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

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Summary

Return to sender:

A multi-method study on
guardianship against
transnational child sexual
exploitation



Introduction

Sexual exploitation of children not only crosses moral and legal boundaries, but can also cross borders. Sexual exploitation of children in the context of travel and tourism (SECTT) – also known as ‘transnational child sexual exploitation’ or ‘child sex tourism’ – increasingly receives attention from NGOs, activists, media, governments, companies, and scientists. Governments across the globe, both in countries where children are exploited (‘destination countries’) and in countries where offenders travel from (‘countries of origin’ or ‘sending countries’), have taken more and more measures to combat this phenomenon. But despite the growing attention for the problem, knowledge about SECTT is in its infancy. The lack of robust scientific research on this problem hampers effective action, especially if policy is based on moral and political arguments, assumptions, or stereotypes, rather than an accurate picture of the problem.

This research investigates the role of third parties in enacting guardianship to combat SECTT. One of the most accessible theories of crime, the so-called ‘crime triangle’, states that crime happens when three elements come together: namely, when a motivated offender meets a suitable target in absence of a capable guardian. SECTT has often been described to be a consequence of poverty and globalization. From the viewpoint of the crime triangle, poverty has turned people across the globe into ‘suitable targets’ to be exploited, while globalization has made it easier for ‘motivated offenders’ to get in touch with these targets. But what about the third leg of the triangle: guardianship? Which (policy) lessons can we learn if we look not just at victims and offenders, but also at the role of third parties?

Guardianship has received relatively little consideration in scientific research on child sex crimes, while research into (the pathology of) offenders can count on more attention. In recent years, certain scholars have attempted to change this by investigating the role that the environment can play. Their research shows, for instance, that guardianship by third parties can play an important role in preventing, stopping, or reducing child sexual abuse. Increasing our insight on guardianship could therefore also be a valuable starting point for preventing SECTT.

According to the crime triangle, a guardian could be a police officer, or a hotel receptionist, or an attentive bystander: citizens like you and me. But guardianship can be enacted not just by individuals, but also by institutions, such as governments or companies. These two types of guardianship are referred to respectively as micro-level guardianship, enacted by individuals, and macro-level guardianship, enacted by institutions.

This research

The central question of this book focuses on these two types of guardians, and reads:

*In what way and to what extent are **governments** and **members of the public** in both countries of origin and destination able and willing of enacting guardianship against transnational child sexual exploitation?*

This overarching question is answered through four empirical chapters, each with their own focus, research question, and methodology. The empirical part of this book consists of two parts researching the role and perceptions of either governments (macro-level) or citizens (micro-level) as potential guardians. Each of the four empirical chapters focuses on a different actor in countries of destination and origin:

| | Destination countries | Origin countries |
|--------------------|--|---|
| Governments | <i>chapter 2</i> SECTT destination countries | <i>chapter 3</i> Political actors in a country of origin (Netherlands) |
| Citizens | <i>chapter 5</i> European travelers and tourists as potential witnesses | <i>chapter 4</i> General public in a country of origin (Netherlands) |

Findings

Guardianship by governments

Chapter 2 seeks to answer why SECTT happens in certain countries of the world, and not in others. Using a statistical analysis of data sources of all countries in the world, four potential risk factors were investigated in particular: (1) the amount of tourists traveling to a country; (2) how good or bad living conditions are for children in a country; (3) the quality of governance in a country; and (4) how wealthy or poor a country is and, as another proxy for economic prosperity, how close it is to the equator. To establish which countries are destinations for SECTT, the U.S. State Department’s *Trafficking in Persons Reports* were used.

The results show that SECTT destination countries are, on average, poorer and located closer to the equator. Destination countries are not visited by more or less tourists than non-destination countries, and quality of governance does not predict which countries are destinations. While children’s living conditions are generally worse in destination countries, this effect is reversed when economic factors are taken into account: within the group of countries with comparable (poor) economic conditions, the odds of being a destination country are actually smaller in countries which score lower on guaranteeing children’s rights, especially the right to life and education. This shows that SECTT happens in poor countries where children nevertheless do not have the worst living conditions.

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All in all these results raise questions about the ability of destination countries to effectively enact guardianship to protect children from transnational sexual exploitation. Economic conditions in destination countries not only create opportunities for SECTT, but also impede effective responses to the problem.

Chapter 3 shifts focus from destination countries to countries of origin where offenders travel from. Perceptions of SECTT in the political and policy arena of a sending country, the Netherlands, are central to this chapter. This study is based on the idea that the measures taken to combat a particular problem illuminate how a problem is understood. To gain insight in the way that SECTT is understood by policy makers, politicians and governors, all relevant national policy documents and political debates in the Dutch parliament on the topic of 'child sex tourism' from 1995 to 2020 were analyzed.

The findings of this discourse analysis demonstrate that, in the Dutch arena, 'child sex tourism' is primarily understood and presented as a crime problem. Emphasis is placed on measures like catching offenders, international police cooperation, public education campaigns to encourage reports by citizens, public-private cooperation, and prevention of recidivism by already known sex offenders. While this way of looking at the problem is dominant, and will therefore feel logical or 'right' to many, there are also other ways of looking at the problem. SECTT could for instance also be seen as a human rights problem (to be solved, for example, with development aid or poverty reduction programs), or as a public health problem (to be solved through better care for people experiencing sexual attraction to children, for example). However, these alternative 'lenses' (or frames) are only seldom observed in the analyzed documents.

