



**Universiteit
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The Netherlands

Return to sender: a multi-method study of guardianship against transnational sexual exploitation of children

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Citation

Koning, A. (2023, June 22). *Return to sender: a multi-method study of guardianship against transnational sexual exploitation of children*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3594097>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Chapter 6

**Conclusions and
directions for the future**



6.1. Protecting children from sexual exploitation by travelers: Macro- and micro-level guardianship

Over the past three decades, sexual exploitation of children in the context of travel and tourism (SECTT), more popularly known as ‘child sex tourism’, has increasingly received attention from NGOs, activists, governments, news outlets, companies, and academics across the globe. The momentum to (be seen to) combat SECTT, thanks in a great part to the NGOs who put the issue on the international political agenda in the 1990s, has inspired governments worldwide to develop responses to combat SECTT. It has become widely acknowledged that “inaction on this crime can have serious social and economic consequences” (Hawke & Raphael, 2016, p. 13). Not acting is simply not an option.

Unfortunately, the lack of robust empirical research on the phenomenon inhibits effective action. In absence of “hard evidence” (Hawke & Raphael, 2016, p. 13; also George and Panko, 2011; Montgomery, 2008), responses were, perhaps inevitably, developed based on moral or political arguments and assumptions rather than an evidence-base. This starting point is problematic, because characterizations of a problem built on stereotypical narratives risk producing policies that do not adequately or accurately address the problem as it actually exists (Tyldum & Brunovskis, 2005). The empirical research that *has* been conducted on SECTT indicates that it is a complex, dynamic, and varied phenomenon, and that perceptions of the problem are often oversimplified or sensationalized (e.g. Miller, 2011; H. Montgomery, 2008). It seems that much of what we think we know about SECTT is based, at best, on expert opinions and untested assumptions, or at worst, on questionable estimations, veiled interests, and damaging stereotypes.

In what is perhaps the most accessible theory about the origins of crime, the ‘crime triangle’ proposes that crime occurs when a likely offender meets a suitable target in absence of a capable guardian (L. E. Cohen & Felson, 1979). Previous studies about SECTT have commonly described the phenomenon as a consequence of poverty and globalization; factors that, through the lens of the ‘crime triangle’, have turned individuals into suitable targets, and have made it easier for likely offenders to reach vulnerable victims. In these theoretical reflections on SECTT, I observed that the third leg of the crime triangle, guardianship, had been overlooked.

Against this backdrop, I sought to expand our understanding of SECTT beyond descriptions of individual victims as suitable targets due to poverty, or likely offenders who are now able to reach these vulnerable victims through the increased ease of travel of the past decades. Instead, this book examined perceptions of and responses against SECTT through the lens of guardianship. The overarching research question was: “In what way and to what extent are governments and members of the public in countries of origin and destination able and willing of enacting micro- and macro-level guardianship against transnational child sexual exploitation?”. I conceptualized two distinct types of guardianship relevant for responding to SECTT: micro-level guardianship, enacted

Table 6.1. Overview of main findings per chapter

Research question	Method	Main findings
<i>Part I: Macro-level guardianship</i>		
2 Which macro-level factors account for the variation in SECTT occurrence?	Quantitative analysis of global data sources on 190 countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SECTT destination countries are, on average, characterized by lower economic wealth and are located closer to the equator. • Destination countries do not differ from non-destination countries in their quality of government or number of incoming tourists. • Children's living conditions are overall poorer in destination countries, but the effect reverses when controlled for economic development. Within the group of countries with similarly poor economic conditions, SECTT is less likely to occur in countries with worse protection of children's rights to life and education.
3 How is the problem of SECTT represented (or 'framed') in policy discourse in the Netherlands?	Discourse analysis of 241 Dutch political and policy documents from 1995 to 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Kindersekstoerisme' is predominantly represented as a crime problem, which places emphasis on offender detection, international co-operation, awareness raising to increase notifications of suspicions, public-private partnerships, public engagement, and prevention of recidivism by already known offenders. • Contesting ways of understanding the problem, such as through a human rights or public health frame, are present only very occasionally. • By far the largest category of reported and proposed actions can be classified as purely facilitative, such as policy development or facilitating cooperation. It remains unclear how these responses (are expected to) help to address the problem. Evaluating policy outcomes or conducting research is seldom discussed. • The problem remains invisible, as evidenced by the absence of relevant statistics, descriptions of the phenomenon, or discussions about influential concrete cases in the corpus.
<i>Part II: Micro-level guardianship</i>		
4 To what extent do spatial and social distance to the crime location influence public perceptions about SECTT?	Vignette experiment among a representative sample of the Dutch public (N = 949)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social distance affects public perceptions of child sexual exploitation: public perceptions significantly differ between socially distant vignettes (Thailand, Romania) and socially close vignettes (Netherlands, U.S.). • Specifically, differences are observed in (a) perceptions of crime severity, with socially distant conditions judged as less serious than socially close conditions, and (b) victim blaming, with victims in socially distant conditions judged as less responsible than victims in socially close conditions. • Alternative hypotheses (spatial distance and home/abroad) are rejected.
5 Which barriers are associated with travelers' intent to report signals of SECTT abroad?	Survey among 728 travelers from five European countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of the phenomenon and intervention awareness decrease the perceived barriers and positively impact intent to report. • Barriers relating to the interpretation of the situation and cost-benefit reasoning inhibit travelers' intent to report. • Previous experience with observing signals of SECTT is associated with a lower intent to report.

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by individuals, and macro-level guardianship, enacted by institutions. Within these two parts, the four empirical chapters of this book specifically explored the role of (1) destination countries for SECTT; (2) government in an origin country; (3) the general public in an origin country; and (4) European tourists and travelers as bystanders. In the previous chapters, I investigated, presented and questioned the opportunities and obstacles for each of these actors to enact guardianship to prevent and stop sexual exploitation of children by transnational offenders.

In this final chapter, I first summarize the findings of the four empirical chapters and reflect on their outcomes through the lens of guardianship, the overarching theoretical framework of this book. The second section discusses the scientific contribution of this book, and presents suggestions for future research. I conclude with a general discussion of the main lessons of this book and recommendations for policy.

6.1.1. Macro-level guardianship by destination countries

The first empirical chapter of this book started with an exploration of macro-level guardianship in destination countries. While children can be exploited anywhere in the world, certain countries are particular ‘hot spots’ for SECTT. Activists and academics have put forth many ideas to explain why these countries are more vulnerable to be(com)ing destinations for transnational child sex offenders than others, such as “underdevelopment, poverty, marginalization, avarice, lack of empowerment, corruption, lackluster law enactment and enforcement, frail morality, and widespread insensitivity to the rights of children” (George & Panko, 2011, p. 137). Yet hardly any of the hypothesized risk factors that could allow SECTT to thrive in a specific country were substantiated by cross-national empirical research.

To gauge the validity of some of these common assumptions, *Chapter 2* tested hypotheses about country-level risk factors to be(come) a destination for SECTT. Using open source data from 190 countries, as well as systematic coding of the Trafficking in Persons Reports (US State Department, 2016, 2018), the study looked for differences in societal circumstances between those countries that are labeled ‘destination countries’ and those that are not. Building on the three elements of the crime triangle (L. E. Cohen & Felson, 1979), the study tested four hypotheses: (1) that countries visited by more tourists are more likely to be a destination for SECTT, because more potential offenders are entering the country; (2) that countries with more dire children’s living conditions are more likely to be a destination for SECTT, because there is a greater supply of potential victims; (3) that countries with lower quality of government are more likely to be a destination for SECTT, as this influences to what extent the government can act as a capable guardian; and (4) that countries with poor economic development are more likely to be a destination for SECTT.

