

Risk and Protective Factors for Sexual Exploitation in Male and Female Youth From a Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Risk and Protective Factors for Sexual Exploitation in Male and Female Youth From a Cross-Cultural Perspective: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Youth are at elevated risk of becoming victims of sexual exploitation, which has a detrimental impact on their physical and psychological well-being. Understanding factors associated with sexual exploitation is key for prevention efforts and adequate and timely treatment. This systematic review sheds more light on this by providing an overview of both risk and protective factors for sexual exploitation in male and female youth from a cross-cultural perspective. In all, 65 studies were selected meeting the inclusion criteria: qualitative or quantitative peer-reviewed studies in English, Dutch, or German with findings on risk and protective factors associated with sexual exploitation in youth aged up to 24 years. Results show that there are common risk factors in male and female youth worldwide (e.g., adverse childhood experiences, lack of a social network, substance use, and running away). Positive and supportive relationships are an important protective factor in mitigating the risk of sexual exploitation. Geographic differences were found. In non-Western continents, more environmental factors (e.g., economic vulnerabilities, residential instability) were cited. Research in countries outside the United States is limited and protective factors and males are underexamined. To fully understand vulnerabilities in youth, their interactions, and possible gender differences and to address the needs of diverse populations, more insight should be gained into the broader range of risk and protective factors worldwide. This systematic review has made a valuable contribution to this by providing practice, policy, and research guidance in the establishment of more targeted prevention efforts, adequate treatment, and areas to address in future research.

Keywords

sexual abuse, child abuse, cultural contexts, prostitution/sex work, youth violence

Introduction

Sexual exploitation is a global human rights problem and has a detrimental impact on the physical, psychological, and socio-emotional well-being of victims. It is a form of human trafficking and is defined by the United Nations as “any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another” (UN Secretary-General, 2003, p. 1). Over the last few decades, sexual exploitation has increasingly been recognized as a public health concern (de Vries et al., 2020), although the true scale remains unknown (Chang et al., 2015; Gerassi, 2015; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016). Based on an international survey by the International Labor Organization (2017), it was estimated that globally 3.8 million adults and 1 million children were victims of sexual exploitation. However, data from 148

countries all over the world showed that in 2018 almost 25,000 victims of sexual exploitation were reported, of which one-third were children (The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020). This large gap between the estimated and actual reported number of victims illustrates the challenge of victim identification. This hampers the

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possibilities to provide appropriate (preventive) care and support (Baldwin et al., 2011). It is important to proactively address the potential for and ideally prevent sexual exploitation in youth. They are at elevated risk of becoming victims and the adverse effects of it on both mental and physical health are tremendous (Hurst, 2021).

There is empirical evidence for a wide range of health consequences of sexual exploitation in youth (Varma et al., 2015; Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). Human traffickers often use extreme violence, threats, and manipulation to control their victims. They create an environment in which sexually exploited youth are at elevated risk of several mental health issues (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016; Wood, 2020), such as posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, attachment problems, emotion regulation problems, and anti-social behaviors (Basson et al., 2012; Clawson et al., 2009; Hossain et al., 2010; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016). The frequent combination of physical and sexual abuse and being isolated from their support system may lead to complex trauma, emotional and behavioral difficulties, marginalization, and criminalization (Gerassi, 2015; Landers et al., 2017; Varma et al., 2015). Furthermore, sexual exploitation may result in physical and sexual health consequences including sexually transmitted infections, pregnancies, miscarriages, abortions, urinary tract infections, injuries from physical abuse, and several undiagnosed chronic medical conditions (Chaffee & English, 2015; Cole et al., 2016). These major mental and physical health consequences for youth victims underline the importance of appropriate and timely health care and support.