In this chapter, I argue that the way that 'child sex tourism' has been understood in Dutch political debates and policy over this 25-year period can be characterized as one-sided. The crime frame simplifies the problem, and consequently aspects of the problem and potential solutions are overlooked. Moreover, the documents show little curiosity about the effectiveness of implemented responses. Even though much emphasis is placed on the importance of catching offenders, concrete information about these offenders and or victims (such as statistics, descriptions of the problem, or famous cases) is mostly lacking. Furthermore, many policy measures are engaged only with the process rather than outcomes, such as encouraging cooperation, facilitating, or making more policy. It remains unclear which tangible results are achieved through this approach, and the lack of policy evaluations makes it impossible to answer that question.

In short, this chapter demonstrates that perceptions on SECTT in the political arena affect the way that governments in sending countries enact guardianship against SECTT. The results encourage reflection on the way in and extent to which origin countries can and want to act as guardians against SECTT.

Guardianship by citizens

In recent decades, various public engagement campaigns have sought to involve the general public, such as travelers, in preventing SECTT. In public administration, this process is also known as 'responsibilization'. Nevertheless, little is known about perceptions that the public has about SECTT, or about their willingness to report suspicious situations of sexual child exploitation abroad. The second part of the book therefore focuses on the perceptions and role of individual citizens, like you and me, as possible guardians.

Chapter 4 investigated perceptions of child sexual exploitation among the general public in a country of origin (once again the Netherlands). A vignette experiment among a representative sample of 949 Dutch adults was conducted to examine whether and how public perceptions about child sexual exploitation are dependent on where in the world the child is abused. Research participants read a story about a Dutch man who develops sexual feelings for minors, and calls upon an agency to arrange sexual contact with a 12-year old girl during a business trip. The destination of his trip was randomly varied in such a way that all participants read the identical story but with different destinations, being Amsterdam (the Netherlands), Bangkok (Thailand), Bucharest (Romania), or Los Angeles (United States). This experimental manipulation allows insight into the impact of, on the one hand, *geographical* distance (how far away or close by a destination physically is), and on the other hand *social* distance (the extent to which a destination feels close, familiar, or like 'us').

The results show that public perceptions about child sexual exploitation are influenced by social distance. No evidence was found for alternative hypotheses about the effect of geographical distance or differences between home country/abroad. More specifically the results show a significant difference between experimental conditions that are socially close in comparison to conditions with larger social distance. In other words, Dutch people judge the story differently when this happens in the Netherlands or United States than when it happens in Romania or Thailand. These differences are found specifically for two aspects, namely (1) perceptions about the seriousness of the incident, where the story was evaluated as less serious when social distance was greater, and (2) the extent to which the victim was deemed responsible for the incident (*victim blaming*), where victims were attributed less responsibility in conditions with greater social distance. Simply put, this study shows that the public judges a case of child sexual exploitation as less serious when it happens on a location that feels 'far from their bed'.

Citizens' opinion about the seriousness of SECTT not only carries on in their perceptions of the problem, but also in their behavior, as Chapter 5 demonstrates. To research which barriers may hold back travelers from reporting signals of SECTT if they witness them during travels abroad, a survey was conducted among people from five European countries (France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and Austria) who had traveled abroad in the past five years. The 728 respondents were asked about their willingness to report if they would observe signals of child sexual exploitation abroad.

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The results show that travelers' willingness to report increases with awareness of the problem, as well as with knowledge about where and how to report. On the other hand their willingness to report is inhibited by barriers regarding the way in which the situation is interpreted (e.g. as serious or not, as clear or ambiguous), and regarding cost-benefit considerations (Is it worth reporting? How much effort does it cost?). Finally, travelers who have previously witnessed signals of SECTT in real life were actually less willing to report in the future: a troubling signal.

Although the result of these studies gives some reason for optimism about the use of mobilizing the general public as guardians – their willingness to report is on average high and public perceptions are generally disapproving –, the findings also reveal obstacles that public engagement campaigns and comparable initiatives must overcome if they are to be successful. The identified challenges illustrate that the effectiveness of public campaigns depends, ultimately, on perceptions held by the public about an issue that, fundamentally, does not concern themselves or their own children.

Conclusion

Building on the four empirical chapters, in Chapter 6 the most important findings are summarized, interpreted through the lens of guardianship, and connected to implications for further research and policy. It also elaborates on the strengths and limitations of this research.

Overall, this book demonstrates the added value of studying SECTT, an inherently difficult scientific topic, from the perspective of guardianship. With regard to the central research question, it is clear that both individuals and institutions in both destination countries and sending countries – in various ways and varying degrees – have been called upon to play a role in combating SECTT. In other words, these actors are potential guardians. At the same time, important challenges appear to exist which possibly impede effective guardianship by both governments and citizens. For crimes in general and for SECTT specifically, this book illustrates that enacting guardianship is not just about presence (Is there a guardian?), but also about capability (Can the guardian do anything about it?) and willingness (Does the guardian want to do anything about it?).

Furthermore, this research shows, in different ways, that the way in which potential guardians (us all) look at a problem plays an important role in the extent and way in which guardianship is shaped. It is therefore important to remain critical about our perceptions of SECTT. To what extent do these match what the problem looks like in real life? In terms of designing policy, this means that measures should be, as much as possible, based on scientific knowledge about the problem. Simplified and superficial representations about SECTT – both in policy and in public campaigns – must be reversed to enable effective guardianship.

In line with that conviction, the final paragraphs of this book make a first move towards a discussion on SECTT built on a broader perspective, centered around the question: 'Which underlying causes can be exposed and addressed if we consider SECTT

as a symptom of a deeper disease?'. In addition to the spotlight this book has put on the role of guardians on the one hand and the importance of perceptions on the other, a third aspect therefore characterizes this book: a plea for more scientific knowledge and against superficial solutions.