The findings show that lack of economic development, measured by GDP per capita and distance to the equator, is the strongest predictor of where in the world children are sexually exploited by traveling offenders. SECTT destination countries are, on average, characterized by lower economic wealth and are located closer to the equator. Unlike previously assumed, when economic development is taken into account, the number of tourist arrivals and quality of government cannot convincingly explain why certain countries are a destination country for SECTT. The results for children's living conditions are unexpected: while bivariate analyses show that destination countries have poorer children's living conditions, a positive relation emerges in multivariate models when controlled for economic development. Within the group of countries with poor economic conditions, SECTT is more likely to occur in countries with *better* protection of children's rights to life and education.

The dominance of economic factors can be connected to this book's theoretical framework. Poverty creates a larger availability of potential victims, as well as motivating facilitators or pimps close to them. Global economic inequality also creates a power imbalance between these victims and the rich(er) offenders, creating a sense of entitlement. And governments of destination countries are less able to act as capable guardians in the circumstance of insufficient resources not just for the criminal justice system (to capture offenders), but also for education and health (to protect children). The poor economic circumstances in destination countries therefore influence all elements of the crime triangle: a supply of victims, motivated offenders, and a lack of capable guardianship.

In essence, this means that **at a macro level, the capability for destination countries to enact effective guardianship to protect children from sexual exploitation is limited by their economic development.** Paradoxically, the finding that SECTT is more likely to occur in poor countries with better living conditions for children implies that better child protection can coincide with a higher risk of SECTT if it is not accompanied by overall economic development. Since economic development is a particularly stable factor throughout time, shaped by historical global inequalities, this conclusion echoes an idea from the introduction of this book: namely, that globalization has created "winners" and "losers" in the world (Capistrano, 2015, p. 73; Ishay, 2023). I will return to the implications of this thought in section 6.3.

6.1.2. Macro-level guardianship by origin countries

Chapter 3 evaluated perceptions about SECTT as presented in the political and policy arena in the Netherlands. The study employed a critical discourse analysis of every relevant Dutch political and policy document on SECTT from 1995 to 2020. This study was founded on the idea that how we speak about issues reveals something about how we understand them. Inspired by Bacchi's 'what's the problem represented to be?' approach (2009), as well as building on previous literature about the way that human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation has been 'framed' (e.g. Charnysh et al., 2015; Cruz et al., 2019; Doezema, 1999; Farrell & Fahy, 2009; Gulati, 2011; Lobasz,

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2009; Pajnik, 2010), the study aimed to understand how the government of an origin country interprets the problem of SECTT. Examining these perceptions is an important first step in illuminating how the various actors perceive their responsibility to enact guardianship against this issue, and can shed light on their capability and willingness to enact guardianship.

The analysis showed that over time, Dutch politicians and policy makers have predominantly come to perceive SECTT through a crime frame. Put simply, this means that SECTT is understood primarily as a *crime* problem, which invites criminal justice initiatives, such as criminalization, offender identification by law enforcement, and prosecution, in response. This way of looking at the problem is visible in the majority of responses proposed to combat SECTT. Three categories of responses stand out. First, there are responses aimed at detecting and prosecuting offenders, as well as cooperating with international law enforcement to achieve this (e.g. through the deployment of policy liaison officers). A second category is prevention of recidivism by known sex offenders, for instance by blocking convicted sex offenders from working with children and restricting their freedom to travel abroad. The third type of response can be summarized as public-private collaboration aimed at boosting the effectiveness of investigative efforts, for instance by engaging with industry partners. Public engagement campaigns seek to mobilize members of the public to gather more reports for the benefit of law enforcement.

Alternative ways of understanding SECTT, for example as a *human rights* problem, are observed in the early days of the discourse, but are only occasionally observed in later years. The responsibility to ensure a dignified existence for all people would be a central tenet of a human rights frame. Rather than focusing on the role of individual evildoers, a human rights frame would underscore that the root of exploitation is found in systemic factors like poverty and inequality (Gulati, 2011). Instead, attention to circumstances and needs of destination countries (for instance through development aid) is limited in the discourse, and while the importance of protecting children is frequently asserted, victim-focused initiatives rarely materialize into concrete measures. Responsibility for child victims and victim support is transferred to destination countries and non-governmental parties.

Another alternative way to look at SECTT would be as a *public health* issue, which advocates for a holistic approach taking the needs of all involved parties into account (e.g. Chisolm-Straker & Stoklosa, 2017; Greenbaum, 2019; Willis & Levy, 2002), including those the crime frame would label as 'offenders'. In the case of SECTT, this could for instance include primary prevention, such as initiatives supporting people who struggle with feelings of sexual attraction to minors. However, except for the NGO-led hotline 'Stop It Now!' which reappears in the discourse almost yearly when extension of its funding is debated, primary prevention receives little attention.

Whilst acknowledging that the crime frame has conceivably been helpful to draw attention to the issue (Farrell & Fahy, 2009; Jenness, 2004), Chapter 3 argues that the Dutch plans to combat SECTT, with their narrow focus on repression and crime control,

can be characterized as one-legged. The representation of SECTT as a crime problem risks oversimplifying the issue to one of 'monstruous offenders', remaining silent about many other relevant aspects. To name just a few, it stays largely silent about victims, as victim-focused responses are sparse and primary prevention receives limited attention. It stays largely silent about people who struggle with a sexual attraction to children, who may not receive adequate support since they are solely addressed as potential or actual sex offenders. And it stays silent about the underlying, systemic causes of SECTT; about the connections of sex offending to mental health, and of sex work to cultural values and sexual agency; and about the connections of exploitation to global inequalities, colonization, imperialism, and centuries of exploitation of local populations in the global south.

A final aspect that stands out from the Dutch discourse on SECTT is the lack of curiosity about the effectiveness of the implemented responses. Despite the focus on apprehending offenders, only very few cases make it to court, which would suggest that the approach has seemingly failed to produce the desired outcome. The absence of relevant statistics, descriptions of the phenomenon, or even influential cases in the debates and documents leaves the phenomenon elusive, abstract, and hidden. Seeing that so little knowledge and data exists on the issue, conducting more research would be an obvious first recommendation; nonetheless, this action was rarely proposed. Instead, many responses could be qualified as more and better cooperation, facilitation, and policy development: an approach which could be caricatured as bureaucratic. It remains unclear which tangible results are being realized by this approach in the real world, but the lack of proper policy evaluation makes that question impossible to answer. To become more effective and credible, serious efforts are urgently needed to develop more concrete and result-oriented actions.

From the viewpoint of guardianship, these results demonstrate how perceptions about the problem of SECTT in the political arena can play out to shape a government's responses to enact macro-level guardianship to combat SECTT. While this Chapter chiefly examined the perceptions and responses of the government as macro-level actor, the results also have implications for sending country's willingness and capability to enact guardianship. **These findings invite reflections about the way in which sending countries can and want to effectively enact guardianship against SECTT.** For instance, what does the lack of insight in concrete outcomes of the current approach say about the capability or willingness to intervene on the part of origin countries? Are the ups and downs in political attention for SECTT over the studied 25-year period an indication of institutions' changes in willingness to intervene over time; and if so, what influences this? And, considering the narrow types of responses that politicians have taken so far, are origin countries truly willing to enact guardianship in a meaningful way, even when measures are not politically popular; or do the political actors merely want to be perceived as being willing?

