CHILDLIGHT
Global Child Safety Institute

SEARCHLIGHT 2025
Technical Notes

Who benefits?

Shining a Light on the Business of Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

HUMAN DIGNITY FOUNDATION

THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

SEARCHLIGHT 2025

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Study G: Unmasking Exploitation: Study of Supreme Court Cases Reveals Changing Landscape of CSEA in the Philippines

1. Background

Despite worldwide efforts to combat child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA), the advent of the internet has not only globalised, but also intensified these crimes, making it easier for perpetrators to reach victims and operate anonymously (Long, 2023). The Luxembourg Terminology Guidelines (2016) defines child sexual exploitation as an act where a child is coerced or threatened to engage in sexual activity in exchange for any gain or benefit, whether through coercion, threats, or other factors like power imbalances. This is distinguished from other forms of child abuse by the notion of monetary or non-monetary exchange and often affects the most vulnerable children, particularly those in poverty or abusive situations (ECPAT International, 2016).

This definition has been adopted by the Philippine Republic Act 11930, known as the Anti-Online Sexual Abuse or Exploitation of Children (OSAEC) and Anti-Child Sexual Abuse or Exploitation Materials (CSAEM) Act, enacted in 2022. This new legislation defines child sexual exploitation as encompassing any act, regardless of apparent consent, that involves sexual abuse with monetary or nonmonetary consideration, favour, or benefit; actual intercourse with a child; and the use of fraud, manipulation, intimidation, threat, or deception. It also includes any related acts of abuse, cruelty, exploitation, or actions harmful to a child's development.

The term has been further expounded in the conceptual model that emerged from Laird et al.'s (2023) systematic review of child sexual exploitation, which defines it as an abusive act in which an individual or group exploits a power imbalance to use, force, coerce, and/or deceive a child or young person (i.e., individuals below the legal age of adulthood or otherwise considered by societal norms to be a 'child') into completed or attempted sexual activity, either online or offline. This can occur through (a) offering or actually exchanging the unmet needs or wants of the child/young person (e.g., for food, clothing, shelter, money, protection, belonging, affection, developmental needs, or anything of perceived value) and/or (b) use of the economic or social advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator, and this is (c) regardless of consent or who initiates or solicits the contact (e.g., child/young person or perpetrator, adult or peer).

The advent of the internet has introduced new forms of CSEA that allow

perpetrators to target victims globally, while maintaining anonymity (UNDOC, 2021). The growing use of online platforms for grooming, recruitment, and exploitation of children has blurred the boundaries between human trafficking and economic exploitation (ECPAT International, 2018). Studies also show that many perpetrators share similar traits, such as socioeconomic background, past abuse or a criminal history (Colley, 2019; Carpinteri et al., 2018; Krone et al., 2017) and often exploit power imbalances using manipulation, coercion, and threats to control their victims (Ali et al., 2023; Laird et al., 2023). The complexity and scope of their criminal activities have expanded because of the use of the internet and digital platforms, making it difficult for law enforcement to detect and prosecute offenders (UNDOC, 2021).

In particular, the Philippines has been identified as a global hotspot for the online sexual exploitation of children (ECPAT International, 2017). The country is also dubbed as a major source of child sexual abuse material worldwide (Blancaflor et al., 2022). Although legislative measures have been enacted, including the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act (RA 9208), the Anti-Online Sexual Abuse or Exploitation of Children Act (RA 11390), and the Anti-Child Pornography Law (RA 9775), children continue to be exploited using technology-based platforms (Gil, 2021). The International Justice Mission (IJM) highlighted a rapid rise in internet-facilitated exploitation, with cases linked to Philippine internet protocol addresses increasing dramatically from 43 per 10,000 in 2014 to 149 per 10,000 in 2017 (IJM, 2020).

Factors such as poverty, limited social protection, widespread English proficiency, and a facilitative financial transaction industry exacerbate children's vulnerabilities to online exploitation (Roche et al., 2023). Families in these situations often lack resources to address the risks associated with online exploitation (Myers & Bourdillon, 2012; Gabel, 2012). There are also issues with community perceptions of harm, as some people believe that children cannot be abused without physical contact, as the perpetrator is online (Ramiro et al., 2019). These challenges are compounded by shame, stigma, and inadequate responses, creating significant barriers to protecting children and addressing online exploitation effectively (Roche et al., 2023).