Despite these consequences, many victims are still unidentified and thus untreated. There are a number of barriers that contribute to this situation. For example, the internet facilitates covert non-traceable communication regarding trafficking-related activities (Kloess et al., 2014). Youth often fail to recognize and understand that they are exploited (Baldwin et al., 2011; Macy, 2018; McClain & Garrity, 2011). For youth with intellectual disabilities, it is even more difficult to recognize victimization (Reid et al., 2018). They often do not understand what is happening during sexual abuse, may not distinguish a boyfriend from a human trafficker, may be confused about which sexual behaviors are legal or illegal, are less able to use their right to say no or to communicate about the exploitative situation, and are sometimes viewed as less credible by law enforcement (Wissink et al., 2015; Reid et al., 2018). Furthermore, victims who do understand their exploitation are often reluctant to disclose victimization as a result of experiences of self-blame, shame, emotional attachments to the perpetrator, or fear of facing charges for criminal activities related to their victimization (Andretta et al., 2016; de Vries et al., 2020). A lack of knowledge on accessible care or cultural and language barriers further limits access to support services (Andretta et al., 2016). Studies have shown that victims of

sexual exploitation often interact with healthcare providers while they are being trafficked (e.g., for the purposes of routine health care, child protection investigations, or homelessness services; Baldwin et al., 2011; Chaffee & English, 2015). However, healthcare providers often fail to identify victims of sexual exploitation, which is mainly a consequence of insufficient training (Chaffee & English, 2015; de Vries et al., 2020).

An important way of preventing sexual exploitation in youth and its severe consequences is to identify early risk and protective factors (Landers et al., 2020). A systematic review (Franchino-Olsen, 2019) gave insight into a wide range of risk factors for sexual exploitation in children in the United States (e.g., adverse childhood experiences [ACEs], conflicts with parents, running away, substance use, peer influence, poverty, difficulty in school, and poor mental health). ACEs are frequently cited risk factors and encompass experiences of physical and emotional abuse and neglect, sexual abuse, or household dysfunction (parental substance abuse, mental health problems, incarceration, separation, and domestic violence; Felitti et al., 2019). Also, many victims report a long history of out-of-home placement, foster care, involvement in child welfare, and juvenile detention (Chohaney, 2016; Landers et al., 2017; Macy, 2018). Youth from poor socioeconomic backgrounds are especially vulnerable, and countries in West Africa, South Asia, Central America, and the Caribbean report higher rates of youth victimization (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020). Yet, there remains a knowledge gap with regard to the nature and role of protective factors for sexual exploitation (e.g., having peer relationships, unconditional love of a parent, living in a clean and safe home, and opportunities to learn; Crandall et al., 2019; Landers et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2021). In addition, much of what is currently known about risk and protective factors for sexual exploitation is based on studies conducted in the United States. Such a monocultural perspective can be problematic when applied to the context of non-Western cultures (Gopalkrishnan, 2018; Dalla et al., 2022). Finally, the stereotypical victim of sexual exploitation tends to be female, but victims also include male youth (Choi, 2015). The role of gender in the understanding of risks and protective factors for sexual exploitation is still limited (Franchino-Olsen, 2019). To date, there is no systematic overview of the literature on research into both risk and protective factors for sexual exploitation. It is also unknown to what extent the risk and protective factors for sexual exploitation have been found in male and/or female youth and in which different countries. Therefore, the aim of the current systematic review is to give an overview of the risk and protective factors associated with sexual exploitation in male and female youth worldwide. These insights will contribute to more targeted prevention efforts and adequate and timely treatment.

Method

To conduct and report the current review, the 2020 Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) guidelines were followed (Page et al., 2020). The protocol for study screening and selection was registered in PROSPERO (registration number: CRD42022310197, access via: https://www.crd.york.ac.uk/PROSPEROFILES/310197_STRATEGY_20220211.pdf).