6.1.3. Regular citizens as guardians

The second part of this dissertation (*Chapters 4 and 5*) examined the role of micro-level guardians: specifically, the general public. That regular citizens can guard against crime is not only widely theoretically accepted (Clarke & Eck, 2009; L. E. Cohen & Felson, 1979; M. Felson, 1995; M. Felson & Cohen, 1980; Reynald, 2011), but is also increasingly put into policy and practice. As was also demonstrated for the Dutch context in Chapter 3, contemporary governments have increasingly encouraged non-governmental 'partners' to 'take responsibility' for crime problems (Garland, 2001; Terpstra, 2010). Public engagement is believed to have particular merit in responses against hidden phenomena such as SECTT. Government initiatives in origin countries across Europe have sought to mobilize members of the general public. Typically, campaigns seek to encourage travelers in destination countries to report suspicions of child sexual exploitation they may witness while traveling abroad, thereby aiding the enactment of guardianship by law enforcement of countries of origin. Conceptually, this represents the enactment of indirect, informal guardianship (Reynald, 2014), but theoretical linkages can also be observed to work on bystander intervention and crime reporting by third parties (e.g. Latané & Darley, 1970; Piliavin et al., 1969). However, little was known about the perceptions that these members of the general public have about SECTT, or the willingness of travelers to enact guardianship by reporting signals of SECTT abroad. To contribute to this knowledge gap, Chapter 4 studied perceptions of SECTT among members of the general public in an origin country. Through a vignette experiment, the influence of spatial and social distance to the crime location on public perceptions about child sexual exploitation was examined among a representative sample of the Dutch public. Chapter 5 in turn investigated willingness to enact guardianship by exploring the barriers associated with travelers' intent to report signals of SECTT abroad. A survey was conducted among more than 700 respondents from five European countries (the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany and Austria) who had traveled abroad in the past five years.

The findings from these empirical chapters give reason for some optimism when it comes to the potential of members of the public to enact (indirect) guardianship. In Chapter 5, travelers generally rate their intent to report as quite high; however, their intent to report is also compromised by various obstacles. Chapter 4 demonstrates that the Dutch public perception of a case of child sexual exploitation is generally quite punitive; although this is not equal across crime locations. So far, this fits with previous research about public opinion about child sex offenses, which is generally among the most punitive (Mears et al., 2008; Stafford & Vandiver, 2017). A recent small-scale study showed similar negative perceptions about SECTT among Chinese tourists (Aston et al., 2022).

However, the results from these chapters also provide cautionary lessons about the reliance on guardianship by members of the public. Chapter 4, on public perceptions of the Dutch public, shows a significant effect of social distance on the public's perception of crime severity. Social distance to the country of destination impacts how the public

feels and thinks about an incident of child sexual exploitation. In other words, the Dutch general public evaluates child sexual exploitation as less serious when it happens in places, and to people, the public doesn't feel akin to. This finding, which is consistent with sociological and social psychological theories that predict that people have less empathy for people we don't feel akin to (using constructs like social distance, in-group favoritism, 'Othering'), has serious implications for the response to transnational child sexual exploitation, which by definition happens 'abroad'.

Beliefs about crime severity are not just found to impact members of the public's perceptions, but also their intended behavior. Chapter 5 identifies various obstacles that would prevent travelers from reporting signals of SECTT they may witness while abroad. Travelers' intent to report is inhibited by barriers related to the interpretation of the situation: travelers are less likely to report possible signals of SECTT if they are unaware of the phenomenon, if they interpret the event as ambiguous and not serious, and if they don't know where to report. Furthermore, negative expectations about the utility or effort of reporting coincide with a lower intent to report. Consistent with rational choice theories, it appears that cost-benefit reasoning is an important factor shaping travelers' intent to report. Interestingly, while awareness of SECTT is positively associated with intent to report, travelers who have previously observed signals of SECTT in real life are *less* inclined to report in the future.

In sum, based on criminological theories, we can expect there to be merit in engaging the general public as informal guardians. The results of this book give reason for some optimism, but also suggest that guardians who are *available* are not necessarily also *capable* and *willing* to disrupt crime opportunities. These findings correspond to Reynald's (2010) work on informal guardianship against residential burglary, which identified three dimensions of capable guardianship: an ability to detect potential offenders, willingness to supervise, and willingness to intervene when necessary (see also M. Felson, 2006). Sampson and colleagues (1997) similarly emphasized citizen's willingness to intervene on behalf of a common good, which, as an indication of a neighborhood's collective efficacy, reduced violent crime rates. Consistent with these perspectives, the findings from Chapters 4 and 5 indicate various challenges facing initiatives that rely on the general public to discourage SECTT in particular. In essence, these challenges are rooted in the fact that the success or effectiveness of these initiatives is dependent on how the public perceives an issue that, fundamentally, does not concern them or their own children. **In particular when applied to SECTT, it is therefore crucial to evaluate the potential utility of these guardians not just, or even not primarily, by their *availability* or *capability*, but also by their *willingness*.**

6.2. Strengths, limitations, and directions for future research

6.2.1. This book's contributions

This book makes several noteworthy contributions to the current literature, but also has limitations. This section will first discuss this book's theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions, before outlining limitations and suggestions for future research.

The book makes theoretical progress by applying an overarching perspective centered on the concept of 'guardianship' to SECTT. Since this third leg of the crime triangle has frequently been overlooked in research on sex crimes broadly, and on SECTT specifically, I decided to focus this book not on victims or offenders, but on actors who are not part of the primary crime event. The book extends existing approaches to guardianship by proposing that in the context of SECTT, guardianship should be conceptualized to include not just micro-level (individual), but also macro-level (institutional) guardians. Moreover, by incorporating the notion of guardians' willingness to intervene, alongside the traditional focus of guardianship literature on capable guardianship, into the central theoretical model (section 1.3), this book also advances our understanding of the importance of guardians' willingness to intervene, as well as the perceptions that shape both.

Guardianship is the red thread that sews the patches, the empirical chapters, together, into a colorful quilt. But this book also engaged with various other strands of scholarship to explore how governments and members of the public perceive and enact their responsibilities to respond to transnational sexual exploitation of children. Held together by guardianship as the red thread, the patches that make up this book each have their own colorful pattern, with the constituent chapters relying on theoretical frameworks from a range of academic disciplines, from criminology to social psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics and political science. The expectations and interpretations described in the studies collected in this book incorporated, amongst others, routine activity theories, economic theories of supply and demand, rational choice, situational theories, feminist and other critical theories, agenda setting and framing, 'what's the problem represented to be?', construal level theory, social distance, in-group favoritism and 'othering', ideal victim literature and belief in a just world, bystander intervention models, and scholarship on third party crime reporting, social distance and 'othering'. Therefore, the findings from the constituent studies, as discussed in more detail in the individual chapters, can contribute to a wide variety of social-scientific disciplines, theoretical frameworks, and methodological schools.

As established in the introduction of this book, SECTT is a unique research challenge, with research in this field having been described as "embryonic" (McPhee, 2014, p. 106). The studies in this book contribute empirically to research about this unique, challenging, and important research topic in three directions. First, this book tested risk factors which previously had widely been assumed to exist, and presented statistical evidence of the

systematic relationship of (geo-)economic variables with being a destination country for SECTT (Chapter 2). Second, this book expanded knowledge on the potential, role and responsibility of (citizens in) sending countries, whose role in the phenomenon had previously been overlooked outside of the legal discipline. In short, it returned empirical attention to the senders. Chapter 3 is the first to assess frames in public policy about SECTT in such a country of origin. This chapter illuminated certain blind spots (or silences in the problem representation) that SECTT policy in a European country of origin is founded on, which is an important starting point for policy recommendations to combat SECTT. Third, this book showed that the public's opinion of child sex crimes depends on crime location (Chapter 4), and provided insight into the reasons why travelers (fail to) report signals of sexual exploitation of children abroad through online reporting mechanisms, which could inform recommendations for public campaigns. Overall, by expanding empirical knowledge in these directions, this book contributed to "the work of a small pool of researchers who have taken it upon themselves to build upon a distinctively thin empirical base" in this field (McPhee, 2014, p. 106).