2. Rationale

Despite extensive research on child sexual exploitation, key limitations in understanding and addressing the issue persist. There is a research gap in exploring the intersection of online and offline child sexual exploitation.

Existing studies often treat these as separate phenomena and not as a reflection of overlapping areas of exploitation that intersect and influence each other. For example, research needs to examine how online grooming of children can lead to offline exploitation (Chiu & Quayle, 2022) and how perpetrators use both environments to exploit children (Ringenberg et al., 2022). Another gap relates to changing strategies and methods used by perpetrators (Cale et al., 2021). The rapid development of digital and communication technologies has made it possible for perpetrators to develop new ways to exploit children, but current research lags in keeping up with these evolving tactics, especially the use of emerging platforms such as iOS devices, social media, and encrypted communication channels (Demetis & Kietzmann, 2021; Joleby et al., 2021). Studies are needed to understand how these new technologies are being used for the purpose of child sexual exploitation.

There is also a lack of detailed comparative analysis of the profiles, roles and modus operandi of perpetrators involved in online versus offline exploitation (Christensen & Tsagaris, 2020). Few studies have focused on whether existing legal frameworks and law enforcement strategies have been effective in prosecuting cases of child sexual exploitation, especially when perpetrated online. Studies are needed to evaluate how effective current laws are in addressing the complexities of digital evidence and the unique challenges posed by online child sexual exploitation (Cullen et al., 2020; Simon et al., 2020; Toro Quezada, 2018).

This study is important for advancing our understanding of the complex dynamics of CSEA, both in offline and online platforms. Using secondary data from Philippine Supreme Court decisions, this study aims to uncover patterns of CSEA cases by examining the profiles and methods of perpetrators, as well as the law enforcement strategies used in addressing the problem. It is also important to understand the types of perpetrators who are not appearing in the Supreme Court data and not being held accountable for their crimes. Specifically, this study will focus on cases of commercial sexual exploitation of children, which is distinguished from the more general child sexual exploitation, with the latter specifically focusing on monetary gain and typically involving organised criminal activities where economic profit is the primary motive (ECPAT International, 2016).

3. Research questions and aims

3.1 Research question

has the shift from offline to online platforms transformed the nature and mechanisms of commercial sexual exploitation and abuse of children (CSEA), and what are the implications for prevention, detection, and intervention efforts?

3.2 Objectives

Our research objectives were to:

- Examine the profile of perpetrators of CSEA in terms of sex, roles and relationship with victims
- Investigate the methods of operation of perpetrators of CSEA in terms of scale, recruitment methods, geographic distribution, common places of exploitation, and amount of money involved in CSEA
- Compare the various forms or types of online and offline CSEA
- Examine the patterns of law enforcement strategies, including case pendency, methods of reporting and arrest

4. Study design and methods of data collection and analysis

This study employed a secondary data analysis approach, focusing on the retrospective review of court cases related to online and offline cases of commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) decided by the Supreme Court of the Philippines (see Appendix A on research methodology). The primary objective was to examine how the profiles and operations of perpetrators of CSEA, as well as law enforcement strategies, have evolved with the advent of digital technology through a comprehensive examination of legal records.

5. Study setting/information about the data source

5.1 Study site

The study involved accessing and analysing publicly available court records and legal databases maintained by the Supreme Court. As the highest court that handles cases from all regions of the Philippines, the data that can be derived from the records of the Supreme Court are comprehensive, thus providing a national perspective on CSEA. This allowed the study to capture

the geographic and regional trends in CSEA. As the final case arbiter, the decisions rendered by the Supreme Court are authoritative, representing the final legal judgment on cases. Thus, by focusing on Supreme Court decisions, only legally adjudicated cases of CSEC were examined, providing reliable and definitive legal outcomes that are crucial for analysing trends in the prosecution, sentencing and legal basis of cases. In addition, Supreme Court records are generally more accessible to the public than lower court records, facilitating easier data collection and verification. This accessibility supports the ethical conduct of the research, as publicly available data was used, minimising potential privacy concerns. The records of the Supreme Court also span a significant period, which enables a comprehensive understanding of the impact of digital technology on CSEA and how the profiles and methods of perpetrators have evolved over time. By focusing on Supreme Court decisions, a thorough and authoritative analysis of CSEA was ensured, contributing to evidence-based policymaking and enhancing protective measures for vulnerable children.