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion criteria were as follows: original peer-reviewed studies with qualitative or quantitative data and analysis; reported outcomes were risk and/or protective factors associated with sexual exploitation; outcomes were antecedents and not consequences of sexual exploitation; studies had to report on children and youth (up to 24 years old); and were written in English, Dutch, or German. For the purpose of this systematic review, sexual exploitation was operationalized according to the definition of the United Nations: “any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another” (UN Secretary-General, 2003, p. 1). Given the limited number of studies on this topic, a broad range of study designs and methodologies were allowed to be included. Consequently, there was a variety in the nature of the associations between risk and protective factors and sexual exploitation. Factors cited in quantitative studies had to have a statistically significant association with sexual exploitation. Meaning, there had to be a relationship between variables, although they might not have predictive power or indicate causality. In the qualitative studies, the risk and protective factors were drawn from themes in the data that contributed to or prevented youth from encountering sexual exploitation. To ensure factors regarding mental and emotional health states were not consequences of sexual exploitation, an additional inclusion criterion was that it must be clear that these factors were present prior to victimization. Secondary data (e.g., systematic reviews), opinion pieces, and single case study were excluded, as well as studies that did not distinguish between sexual exploitation and other forms of human trafficking, studies that included youth and adults but failed to separate results between the groups, and studies that identified characteristics of sexually exploited youth but failed to clarify whether these heightened or decreased the chances of sexual exploitation. There was no restriction in the publication period, but records had to be available electronically for practical purposes.

Information Sources and Search

First, the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, the Database of Abstracts of Reviews, and the International

Register of Prospective Systematic Reviews (PROSPERO) were searched to identify whether any reviews on the understanding of risk and protective factors in sexually exploited youth from a worldwide perspective had recently been planned or carried out. Second, a systematic search of the PsycInfo, PubMed, Medline, ERIC, Psychology, and behavioral sciences collection and Web of Science databases was performed by the first author, with the support of an information specialist at Maastricht University. In addition, the first 100 records of a Google Scholar search were scanned. These databases were selected to maximize the reach across disciplines. Search terms included three concepts: “sexual exploitation,” “youth,” and “risk and protective factors.” The last search was performed on October 10, 2022.

Study Selection

Figure 1 shows the PRISMA flow chart. The articles that remained after deduplication ($n=987$) were double-screened independently by the first and second authors for relevance on the basis of titles and abstracts. The remaining articles were screened full text by two researchers independently, of which 50% double. Discrepancies between them were resolved through the involvement of the other authors until a consensus was reached. Additional records were retrieved through forward and backward citation searching. The Rayyan software tool (Ouzzani et al., 2016) was used for study selection and assessment of the inter-rater agreement. The inter-rater reliability for title and abstract screening was calculated by Cohen's kappa with a level of agreement of 0.85, which is considered as strong. All steps were guided by the screening and selection protocol.

Quality Appraisal

Included studies showed a diversity in designs, ranging from small-scale qualitative designs to quantitative cross-sectional observational and mixed-methods studies. The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Hong et al., 2018) was used to appraise the methodological quality of the included studies. The MMAT is found to be a reliable and efficient tool to concurrently evaluate the quality of studies with varying designs in a review (Pace et al., 2012). The appraisal was carried out by the first author. When the outcome of the two screening questions was negative (“are there clear research questions?”; “do the data allow us to address the research questions?”), the studies were excluded. The outcomes of the further appraisal were used to address limitations in the strength of the evidence of the results.

Synthesis of Results

The primary outcome variables consisted of risk and protective factors for sexual exploitation derived from the quantitative and qualitative results from the included studies. Secondary