Another important contribution of this book, in line with its secondary aim, is its methodological progress in a research field where untested expert opinions and NGO reports with questionable methodological rigor have shaped most of what we know so far. As described in the introduction, the vast majority of academic literature to date could be categorized in two types: small-scale qualitative case studies among (potential) victims in countries of destination, and (socio-)legal discussions of legislative responses to combat SECTT. Rather than the types of methods that have been predominantly applied previously, the studies in this book were among the first to apply four different research methods and compiled four unique data sets, thereby demonstrating new, innovative ways to gain insight into (perceptions about) this phenomenon. Chapter 2 was the first study to develop a transparent protocol for systematic codification of the Trafficking in Persons Reports (US State Department, 2016, 2018) to test hypotheses about the prevalence of SECTT in a country. In contrast to earlier research on SECTT which typically focused on one or a few countries, this study used cross-national data to study risk factors at a *global* scale. The third chapter demonstrated the utility of using political and policy documents as data sources to gain insight into perceptions about SECTT. It is the first study to identify frames or problem representations specific to the phenomenon of SECTT. Its ambitious data collection strategy included 25 years of relevant documents about SECTT, and its analytical methods drew connections between SECTT and prior research on human trafficking. Chapter 4 used an experimental design on a representative sample of the Dutch public to study the effect of crime location: an understudied element in vignette experiments. While the methodology was inspired by a study previously conducted in the United States (Kosuri & Jeglic, 2017), the expansion to a 2x2 design illuminated theoretical explanations unexplored in earlier studies. Faced with challenges to conduct fieldwork during the global COVID-19 pandemic, the sensitivity checks conducted to confirm the robustness of this study's results illustrate how researchers can, to some extent, control for unintended effects.

Finally, Chapter 5 used survey data from hundreds of travelers from Austria, Germany, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. While this sample has its limitations, such as questionable generalizability, the cross-national nature, large sample size, and valuable data gathered through this method showcases the potential of this methodology for future research. This study also demonstrates the practical value of collaboration with NGOs in conducting this type of data collection. Overall, this book highlights some new possibilities for data collection on SECTT, despite the many challenges in researching this topic. In doing so, this book hopes to inspire a diversification of the methodological toolbox used to study this phenomenon in the future.

6.2.2. Limitations and directions for future research

Notwithstanding the advancements this book made to the field, each of the four studies and datasets discussed in this book also has its specific limitations. A few limitations concern (methodological) aspects that I would, with the knowledge of hindsight, change if I were to do the research again; these specific limitations to each of the four datasets and methodologies are described in more detail in the discussions of their respective chapters. Some other limitations concern cautions about the generalizability of the results due to the consequences of the composition of a specific sample: for instance, Chapter 5 is based on a non-representative sample, inviting concerns about the external validity of these findings. Most limitations, however, concern relevant research questions that fell outside the scope of this study. These blind spots, as well as my findings, provide directions for future research. In the following paragraphs, I offer an overview of these limitations and unanswered questions as suggestions for future research. My main recommendations relate to researching (a) other types of guardians, (b) the process of guardianship, (c) displacement, and (d) types of SECTT and SECTT offenders.

Other types of guardians

This book examined guardianship by two kinds of actors: formal, macro-level guardianship by *governments* (Chapter 2 and 3) and informal, micro-level guardianship by *members of the public* (Chapter 4 and 5). However, various other micro-level and macro-level actors may also contribute to the prevention of SECTT through guardianship (see Table 1.1). Future research should therefore be undertaken to examine guardianship by other actors, both at the macro level and the micro level.

Starting at the macro level, this book only examined formal actors (governments), which leaves a knowledge gap on the role and potential of *semi-formal and informal macro-level actors*, such as companies, religious institutions, NGOs, and the media. Furthermore, while this book made progress by shifting focus to a sending country other than the United States or Australia – the focus of most earlier research –, further research should be done on *sending countries other than the Netherlands* to enable comparison between origin countries. It is unclear whether the findings from Chapter 3 and 4, which were based on Dutch data, can be generalized beyond the Dutch context.

Another type of guardian that this book has left unexplored is *semi-formal guardianship by place managers* such as hotel staff. While in recent years, initiatives from the tourism sector, governments and NGOs have sought to raise awareness of SECTT among employees in the tourism industry, little is known about the effectiveness of these initiatives in increasing the capability and willingness of these semi-formal guardians to intervene directly or indirectly. Rather than these stand-alone initiatives, structural solutions should be investigated and pursued, for instance by evolving stand-alone campaigns into institutionally embedded tourism education curricula (see Edelheim et al., 2022).⁹⁹

Finally, this book did not explore *micro-level, informal guardianship by residents who live in SECTT destinations*, but instead focused on the (potential) bystanders and witnesses traveling from origin countries. While this focus fits with this book's ambition to return focus to the role of sending countries, guardianship by locals in SECTT destinations is a particularly relevant topic for future studies. Conflicting hypotheses can be drawn up about their capabilities and willingness to enact guardianship. From a routine activities perspective, the potential of local residents to control crime can be expected to be much greater than that of foreign travelers or tourists, since the routine activities of residents overlap much more with those of potential targets. Residents have frequently been the focus of earlier work on informal social control, for instance as informal guardians to prevent property crimes (Reynald, 2014), or to deter crime in neighborhoods by their community's collective efficacy (R. J. Sampson et al., 1997). Future research should examine to what extent insights from these lines of research translate to the communities in which SECTT occurs. Can the behavior of locals in SECTT destination countries be understood through the lens of collective efficacy, or are the economic, cultural, and social circumstances in these communities, which are typically located in the global south, too distinct from the 'metropolitan' context in which these theories originated (Carrington et al., 2016)?¹⁰⁰ Alternatively, the context and phenomenon of SECTT could be wholly different from the types of crime problems, such as burglary or violent crime, that these theoretical frameworks have previously been applied to. Perceptions that residents have about SECTT, and their willingness to intervene to stop it, could be fundamentally different from their willingness to intervene to protect their or their neighbor's property. Some may expect that informal guardians would be more willing to act to protect a child, since third parties have previously been found to be more likely to report and intervene in crimes that are perceived as more severe (Aiello, 2018; R. B. Felson et al., 1999; Galvin & Safer-Lichtenstein, 2018; Nicksa, 2014). An alternative hypothesis takes into account that, in some parts of the world, the commercial sex

99 Some NGOs have developed efforts in this direction; for instance, the Dutch NGO Defence for Children - ECPAT developed e-learning modules for staff in hotels and vacation parks to recognize signs of exploitation (Centrum voor Criminaliteitspreventie en Veiligheid, n.d.).

100 Answering this question should be about more than just testing whether the theoretical insights from metropolitan centers can be 'confirmed' in the world's peripheries. As Wieringa and Sívori (2013, p. 2) explain: "Dislocating [research] from an exclusively metropolitan perspective means not just looking at those issues from different locations, but primarily asking different questions, addressing the asymmetries of power involved in processes of globalization."