5.2 Data collection

Data were collected from Supreme Court records and legal databases (https://elibrary.judiciary.gov.ph/). Inclusion criteria encompassed cases decided by the Supreme Court between 2003 and 2024, following the enactment of the Anti-Human Trafficking in Persons Law (RA 9208).

A comprehensive search method was used to identify relevant cases using the publicly available Supreme Court e-library, using the following search terms:

> "child sexual exploitation," "online child sexual abuse," "child prostitution," "solicitation of children for sexual purposes," "sexual extortion of children," "grooming of children," "trafficking of children/minors", "child trafficking," "child exploitation," "child pornography," "human trafficking AND minors", "RA 9208," (Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003) "RA 11390," (Anti-Online Sexual Abuse or Exploitation of Children (OSAEC) and Anti-Child Sexual Abuse or Exploitation Materials or CSAEM Act), "RA 9775" (Anti-Child Pornography Act of 2009), "RA 7610," (Special Protection of Children Against Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act) and "RA 10175" (Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012)

Although some of these search terms have stigmatising components (ECPAT

International, 2016), such as 'child pornography,' and 'child prostitution,' they were used to search for relevant cases, as these terms often appear in Supreme Court decisions. These search terms were formulated upon consultation with the Advisory Board for the study, which consisted of legal experts on CSEA.

The search process was run from July to August 2024 and another search process was conducted in November 2024 to check for recent Supreme Court cases. A total of 622 cases were identified as potential cases for full-text screening in the first search run and 18 cases in the second. Four reviewers conducted the full-text screening of cases in August and September 2024. In cases of divergent opinions on eligibility, the reviewers deliberated, and unresolved disagreements were settled by the fifth reviewer. A total of 56 cases (43 from the first search run and 13 in the second search run) were included in the final review (see Table 1).

Table 1. Search and screening results

I. SEARCH PROCESS	
Number of records identified from Supreme Court database using search terms	July to August 2024 search process "child sexual exploitation" = 1 record "child trafficking" = 27 records "child prostitution" = 144 records "child pornography" = 16 records "trafficking of minors" = 7 records "online child sexual exploitation" = 0 record "grooming of children" = 4 records "trafficking of children" = 14 records "human trafficking" AND "minors" = 37 records "RA 9208" = 50 records "RA 11930" = 1 record "RA 9775" = 8 records "RA 7610" = 269 records "RA 10175" = 22 records **November 2024 search process (specifically looking for 2024 SC decisions):** "child trafficking" = 18 records (for 2024) **TOTAL: 640 records**

II. SCREENING PROCESS	
Excluded cases and reasons for exclusion	Other types of child abuse, and not about CSEA = 396 Case duplicates = 92 records Irrelevant cases = 120 Cases not within the reckoning period = 27 Cases not involving children = 3 Cases dismissed/acquittal = 2
Total number of cases included in the review	56 cases

5.3 Data extraction

A data extraction table (see Appendix B) with thematic headings was created specifically for this study to ensure consistency and accuracy in the data collection. This was pilot tested for at least three (3) court case records to check for data comparability. All relevant and key information were systematically extracted from each court case. The extracted information included the following: (1) demographic profiles such as age, sex, socioeconomic background, and roles of perpetrators and victims (if available); and (2) nature of CSEC including operational scales such as small-scale, family-run, large-scale and organised or syndicate operations, and different forms of online and offline CSEA. The study also retrieved information on perpetrator-victim relationships, methods of recruitment penalties and punishments imposed, the geographic distribution of cases, and case pendency. To anonymise the cases, unique codes from the Supreme Court's general register of dockets assigned to each case were used to protect the privacy of individual identities of victims.

5.4 Data analysis

A mixed-method approach was used, which combines both quantitative and qualitative data. Descriptive statistics were used in the quantitative data to summarise the demographic profiles of the perpetrators, operational scale and law enforcement strategies. Outcome measures included sex, roles and relationships of perpetrators with the victims, types of CSEA (online vs. offline), scale of operations, recruitment tactics, places of exploitation, geographic distribution of cases, forms and amount of CSEA, methods of reporting and arrest, and case pendency, which used statistical tools such

as mean, median, mode, frequency distributions, and percentages as relevant. A comparative analysis was also done to identify differences and similarities between online and offline CSEA, as well as profiles of perpetrators, based on Supreme Court documents and those in other CSEA prevalence and incidence studies.