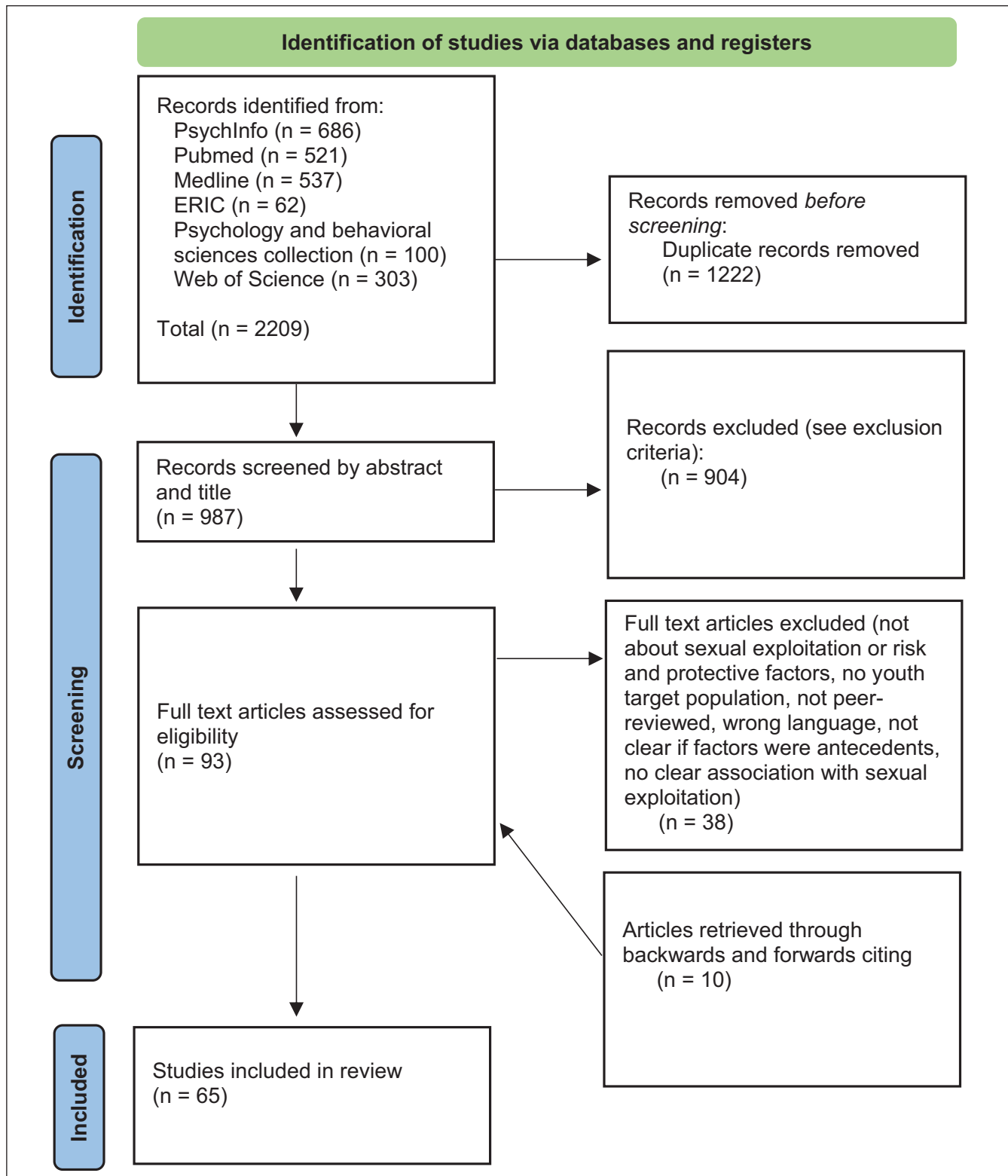


Figure 1. PRISMA diagram summary of the number of found, reviewed, and included studies in this review.

outcomes were the gender of the study populations and the country in which the cited studies were conducted. To structure the primary outcomes, a framework synthesis approach was

used (Carroll et al., 2013). Preexisting models that were found relevant in scientific literature for understanding the risk of sexual exploitation were the general strain theory (Agnew,

Table 1. A Priori Framework Used to Code the Risk and Protective Factors.

Risk factors		
<i>Negative experiences:</i> Negative events at the individual/family, community, and societal levels, associated with sexual exploitation	<i>Negative affect states:</i> Experiences of negative emotional states, often caused by negative experiences, associated with sexual exploitation	<i>Poor coping behavior:</i> Maladaptive, unhealthy, and destructive behavior, not resolving the problem and actually increasing harm, associated with sexual exploitation
Protective factors		
<i>Positive experiences:</i> Positive events at the individual/family, social and societal levels are associated with a decreased risk of sexual exploitation	<i>Positive affect states:</i> Experiences of positive emotional states that are associated with a decreased risk of sexual exploitation	<i>Healthy coping behavior:</i> Adaptive, healthy, and constructive behavior, associated with a decreased risk of sexual exploitation