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sector serves as a means of income, employment, survival mechanism and method of coping with a lack of social welfare for large segments of society (Lim, 1998).¹⁰¹ The child sex trade is intricately interwoven with the regular (formal and informal) sex sector (O'Connell Davidson, 2004, 2005), which in turn significantly contributes to national and local economies (Lim, 1998). In this context, more research on the perceptions, willingness and capabilities of local residents as potential informal guardians about SECTT is paramount.

The process of guardianship

This book's theoretical model (described in 1.3 and Figure 1.1) proposed that whether and how an individual guardian acts is determined not just by their capability, but also by their willingness. These in turn can be influenced by a wide array of perceptions, beliefs, experiences, and emotions. The empirical chapters in this book demonstrate the added value of broadening our understanding of guardianship beyond the 'capable guardian', and showed that guardians' beliefs, perceptions and opinions about the crime problem are relevant elements for those seeking to understand why and when guardianship for crime prevention succeeds or fails. Nevertheless, the four studies in this book could illuminate some parts and steps of this theoretical model, and left others unexplored. There is abundant room for further progress in systematically *testing each step of this theoretical model*: from perceptions to willingness to intervene and to capability, and from guardians' willingness and capability to their behavior of enacting guardianship. Research questions that follow from this book's findings include for instance: (i) How precisely do beliefs and perceptions influence the enactment of guardianship, such as reporting behavior? (ii) what could explain why people who had previously seen signals of SECTT were less likely to report (as found in Chapter 5)? In other words, how can previous experiences change guardians' willingness to intervene? And (iii), what is the role of neutralization techniques in shaping guardians' willingness to intervene in a crime problem like SECTT? This is a particularly poignant topic for future research in light of public perceptions that don't always seem to agree on the seriousness of SECTT as a crime problem worthy of intervention (Chapter 4).

The limited scope of this book is also reflected in its lack of attention for *the effects of enacting guardianship*. What happens after the final step in the theoretical model? Does the chosen behavioral intervention or presence by the guardian effectively prevent crime, as the crime triangle would stipulate, and under which circumstances? Put differently, to what extent does the willing and capable guardian live up to its potential as "the ultimate protector and defender of people and property against criminal violations" (Reynald, 2011)? Regarding macro-level guardianship, this question translates into an appeal

101 "How can we talk about prevention," summarized social workers in the Philippines, "when the mother is a prostitute, the father is a pimp, the uncles and brothers are pimps and often drug pushers as well, and sometimes even the grandmother was a prostitute. We are talking about generations that have had prostitution as the only avenue open to them for making a living." (Abreu, 1991, pp 3-4; in Lim, 1998).

for more research on *the effectiveness of policy measures* to combat SECTT. When a government decides to act, and how, what are the outcomes? Unfortunately, this question is easier asked than answered. Keeping in mind the findings of Chapter 3, which showed a level of disinterest in evaluating the outcomes of policy in the political discourse, research into effectiveness may not be a political priority. A skeptical interpretation would be that politicians may be more interested in being seen to act than in what the effects of their actions are. But even if we assume willingness and cooperation by governments, carrying out research on effectiveness is also practically and methodologically near impossible, due to the lack of reliable data sources on the outcome measure of policy evaluations: the prevalence of SECTT. Methodological advancements, coordinated data collection initiatives, and cooperation with NGOs and government agencies are recommended if we are to collect the data necessary to conduct evaluative research in the future. However, while the difficulties of evaluative research on SECTT prevention may feel defeating, evaluating policy's effect on mechanisms that are expected to influence SECTT appears to be, at least for this moment, more attainable. For instance, what are the policy outcomes with regards to alleviation of poverty? To what extent are measures improving children's living conditions and leading to a more effective protection of their rights? And are campaigns successful in mobilizing guardianship by bystanders against SECTT?

Displacement

Another avenue for future research concerns the issue of displacement. A well-known issue in situational crime prevention, displacement is a concern applicable to all place-based responses: simply put, it is the idea that increasing surveillance or guardianship in one place could move crime to other places rather than prevent it. If you put stronger locks on your house, will the burglars target the neighbors instead? In the case of SECTT, (potential) SECTT destinations with high (or increasing) levels of macro-level guardianship could shift or displace SECTT to other countries in the region. Conversely, if a country is perceived as more lax than its neighbors, it may become a more attractive destination for SECTT. This issue was left unexplored in this book. While Chapter 2 demonstrated the importance of economic development in shaping where in the world SECTT occurs, it has not investigated whether it is (only) economic development in absolute terms that matters, or economic development compared to other (neighboring) countries. Put differently, these observations invite research into guardianship in relative rather than absolute terms. More research needs to be undertaken to understand potential unintended side-effects of enacting guardianship, and whether and under which conditions displacement occurs.

In addition to displacing to neighboring countries, displacement of certain types of crime, including SECTT, to cyberspace is also a significant concern. In recent decades, technological advancements have increasingly provided opportunities for sexual exploitation of children through digital environments, for example by facilitating the exchange of child sexual abuse material or by enabling those with a sexual interest in

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children to connect with like-minded individuals in online communities (Kloess & van der Bruggen, 2021; Steel et al., 2020; van der Bruggen & Blokland, 2021). Offenders no longer have to physically cross a country border to abuse a child on the other side of the world. 'Live-streaming' child sexual exploitation in particular has been likened to SECTT, because it enables offenders to abuse a child on the other side of the world *in real time*, often on demand, via webcam. While like SECTT, this problem is inherently transnational, the offender does not physically travel and can engage in the abuse from the comfort of the Internet in their own home. This phenomenon raises important questions about how to enact guardianship in cyberspace. Since academic studies into this specific form of technologically facilitated (or 'live-streaming') child sexual exploitation are still in its infancy (but see Açar, 2017; R. Brown et al., 2020; Dushi, 2020; Internet Watch Foundation, 2018; Salinari, 2018; Terre des Hommes, 2013b), this phenomenon should be a priority for research wishing to contribute to prevention in this rapidly moving field.

In addition to displacement to other countries or online environments, some would say that the issue of displacement is in fact central to the existence of SECTT. It has been argued that transnational child sex offending exists mainly because child sex offenders escape abroad, away from the watchful eyes of law enforcement in their home country, to a new place where they feel anonymous, where regulations may be less stringent, and the criminal justice system less effective at formal guardianship (ECPAT International, 2008; Johnson, 2011; M'jid, 2012; Thomas & Mathews, 2006). This argument makes several implicit assumptions about the motivations and careers of transnational child sex offenders and the nature of SECTT: for instance, it implies that SECTT offenders were already motivated offenders before they planned the trip and traveled. It also implies that transnational child sex offenders are essentially the same as other types of child sex offenders in most characteristics and risk factors, except for the traveling behavior by one of these groups to escape high levels of guardianship in their home country. Research to date has not substantiated these assumptions, but it has barely scratched the surface of answering them empirically. More research on individual risk factors and characteristics of SECTT offenders is needed to be able to inform more effective policy. The literature on SECTT would benefit from studies into the differences between SECTT offenders and other types of child sex offenders. To what extent do the characteristics, risk factors, and criminal careers of child sex offenders and SECTT offenders overlap? Does transnational SECTT fit in a pattern of escalating criminal behavior for career child sex offenders, who may also possess child sexual abuse material, engage in live-streaming child sexual exploitation, or abuse children in their home country? Or should transnational SECTT be seen as a distinct phenomenon, where the different cultural setting, the 'holiday'-vibe, or the anonymity has influenced a traveler's ideas of right and wrong to such a degree that they do things they would never do at home? Answering these questions can provide important starting points for policy recommendations for more effective prevention of SECTT.