The qualitative data analysis used thematic analysis in identifying common themes, patterns, and nuances related to the nature of CSEA, as well as the roles and modus operandi of perpetrators. Systematic coding of qualitative data was done, and themes were identified based on emerging patterns in the qualitative data. The research variables in Table 2 were coded and analysed. Using convergent mixed methods, all quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated in the analysis. This included combining statistical findings with thematic insights to provide a holistic understanding of the patterns, dynamics and contextual factors in CSEA.

Table 2. Research variables

Perpetrators' profile	Sex, relationship with victims, types of perpetrators, location
Methods of operation	Recruitment strategies, use of technology, nature of exploitation, facilitators/drivers, methods of payment, amount paid, type of operation, places of exploitation
Legal enforcement	Methods of reporting and arrest, sentencing patterns, legal reasoning, punishment/penalty charges imposed

6. Sample and recruitment

This study used a purposive sampling design, focusing on cases of CSEA, both online and offline, that have been decided by the Supreme Court of the Philippines. All eligible cases of CSEA that satisfied the following inclusion criteria were included in the study: (1) cases decided by the Supreme Court between 2003 and 2024, following the enactment of the Anti-Human Trafficking in Persons Law (RA 9208), which criminalises various forms of child sexual exploitation; (2) convictions related to CSEC, specifically involving acts where there is an exchange of monetary or nonmonetary considerations,

regardless of whether they were online or offline; and (3) cases involving children and/or minors as victims. Only cases that resulted in a final conviction were included, ensuring the data reflects legally adjudicated cases of CSEA. The exclusion criteria for cases included the following: (1) cases that did not involve any commercial aspects of child sexual exploitation, such as those solely involving non-commercial child sexual abuse without any form of exchange; and (2) cases currently under appeal or those for which the Supreme Court has not reached a final verdict. These cases were excluded to ensure that the study only includes legally resolved cases were analysed.

7. Ethical and regulatory considerations

As the Supreme Court records maintain anonymised data on CSEA victims to protect their rights and privacy, using existing court records reduces the risk of harm to victims and upholds ethical standards of publicly accessible data. Despite the public nature of the data on perpetrators, this study anonymised them by removing or coding any identifying information (e.g., names and addresses or exact location of the CSEA) that could directly or indirectly identify individuals involved in the case. Each case was assigned a unique code using the Supreme Court's general register of dockets to protect the privacy of individuals involved in the case.

As it was impractical to obtain consent from perpetrators and other parties involved in public court documents, this study sought a waiver of consent from the ERB. The waiver of consent is justified, as the research is in the public interest and the study poses minimal risk to individuals, because it uses publicly available secondary data. Moreover, further use and analysis of data that is freely accessible on the internet, in books, or in other public forums such as the Supreme Court e-library is generally permissible (Tripathy, 2013).

This study also involves distressing information such as details of CSEA crimes, thus it was essential to consider the potential risks posed to researchers. To mitigate these risks and ensure the well-being of the researchers, resources and support was provided for those experiencing emotional distress through a debriefing process. The study maintains transparency and accountability with stakeholders regarding its aims, methods, and outcomes.

7.1 Research timeline

The research was conducted over 12 months from March 2024 to February

2025.

Activities	First quarter			Second quarter			Third quarter			Fourth quarter		
Months	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Research fellowship training, research conceptualisation	■	■										
Drafting of research proposal		■	■									
Obtaining ethics clearance and RGAO registration			■	■								
Convening research advisory board			■									
Supreme Court database search and screening processes				■	■							
Data extraction					■	■	■					
Data analysis						■	■	■				
Write-up of the first draft of the research report								■	■			
Feedbacking to research advisory board										■		
Final draft of research report										■	■	
Research dissemination												■

7.2 Safeguarding and researcher well-being

The risk for this study was minimal.