2006; Reid & Piquero, 2016), the multilevel framework (Gerassi, 2015), the ecological framework (Edwards & Mika, 2017), and the intergenerational and cumulative adverse and resilient experiences (ICARE) model (Franchino-Olsen, 2021; Hays-Grudo et al., 2021). Using theoretical frameworks to structure factors associated with sexual exploitation can provide meaningful insight regarding their role in the pathways to sexual exploitation (Franchino-Olsen, 2021). These models were integrated into the a priori framework. This framework and its sub-categories are explained in Table 1 and were used to code the results from the included studies. It organized risk factors into sub-categories of negative experiences, negative emotional states often caused by negative experiences, and the subsequent poor coping behaviors, which are all associated with sexual exploitation (Agnew, 2006; Reid & Piquero, 2016). Given the broad range of cited negative experiences, they were categorized at the individual/family, community, and societal levels (Edwards & Mika, 2017; Gerassi, 2015). The positive counterparts are the sub-categories of protective factors in mitigating the risks of sexual exploitation. In subsequent steps, the results were axially coded against the framework, and new codes were created by performing thematic analysis on any evidence that could not be coded against the framework.

Results

Study Characteristics

A total of 65 studies were included, of which 38 had a quantitative cross-sectional (58%), 22 a qualitative (33%), and five had a mixed-method (8%) design. Table 2 summarizes the main findings, including the continents in which the risk and protective factors were found. Figure 2 provides an overview of the proportion of included studies per country. Most risk and protective factors were studied in North America ($n=44$; 67%), of which two studies were conducted in Canada, five in Mexico, one in Haiti, and the others in the United States. Risk and protective factors were less frequently cited in Europe ($n=9$; United Kingdom, Spain, and Greece), Africa ($n=13$; Ethiopia, Uganda, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa), and Asia ($n=6$; India and the Philippines; see Figure 1 for an overview).

In total, 35 studies (55%) included data on both male and female youth, of which 20 conducted an analysis on gender differences in risk and/or protective factors and their association with sexual exploitation. Transgender and non-binary youth were not included in these analyses due to limited data or no inclusion of gender (identities) besides male or female. In the remaining 15 studies, no comparison was made between male and female youth (e.g., as a result of small sample sizes or no focus on gender differences). A total of 27 studies (41%) solely focused on female youth and only three studies (5%) focused on male youth.

In general, the methodological quality of the included studies derived from the quality appraisal was adequate, but not flawless. Two studies were excluded on the basis of the screening questions. While many studies presented results on male and female youth, the proportion of males was very small as compared to females. For many studies that used qualitative methods, the process of data synthesis was not clearly described. Also, the interpretation of results was not always supported by the collected qualitative data. Regarding quantitative studies, some did not account for confounders, which made it hard to draw conclusions on associations. These limitations were taken into account when describing the results.

Table 2 presents the revised framework composed of a priori and novel themes about risk and protective factors. A total of 17 risk factors regarding negative experiences were found, 3 on negative affect states, 5 on poor coping and risk behaviors, and 3 on demographic variables, adding up to 28 different risk factors. Negative experiences regarding ACSs were grouped into the recommended sub-categories by Ford et al. (2014): “physical/emotional abuse and neglect,” “sexual abuse,” and “household dysfunction.” Protective factors were cited less frequently: five positive experiences were found, one on positive affect states and one on healthy coping and behavior, adding up to seven different categories of protective factors. In the following paragraphs, for each of these categories, it is described which risk and protective factors were found and to what extent they were studied in male and/or female youth and different countries. If studies analyzed their data by gender and found significant differences, these differences are described.

Table 2. Summary of Main Findings: Revised Framework of Risk and Protective Factors and the Number of Studies and Continents in Which These Factors were Identified.