SECTT offenders

This book has been unique in its focus on guardianship to combat SECTT, rather than conducting research on the phenomenon of SECTT. However, gaining a more complete and accurate picture of SECTT offenders and their behavior could improve guardians' capability to recognize them. Further research should therefore be conducted to expand our understanding of different types of SECTT offenders. Having considered elements of guardianship that this book has left unexplored, I also suggest some avenues for future research on this other leg of the crime triangle.

As described in the introduction, the image of the 'typical' SECTT offender has gone through a noticeable transformation in recent decades: from the pedophile going on specifically designed sex tours, to the current dominant image which includes a wide variety of offender types in the context of tourism and travel. The findings from Chapter 2 indicate that mass tourism alone is not a predicting factor for destination countries of SECTT. This implies that offenders could be tourists, but also business travelers or migratory workers, as well as emigrated sex offenders working at schools or orphanages abroad. The question is if it ends there. If the answer to who is a likely offender for SECTT is, as Miller-Perrin and Wurtele (2017) claim for all forms of child sexual exploitation, 'transient adult males', then other traveler types could also 'fit the profile' for SECTT. With this in mind, the potential interlinkages and overlap between SECTT and these transient contexts frequented by men, such as international sporting events (e.g. Castilho et al., 2018; Finkel & Finkel, 2015; Florence et al., 2016; Van Blerk et al., 2019)(e.g. Castilho et al., 2018; Finkel & Finkel, 2015; Florence et al., 2016; Van Blerk et al., 2019; but see Ham, 2011; Hayes, 2010; Matheson & Finkel, 2013) and military or peacekeeping missions (e.g. Burke, 2014; Higate, 2007; Kehoe, 2019), need to be explored. On the other hand, the image that sex tourism by women is motivated by a search for love or romance rather than sexual gratification (I. L. Bauer, 2014; Chege, 2017; Ranasinghe, 2017; Spencer & Bean, 2017) could have contributed to a blind spot for SECTT by female offenders. How such perceptions could shape the willingness and capability of guardians to prevent SECTT by female and other 'non-(stereo)typical' offenders is open to future research.

One notable issue that fell outside of the scope of this book was SECTT by domestic travelers. As explained in the first chapter, my definition of SECTT conceptualized the phenomenon as transnational. This demarcation essentially perceives domestic child sex offending as a different or separate problem, which could be problematic when these issues can conceptually and practically overlap. However, opportunities for enacting guardianship may be quite distinct for transnational or domestic offenders. Conceivably, domestic child sex offenders present their own challenges to guardianship by both macro- and micro-level guardians. For instance, members of the public may not be able to recognize domestic offenders as easily as they would recognize abuse by foreign travelers, who may stand out more in a crowd due to their ethnicity, language, attire, or behavior. Government measures typically also approach child sexual exploitation perpetrated by their own citizens through different policy frameworks or laws, for

instance on 'child prostitution', than when they are perpetrated by foreign travelers. Future research should investigate these expectations.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that research on the phenomenon, victims, or offenders of SECTT is not just hampered by the phenomenon's hidden, invisible nature, but also by the added societal pressure, personal work, and moral and ethical dilemmas involved in studying and reporting about such a high-profile, emotive, and complex topic. As scholars on various other forms of child sexual abuse and child sex offending have highlighted (e.g. H. Montgomery, 2007; Wortley, 2015), the difficulty in studying this topic lies not just in methodological puzzles, but also in managing emotional responses. This can be an intimidating prospect to many academics in the current climate of abundant public concern, popular myths and moral panics about child sexual victimization, where pedophiles are perceived as one of "the key hate figures of our time" (Jervis, 2015, p. 166; Klein, 2017; Schiavone & Jeglic, 2009; Stafford & Vandiver, 2017). Child sexual abuse is virtually unparalleled in its ability to generate outrage, disgust and confusion (Cockbain & Reynald, 2016). Not only must researchers navigate our own emotional responses to the subject matter, resolve moral and ethical dilemmas, and challenge our own internal biases (see H. Montgomery, 2001, 2007 for refreshing examples), but scholars in this field also have to skillfully, diplomatically, and truthfully anticipate and manage the public response to our research findings. Acknowledgement of and awareness about these obstacles, as well as institutional support to guide researchers, especially young academics, through them, is crucial if we are to expand the "small pool of researchers" in this field to at least a more densely populated and diverse pond (McPhee, 2014, p. 106).

6.3. Where do we go from here? Reflections for more effective responses

This book has illustrated different ways and extents that governments, on the one hand, and members of the general public on the other, are capable and willing to guard against transnational child sexual exploitation (SECTT). The findings from the collection of studies in this book explored the opportunities and obstacles for different forms of guardianship for SECTT in both destination and origin countries. In addition to the more concrete recommendations for practice that were elaborated in the individual chapters, this section offers two overarching reflections on the implications of these findings for the way we respond to SECTT. Venturing beyond my research questions, I build on the wider implications of my findings, as well as SECTT scholarship to date and other relevant theoretical perspectives. My reflections for more effective responses against SECTT are discussed in two parts.

Summary: Two concluding reflections

1. *Are our perceptions of SECTT consistent with what it looks like in reality?*
Question and change perceptions of SECTT: base policy on evidence-based, scientific research about SECTT rather than assumptions, and challenge narrow perceptions about SECTT in public awareness campaigns.
2. *Which root causes can we uncover and address if we consider SECTT as a symptom of a deeper disease?*
Look at SECTT as a symptom of a deeper disease. Consider, uncover, and address root causes.

6.3.1. Question perceptions of SECTT

Oversimplified perceptions of the problem render “uncomplicated what is, in reality, an enormously complex policy field: one that spans welfare, housing, education, tourism development, employment, as well as criminal justice, and one fraught with contradictions and political dilemmas for anyone concerned with rights and freedoms” (Cruz et al., 2019).

An effective approach to SECTT “does involve a much more nuanced view of [the problem], which does not make excuses for it, but looks honestly at the causes, the effects and the possible and practical solutions to it.” (H. Montgomery, 2001, p. 13)

This book has argued for the importance of perceptions in determining how capable and willing guardians are, and in turn, in determining whether and how guardianship is enacted. The way we look at a problem matters. Stereotypical, or otherwise erroneous or incomplete, perceptions of the problem are problematic. Governments can only make effective policy if it is built on an accurate assessment of what the problem looks like in practice. To establish this knowledge base, much more scientific research needs to be done on this phenomenon. Likewise, bystanders, i.e. citizens, can only act (more) effectively if they know what to look out for.

Part II of this book focused on the potential of these bystanders by examining how citizens could enact guardianship to protect children from transnational offenders. The findings identified obstacles that could hamper the effectiveness of public reporting campaigns. To aid policy efforts, I offer several suggestions of how campaigns aimed at encouraging reports from the public may be improved below, based on the findings of this book. Overall, those tasked with developing campaigns for the general public should, keeping in mind the specific context of SECTT, ask *what could help members of the public to be able to fulfill the role that is expected of them*. For instance, while residents who protect their neighborhood from burglary can identify observable ‘suspicious’

behavioral cues (Reynald, 2010), it is probably much more difficult to distinguish between benevolent individuals and potential offenders of SECTT. What does suspicious behavior even look like in the case of sexual child exploitation abroad? Can travelers accurately spot suspicious situations, or are their perceptions clouded by the 'SECTT myths' described previously (Chapter 1.4), and their reports therefore limited to descriptions of middle-aged white men spotted with someone who looks like they may be underage? If public engagement campaigns are to be effective, public campaigns would do well to consider these obstacles and attempt to educate the intended audience using concrete examples.