7.3 Research approvals

To ensure compliance with ethical guidelines, technical approval for the study was first obtained from the Research Technical Committee of the Department of Behavioural Sciences of the University of the Philippines Manila (UP Manila). The study protocol was registered in the Research and Grants Administration Office of UP Manila as well as in Open Science Framework (OSF DOI 10.17605/OSF.IO/6954R). Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the UP Manila Institutional Review Board (UPM REB 2024-0484-01) and a secondary review and approval was provided through the Childlight research ethics sub-committee at the University of Edinburgh (ARSPP-AMA-0240924CL).

7.4 Study advisory committee and peer review

To ensure that the research was conducted ethically, effectively and with positive impact on the community, a team of research advisors, comprised of key stakeholders

was convened. The advisory board included: (1) a justice of the Supreme Court; (2) the executive director of the National Coordination Center against Online Sexual Abuse or Exploitation of Children and Child Sexual Abuse or Exploitation Materials (NCC-OSAEC-CSAEM); (3) the former dean of a law school and research head of the Philippine Judicial Academy; (4) a former prosecutor specialising in CSE cases; and (5) a representative from IJM, an international humanitarian organisation specialising in human trafficking and child protection. The advisory board provided subject matter expertise and insights on CSEA, helping to refine research questions, methodology, and analysis. Their feedback was essential to enhance the quality and credibility of the findings and to validate the research methods and findings to ensure the robustness and reliability of the study. The advisory board also helped to translate the findings of this study into practical policy recommendations, ensuring that the outcomes are actionable and can inform policymaking and legal frameworks. Their input will aid in improving practices related to child protection, law enforcement, and victim support services to combat child sexual exploitation.

7.5 Data management

Data extracted from the Supreme Court case were used only for the research purposes, as outlined in the research objectives. The results of the study are presented in an aggregate form with details redacted to prevent the identification of individuals involved in the case. The dataset is securely stored in a password-protected Google database of the University to maintain confidentiality. Access is restricted to the research team only, ensuring that the data remains secure and protected from unauthorised access, thereby preserving the integrity of the research. The data will be securely stored for the next five years after the completion of the study to allow for any possible follow-up analysis or verification process. After this period, all data will be permanently deleted to prevent it from being misused.

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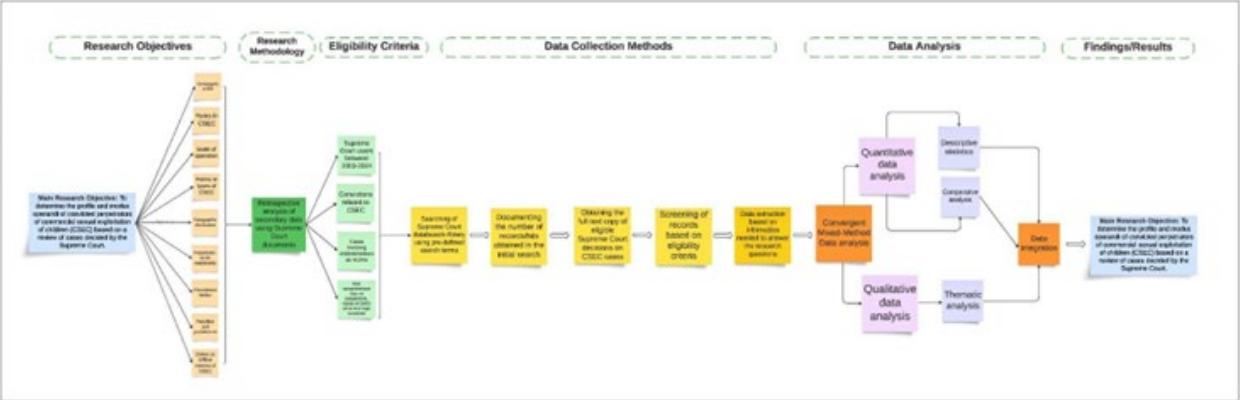
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Appendix A – Diagram of research methodology

Appendix B – Data extraction table

CASE DATA				
Supreme Court docket	Year crime was committed	Year of SC ruling	Methods of reporting and arrest	SC ruling and penalty imposed
PERPETRATOR DATA				
Sex	Role in the case		Relationship with victim(s)	Socio-economic background
VICTIM DATA				
Age	Sex	Socio-economic background	How victim met the perpetrator	Circumstances leading to victimisation
CSEA OPERATIONS				
Form/ type of CSEA	Scale of operation	Amount and economic transaction	Geographical location	Place/s of exploitation