Risk factors				
Negative experiences Individual/family level	Continents	Negative affect states	Continents	Poor coping and risk behavior
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical/emotional abuse and neglect ($n=23$) Sexual abuse ($n=21$) Compromised parenting/family functioning ($n=17$) Household dysfunction ($n=12$) Intellectual disabilities ($n=2$) (Child) marriage or pregnancy ($n=1$) AIDS ($n=1$) 	na, af, as na, sa, af, as, eu na, sa, af, as, eu na, sa, af, as, eu na na af	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social emotional problems ($n=6$) Self-image and need for affection ($n=6$) Mental health problems ($n=4$) 	na, eu na, sa, af, as, eu na	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Substance use ($n=20$) Running away ($n=16$) Sexual (risk) behavior ($n=14$) Criminal behavior and justice system involvement ($n=6$)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The internet and social media ($n=5$) 				
Social level				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Lack of a) social network ($n=13$) Residential instability ($n=11$) Problems related to school ($n=11$) Child welfare or services involvement ($n=6$) Exposure to violence (outside the home) ($n=4$) 	na, af, eu na, af, eu na, sa, af, as, eu na na, af			
Societal level				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic vulnerabilities ($n=17$) Gender, social, and cultural inequalities ($n=5$) Normalization of the sex trade in the environment ($n=3$) Failing legal system ($n=2$) Terrorism ($n=1$) 	na, sa, af, as, eu na, sa, af, as sa, as sa, as, eu af			
Protective factors				
Positive experiences				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive and supporting relationships ($n=9$) School grades and completion ($n=2$) Parental education ($n=1$) Security of basic needs ($n=1$); Leisure activities ($n=1$) 	na, eu, af na na af na	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-worth and setting boundaries ($n=1$) 	na	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Healthy coping and behavior Higher age at first sex ($n=1$)
Demographics associated with sexual exploitation				
Other risk factors				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ethnicity ($n=10$) Gender ($n=7$) LGBTQ+ ($n=4$) 	na na, af, as, eu na			

na = North America; sa = South America; af = Africa; eu = Europe; as = Asia.

Number of studies reporting on the risk/protective factor and corresponding color; red: $n \geq 15$; yellow: $n = 5-14$; blue: $n < 5$.

