survivors

- One-third of adults (31%) agree that survivors face rejection in their communities. Nearly all (78%) agree that survivors should be treated the same as everyone else.



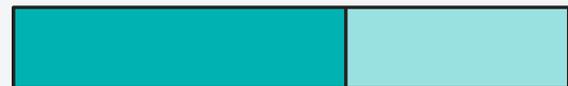
**11.0% OF CHILDREN AGES 12-17** have experienced commercial sexual exploitation in the last year.



**ONE-FIFTH OF CHILDREN (21%)** believe that migrating is the only way to make enough money to survive.



**NEARLY HALF OF ADULTS (42%)** agree that children should go look for food and money in another town.



**MORE THAN HALF OF ADULTS (54%)** have observed signs that children in their own households are at risk for trafficking.



**ONE-THIRD OF CHILDREN (35%)** have experienced emotional abuse.



**ONE-THIRD OF ADULTS (31%)** agree that CSEC survivors face rejection in their communities.

## Methodological Approach

---

The study selected households using a stratified multistage sampling design with probabilities proportional to size (PPS) sampling of areas (parishes and villages). The study was designed to provide estimates representative of all adults and all children ages 12 to 17 in Napak District. The probability sample covers the intended intervention area and comparison areas in the Napak district. The final sample included 986 households (adults) and 830 children. Up to two children per household were randomly selected for the child interview. Nearly all selected households participated (98.5% response rate). The response rate for child respondents was more than 95%.

The adult interview and most of the child interview was interviewer-administered. However, for the most sensitive questions about CSEC and parental-child relationships, children

answered using an audio computer-assisted self-interview program that was designed for children with no or low literacy. Adult questionnaire topics included demographics, knowledge and attitudes about child trafficking and child migration, and a list of all children ages 6 to 17 in the household, as well as some information about each child's education, work, and travel. Child questionnaire topics included knowledge, attitudes, and practices questions regarding child trafficking and child migration and questions about friends.

To our knowledge, this study is the first to use probability sampling methods to study CSEC in Uganda and the first to use audio-assisted self-interviewing to explore this topic among children. Self-interviews minimize response errors that may be especially prevalent with sensitive topics.

## Limitations and Considerations

---

- One-fourth of children residing in sampled households were absent during the fieldwork period. In some instances, children were temporarily staying in other areas tending to cattle or participating in cattle raids. Parents also reported sending their children to stay with relatives in neighboring districts because of local conflicts. The absence of children, especially male and older children, appears in the data. The actual rate of CSEC may be higher than our estimate because those missing from our sample may be at higher risk for CSEC due to their travel away from home.
- This study employed self-administration for the most sensitive questions asked of children using neutral images matched to response categories. We believe that the privacy afforded by this method of data collection may result in more accurate data through less social desirability bias. However, this is a novel method of data collection, and the results must be considered accordingly.
- Data collection occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Changes in behavior due to the pandemic may affect our results. A similar study undertaken before or after the pandemic may have different findings.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

---

The study lends valuable insights into knowledge, attitudes, and practices of migration, child trafficking, parenting, and the prevalence of CSEC.

Although many adults expect children to generate income, either locally or in another town, they almost universally agree that parents have a responsibility to protect their children. Parents may feel an obligation to protect their children and also believe that gaining early experience in navigating economic activities is key to their long-term

ability to avoid harm. Alternatively, parents may consider these activities harmful but feel motivated by economic need to encourage seeking income generating activities locally or elsewhere.

While demonstrating awareness of the risks of migrations, both children and adults also recognize the potential benefits of migration. The level of poverty in Karamoja presents obstacles, such that one-fifth of children believe that migrating is the only way to make enough money to survive. This large number

## Assessing Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Napak District of Karamoja, Uganda

of children may be especially vulnerable to child trafficking because of their desperation.

The finding that 11.9% of children have ever experienced CSEC and 11% of children have experienced it in the last year suggests a need for significant intervention in this area.

This study offers several recommendations for programs and policies seeking to reduce child trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of children:

- **Improve abilities to meet basic needs locally.** Napak residents have significant unmet needs, including basic necessities like food, and believe that migration offers opportunities not available locally. This dynamic puts children at risk for trafficking. Improving abilities to meet basic needs locally may reduce the risk of child trafficking. Potential improvements could include increasing the amount and broadening the targeting of cash transfers provided through government programs such as Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment (SAGE). The government and NGOs could also invest more heavily in skills training as well as agricultural and livestock programs.



The government and NGOs could also **INVEST MORE HEAVILY** in **SKILLS TRAINING** and invest in programs that **PROMOTE FOOD SECURITY** in the short-term

- **Improve caregiver-child relationships.** Children's keeping secrets from caregivers and having been ridiculed by a caregiver are risk factors for CSEC. Activities intended to improve parent-child relationships may help prevent CSEC both by reducing children's vulnerability to CSEC and also by increasing the likelihood that children may talk to their parents if they are being recruited by a trafficker.

- **Improve awareness of signs that children may be at risk of trafficking.** Although most adults could indicate at least one sign that a child may be at risk of trafficking, very few reported all the potential signs. Increased messaging on both the signs of trafficking and recommended actions

after recognizing these signs in children may help prevent child trafficking.

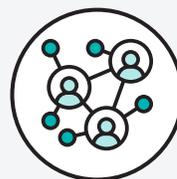
- **Strengthen the functioning of existing child protection referral mechanisms.** When cases of child abuse or child trafficking are identified, it is important to have robust systems for addressing the situation. Programs should work with cultural leaders and private sector actors, particularly in the transport sector to bolster adherence to the child protection regulations. Additionally, the government should increase funding to allow existing mechanisms to meet their mandate.



Programs should **WORK WITH CULTURAL LEADERS AND PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS**, particularly in the transport sector to bolster adherence to the child protection regulations. Additionally, the government should **INCREASE FUNDING** to allow existing mechanisms to meet their mandate.

- **Highlight the risk to boys in awareness raising campaign and ensure their are specific and sufficient services for boys.** Both boys and girls experienced high rates of CSEC, indicating a need to develop CSEC-prevention programming that targets boys as well as girls.

- **Promote inclusion of CSEC survivors.** Although most adults agree that CSEC survivors should be treated the same as everyone else, many adults indicate that this is not happening in practice. Programs encouraging the community to support CSEC survivors and facilitating discussions of what support could look like in practice could move residents beyond simply a theoretical belief in the inclusion of survivors.



**PROMOTE COMMUNITY INCLUSION** of CSEC survivors.



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

1. U.S. Department of State. (2018). 2018 trafficking in persons report: Uganda. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-trafficking-in-persons-report/%20uganda/>