Implications for public engagement campaigns

- I. Public engagement campaigns should improve travelers' *awareness of the problem*, not just by emphasizing and describing that the problem exists, but by educating them about what it looks like (Chapter 5). Although sharing emotive or stereotypical images may feel like an effective solution to mobilize the public, it can hamper the effectiveness of the response in the long run.
- II. To increase reports by the public, authorities should be aware that bystanders may not report signals of SECTT because they are not convinced of the seriousness of the problem (Chapter 4 and 5). People may feel that the issue is socially removed from their reality. Public reporting campaigns should *aim to convince the audience of the severity of SECTT* in ways that take the effect of perceived social distance into account.
- III. Since public perceptions about child sexual exploitation depend on the country in which the crime takes place (Chapter 4), efforts to mobilize public guardianship against SECTT must be designed for that specific context. Combining SECTT with campaigns to combat domestic child sexual abuse are less likely to be effective.
- IV. Since lower intervention awareness hampers intent to report (Chapter 5), public reporting campaigns should *increase travelers' 'intervention awareness'*. Describe clearly and specifically *how* bystanders are expected to act, and which possibilities they have to report suspicious signals.
- V. Since cost-benefit reasoning inhibits intent to report (Chapter 5), public reporting campaigns should aim to *reduce the costs (e.g. effort)* associated with reporting, while also *emphasizing the benefits* of reporting. Think for instance of sharing examples of success stories, or demonstrating the utility of reporting by illustrating what happens when reports are received.

In formulating these recommendations, I have left the normative question (i.e. whether citizens *should* be expected to enact guardianship) to the legislator. I do invite policy makers to engage in a critical reflection on the matter of responsabilization of members of the public, specifically travelers, in combating SECTT. Are the expectations placed on members of the public reasonable, or has responsabilization become a knee-jerk reaction to target this invisible problem? Given the immense lack of evidence-based knowledge about what SECTT looks like in practice, can travelers realistically be expected to accurately assess which signals are ‘suspicious’, if we, scientists and policy makers, don’t even know what to look out for? Once again, the need for research, highlighted previously, cannot be overstated. To paraphrase Montgomery (2001, p. 13), research on its own will not be a panacea to the problem of child sexual exploitation, but it is where intervention must start.

6.3.2. SECTT as a symptom of a deeper disease

“How can we have a just sexuality in an unjust world?
How can we make sexualities democratic in an undemocratic world?
How can we make sexualities free in an unfree world?
And how can we make sexualities equal in an unequal world?
With great difficulty, is the answer. (...) What is required is a focus on changing the
inequalities of a wider social order.” (Plummer, 2015, p. 174)

“Ask a local in a third world tourist destination [what tourism means to them],
and they may well tell you that it’s about selling: selling their environment,
their culture and their services to the guest”
(Wolf, 1993, p. 15; in Dahles & Bras, 1999)

As described in the introduction to this book, there is growing academic attention for the context in which SECTT takes place, as well as consensus that the issue is more diverse than may be commonly assumed. Chapter 2 of this book contributes to this debate and provides compelling evidence of the importance of systemic, economic factors in determining where in the world SECTT takes place. Yet despite their importance, it appears that underlying factors have hardly received attention in policy or political discussions. As Chapter 3 illustrates, when a government settles on approaching a problem through the lens of criminal justice, emphasis is primarily placed on apprehending offenders, and less on the context in which the issue occurs or, indeed, the more profound ‘disease’ that it is symptomatic of. While the focus on managing ‘pedophile’ offenders may be a “morally satisfying position” (H. Montgomery, 2001, p. 13) for countries of origin, I have argued that this focus is too narrow, inspires one-legged policy, and does not necessarily bring about long-term solutions. Simplified narratives of ‘dangerous offenders’ and ‘powerless victims’ keep the focus squarely on controlling these evildoers, and risk ignoring those systemic inequalities that limited the

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opportunities of victims to end up where they did, as well as the interlinkages of SECTT to legitimate tourism and sex work (George & Panko, 2011; McPhee, 2014; H. Montgomery, 2008; O'Connell Davidson, 2004).

The focus on superficial solutions highlights a trend “peculiar to our times that makes it far easier to address symptoms rather than treat the deeper social disease” (Dewey & Conover, 2012, p. 190; also Bauman, 2000). Moral panic about sex offenders and pedophiles could be expected to amplify this tendency (Gooren, 2016; Stafford & Vandiver, 2017; Vandiver et al., 2017), as quick ‘solutions’ are demanded from law-makers without much regard for these measures’ effects. The lack of attention and efforts towards ‘solving’ the root causes of SECTT, as illustrated in Chapter 3, can also be interpreted as a sign that SECTT is a ‘wicked’ problem,¹⁰² since wicked problems can, themselves, be considered a symptom of another problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Moving forward, policy makers should evaluate whether they are getting to the root of the disease, or only managing some of its symptoms. The evidence in this book indicates that currently, responses appear to only scratch the surface. The public discussion and the responses must move beyond by addressing the underlying problem that shapes the opportunities for these offenses in the first place.

One such deeper issue is the value given to foreign capital over and above local interests. As travel became cheaper, easier, and accessible to an increasing number of privileged people,¹⁰³ and developing economies became more dependent on tourism-based income, global interests have frequently prevailed over local needs. The local impacts of some contemporary capitalist practices become especially tangible when the victim is, as is frequently the case, vastly less powerful to stand up to corporate interests. When we examine negative impacts of the travel industry, we can draw a parallel from sexual exploitation of children to environmental degradation of tropical destinations for the benefit of tourists. Dewey and Conover (2012) assert that these are

102 A concept developed by Rittel and Webber (1973), wicked problems seem very difficult to understand and to solve. There is no one agreed solution, or indeed clear problem definition. As such, wicked problems are often associated with “social pluralism (multiple interests and values of stakeholders), institutional complexity (the context of interorganizational cooperation and multilevel governance), and scientific uncertainty (fragmentation and gaps in reliable knowledge)” (Head & Alford, 2015, p. 716). These elements can also be distinguished in responses to SECTT, which involve many different stakeholders, significant knowledge gaps, and high institutional complexity. While Rittel and Webber (1973, p. 165) argue that “there is nothing like a natural level of a wicked problem,” they also acknowledge that “one should not try to cure symptoms: and therefore one should try to settle the problem on as high a level as possible.”

103 Seabrook (2000, p. xi) remarks on this point that: “Sex tourism is itself a consequence of globalization, of the ease with which privileged people can now move around the world. This facility is, of course, not extended to the poor. Quite the contrary. The prohibition upon the free movement of poor people, in contrast to goods and money, should not be ignored in this context.” On a grander scale, critical scholars have argued that freedom of choice and mobility, central tenets of Western, neoliberal democracies, are often skewed to a privileged minority, and that globalization has further widened the gap (Plummer, 2015; see also Bauman, 2000; Cheah, 2006).

manifestations of an underlying ‘social decay’, where tourist dollars are prioritized over child protection, nature conservation, or other local interests. Tourist sites have been described as “dispensable space”, where the (cultural and ecological) needs of local communities are secondary to the requirements of intensive tourism development to attract transnational capital (Routledge, 2000, 2001). When left unhindered and unregulated, the focus on economic growth through tourism income therefore risks to sacrifice child protection and other local interests at its altar.¹⁰⁴

Digging deeper, this issue can itself be said to be rooted in even higher-level causes, as is clarified by asking *why* developing countries fail to protect some of their children from sexual exploitation by foreigners. The uncomfortable answer to that question exemplifies how SECTT can be traced back to inequalities in wealth and power (Hawke & Raphael, 2016), both between ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries (macro level), and between offender and victim (micro level). While some emphasize destination countries are “vulnerable” and incapable of effectively enacting guardianship due to a lack of capacity (e.g. Carrington et al., 2016, pp. 9–10; Dandurand, 2011), and others argue a lack of willingness to intervene due to economic incentives to stimulate tourism (e.g. Bales, 2004, p. 75; Lim, 1998, p. 183), both explanations can be traced back to economic underdevelopment and vast inequalities between nations; inequalities that are, themselves, connected to histories of imperialism, colonialism, forced labor, and dispossession, which have shaped the world in which we live.