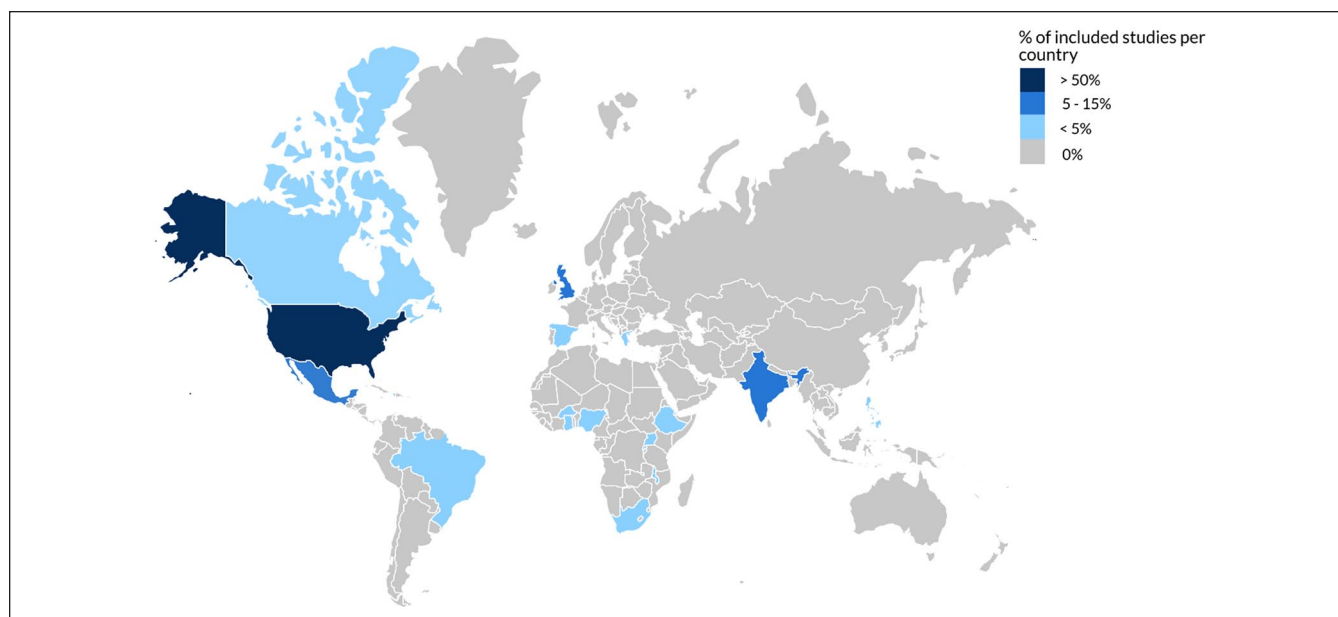


Figure 2. Overview of the proportion of included studies per country ($N=65$).

Risk Factors

Negative Experiences at the Individual/Family Level. A substantial body of research worldwide has linked sexual exploitation to the three categories of ACEs: (1) *physical/emotional abuse and neglect*, (2) *sexual abuse*, and (3) *household dysfunction*. Two studies examined the number of ACEs by screening them in a sample of predominantly female victims of sexual exploitation (Kennedy et al., 2021) and a sample of adjudicated male youth (O'Brien et al., 2017). Both studies showed higher overall numbers of ACEs among youth who were sexually exploited in comparison to those who were not.

A history of *physical/emotional abuse or neglect* ($n=23$) was the most cited risk factor for sexual exploitation in both male and female youth (Adjei & Saewyc, 2017; Barnert et al., 2022; Cimino et al., 2017; Cluver et al., 2011; Fedina et al., 2019; Fraley & Aronowitz, 2021; Goldenberg et al., 2015; Greeson et al., 2019b; Kennedy et al., 2012, 2021; Kiss et al., 2022; Macias-Konstantopoulos et al., 2015; O'Brien et al., 2017; O'Brien, 2018; Panlilio et al., 2019; Perkins & Ruiz, 2017; Reid, 2011, 2018; Roe-Sepowitz, 2012; Servin et al., 2015; Silverman et al., 2007; Varma et al., 2015; de Vries et al., 2020). Studies involved predominantly youth in the United States but also youth in South Africa, Uganda, Nigeria, India, and Mexico. Of the four studies that analyzed by gender, only one found statistically significant gender differences. In a sample of sub-Saharan African adolescents, females were overall more likely to have traded sex compared to males. Yet, males who had experienced both physical and sexual abuse were significantly eight times more likely to have traded sex than males who have never been abused, whereas similarly abused

females were two times as likely than females who have never been abused (Adjei & Saewyc, 2017). Three studies revealed similar associations for male and female youth. A national longitudinal study among adolescents in the United States showed a significant association between previously experienced abuse and neglect and exposure to sexual exploitation in both genders (Barnert et al., 2022). The study of Cluver et al. (2011) revealed that among South-African adolescents in AIDS-affected families, a higher risk of transactional sex was mediated by exposure to emotional or physical abuse in both genders. Moreover, childhood emotional abuse was significantly more often experienced by male and female child trafficking victims in the United States, compared to non-trafficked participants (Fedina et al., 2019). However, this risk factor did not remain significant after accounting for age, gender, race, income, and runaway behaviors.

Sexual abuse ($n=21$) was a risk factor of sexual exploitation in both male and female youth in several countries worldwide (the United States, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, the United Kingdom, sub-Saharan Africa, Uganda, Nigeria, India, and the Philippines; Adjei & Saewyc, 2017; Boyce et al., 2018; Cimino et al., 2017; Cyders et al., 2021; Goldenberg et al., 2015; Kennedy et al., 2021; Kiss et al., 2022; Louie, 2018; Macias-Konstantopoulos et al., 2013, 2015; O'Brien et al., 2017; O'Brien, 2018; Perkins & Ruiz, 2017; Reid, 2014, 2018; Reid & Piquero 2014; Self-Brown et al., 2021; Servin et al., 2015; Silverman et al., 2007; Varma et al., 2015; de Vries et al., 2020). Although this risk factor was predominantly studied in female youth, nine studies involved male youth of which three conducted an analysis by gender. Among a sample of adolescents living in slums in Uganda, the prevalence of ever being raped was four times