In addition to economic exploitation, colonized states have also been socially shaped by cultural invasions. It is not difficult to find examples of how the fate of sexually exploited children today was shaped by the subordination and repression of colonial times. Take Jamaica for example, which, like more than forty other former British colonies, has inherited British legislation against homosexuality (Plummer, 2015). Nowadays, the experiences of Jamaican male sex workers show how the criminalization of homosexuality and widespread homophobia on the island “played a driving role” in their entry into sex work when under the age of 18, by restricting the choices and opportunities available to them (Cruz et al., 2019, p. 205).

In this way, an issue that seems rooted in the local economic, political, social and cultural context of destination countries, upon deeper inspection returns also to the role and responsibilities of the senders. Historically, sending countries have played an important role in creating and maintaining global power imbalances and inequalities that SECTT is a symptom of. Ultimately then, this book, along with a growing body of activist and scholarly literature, urges the global community as a whole to address the root causes of this phenomenon. Simplified narratives about ‘monstrous offenders’ allow countries of origin, typically in the global north, to continue to shirk responsibility to make

104 Examples of global economic or corporate interests being valued over local interests of course extend way beyond the travel and tourism industry. Think for instance of transnational corporations’ extraction of natural resources, which is prioritized over the interests of local people and indigenous communities in developing countries, a practice that has been related to state-corporate crime (Böhm, 2023; see also Banerjee, 2008; Kramer et al., 2002).

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reparations to countries in the global south that they have exploited for centuries. If we are to have any chance of, if not solving, than at least coping with this complex problem, governments and public-sector organizations from sending countries must acknowledge and address the described inequalities and complexities rather than sidestepping them.

Acknowledging the deeper causes of SECTT may not only be uncomfortable because it challenges existing power dynamics, but also because “the higher the level of a problem’s formulation, the broader and more general it becomes: and the more difficult it becomes to do something about it” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 165). In his book on modern slavery, Bales (2004, p. 253) argues: “It would be so much easier to understand and combat [SECTT] if there were clear good guys and bad guys, if all [offenders] were cruel and all [victims] yearned for freedom, if the solution to all [exploitation] were simply to set [victims] free. But (...) liberation is a bitter victory if it leads only to starvation or [revictimization].” Here lies a fundamental difficulty for responding to SECTT. This book offers no ‘quick fix’ recommendations: there are no quick fixes or simple solutions. In the face of root causes of a problem that are so large, intangible, and systemic, it may be hard not to become fatalistic about what can be done. It may be tempting to conclude that grappling with it is a futile endeavor. To paraphrase Head and Alford (2015), why bother with a problem that is virtually impossible to comprehend, and where any solution points to more problems?

Perhaps we can find some hope and comfort from the ‘crime triangle’ once more. Recall that in its straightforward design, it points to three elements of interference for crime prevention: controlling likely offenders, emancipating suitable targets, and finally, enacting guardianship. With this in mind, while acknowledging the existing difficulties of addressing SECTT, let alone its roots causes, as a starting point, I suggest that policy makers’ and politicians’ first step should be to replace superficial perceptions and problem representations of SECTT by higher-level perceptions that acknowledge the diverse, dynamic, and complex nature of the problem. Thinking about the problem of SECTT more broadly and holistically allows greater room to discover alternative ways of enacting guardianship to combat it. If SECTT can indeed be understood as a wicked problem, the good news is that we can learn from scholarship on how to address it. Most importantly, wicked problems ask for a deliberate, comprehensive, and holistic approach (see e.g. Daviter, 2017; Duffy, 2017; Head & Alford, 2015; Hornett & Lee, 2017; Ison & Collins, 2008; McMillan & Overall, 2016; Waddock et al., 2015). It requires an open attitude, a willingness to learn, and active and long-term engagement with the communities involved. It involves curiosity about the needs of destination countries and scientific insights. And it involves not just investing in mobilizing travelers from our own countries, but also investing in local guardianship on the ground.

Recommendations for policy makers

- I. Develop a holistic approach which takes all three legs of the crime triangle into account: (1) Deter likely offenders; (2) Reduce the suitability of potential targets; and (3) Facilitate guardianship by individuals.
- II. Invest in academic research to strengthen the knowledge base on SECTT (see 6.2 for suggestions for future research). Ensure that policy measures are founded on empirical evidence rather than assumptions, and evaluate their effects.
- III. Assess whether policy covers all elements (offender types, victim types, contexts, deeper causes) of SECTT. Widen representations of the problem that are too narrow and cooperate with a larger array of partners to combat the bigger problem.
- IV. Consider SECTT as a 'wicked' problem, which requires innovation, creativity, and cooperation to tackle.

EPILOGUE

Epilogue: On courage and empathy

I started this book with the statement that, after decades of globalization, some find themselves in privileged positions, while others are left vulnerable. Considering the results from the studies in this book, I can't help but wonder to what extent, when, and how these "winners" care about the "losers". This question may be particularly relevant in our current individualized age, polarized political climate and culture. It plays out in different ways in different elements of the problem I have discussed in the chapters of this book. Are we, citizens and governments, going to prioritize the wellbeing of children who are 'far from our bed',¹⁰⁵ to the same extent we prioritize the wellbeing of our own? Are our politicians willing to not just choose responses that are perceived as politically popular, but develop a holistic approach which includes more controversial measures like helping potential offenders, if these are supported by evidence? And are scientists willing to challenge unfounded assumptions and develop the partnerships and methodological innovations necessary to advance our knowledge on this difficult topic? This book illuminated various obstacles that suggest that the answer to some of these matters is, at the least, a 'not always'.

It goes without saying that a lack of care limits the effectiveness with which we can protect children. Similar to what has been said of human rights protection more generally (van Berlo, 2020, p. 553), to what extent efforts to protect children from sexual exploitation will succeed ultimately does not depend solely on the responsabilization of more non-state actors, nor on expanding international legal instruments or increasing resources for law enforcement, but on a genuine belief that the wellbeing and rights of these children *matter*. To paraphrase Aldous Huxley (in Plummer, 2015, p. 188), there is something embarrassing about having written an entire book about sexual exploitation of children only to find that in the end, one has little more to say than, "Try to be a little kinder." Yet here we are.

Richard Wortley (2015) appealed academics who do research on child sexual abuse to have "courage" to challenge stereotypes and unfounded assumptions from a place of "dispassionate objectivity". I believe moving forward vitally demands from all of us, citizens, policy makers and scholars, even more than this courage. Such courage must be based not just on dispassionate objectivity, but also grow from a seed of *passionate empathy*: empathy for foreign children, for those unable to protect them, and even for those who would do them harm. To have any hope of change, the main priority for research, policy, and practice moving forward should be to plant and foster this seed in all who could, through their presence or actions, safeguard children from sexual exploitation.

105 A Dutch proverb signaling something is far removed from your personal experience, or out of your sight. See also Chapter 4.