higher for sexually exploited youth compared to their counterparts who had never disclosed a history of rape (Self-Brown et al., 2021). The association was significant in both male and female participants. Two studies reported sexually abused males to be more vulnerable. As described in the previous paragraph, higher odds for transactional sex were present in physically and sexually abused adolescent males compared to the odds in females (Adjei & Saewyc, 2017). Moreover, in a sample of youth offenders found guilty of a serious offense in the United States, an association between rape or sexual assault and early age of onset for sexual exploitation (prior to the age of 17) was found in males and not in females (Reid & Piquero, 2014).

Household dysfunction ($n=12$; parental substance misuse, exposure to domestic violence, and parental arrests) was a risk factor in male and female youth and was cited in the United States, Canada, Brazil, the United Kingdom, Uganda, Nigeria, the Philippines, and Mexico (Cole, 2018; Kennedy et al., 2012, 2021; Kiss et al., 2022; Louie, 2018; Macias-Konstantopoulos et al., 2013; O'Brien et al., 2017; Panlilio et al., 2019; Reid, 2011; Reid & Piquero, 2014, 2016; Self-Brown et al., 2021; Servin et al., 2015). Four studies analyzed gender differences regarding parental substance abuse (Cole, 2018; Reid & Piquero, 2014, 2016; Self-Brown et al., 2021). Only Self-Brown et al. (2021) found a gender difference. Among a sample of adolescents living in slums in Uganda, an association between parental alcohol use and sexual exploitation was found in females but not in males. With regard to exposure to domestic violence, one study conducted in the United States among a sample of youth involved in the child welfare system showed that exposure to severe violence in the household was associated with sexual exploitation in both males and females. However, being male increased the probability of endorsing a positive item response (Panlilio et al., 2019). In the study of Reid and Piquero (2016) among youth offenders in the United States, no gender differences were found regarding caregiver strain (e.g., domestic violence, parental arrests) and its link with youth vulnerability to sexual exploitation.

Multiple studies ($n=17$), from several continents, found a connection between *compromised parenting and family functioning* and sexual exploitation (the United States, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, the United Kingdom, Uganda, and the Philippines). This risk factor was captured in these studies via different measures (e.g., poor nurturing, conflicts between child and parents, unhealthy family relationships, parental attachment, and caregiver absence) and was found in both male and female youth (Acharya & Bryson Clark, 2021; Alderson et al., 2021; Chohaney, 2016; Cole, 2018; Fraley & Aronowitz, 2021; Helpingstine et al., 2021; Homma et al., 2012; Hornor et al., 2022; Louie, 2018; Macias-Konstantopoulos et al., 2013, 2015; McNeal & Walker, 2016; O'Brien, 2018; Reid & Piquero, 2016; Self-Brown et al., 2021; Silverman et al., 2007; Williams et al., 2012). Three studies made a gender comparison, of which two found

gender differences. Among a sample of substance-using high school students in Canada, male youth who did not live with family were more likely to report exchanging sex for alcohol and drugs compared to males who did live with family (Homma et al., 2012). This association was not found in females. Furthermore, a study with a sample of adolescents living in the slums in Uganda found that a negative parental attitude toward the sexual engagement of their child was associated with sexual exploitation in females but not in males (Self-Brown et al., 2021).

There were two studies, both conducted in a sample of females in the United States, that examined the association between *intellectual and/or physical disabilities* and sexual exploitation. In a nationally representative sample of in-school students from 1994 to 1996, Franchino-Olsen et al. (2020) found higher odds for sexual exploitation in female minors with severe physical disabilities and low cognitive abilities compared to peers without these respective disabilities. In line with this, Reid (2018) revealed that for female youth with intellectual disabilities, endangering circumstances such as lack of awareness, inability to self-identify, and a vulnerability to manipulation contribute to a disproportionate risk of sexual exploitation compared to female youth without intellectual disabilities.

Other negative experiences at the individual/family level were found in two studies conducted in Mexico and South Africa and concerned *child marriage and/or pregnancy* and *AIDS*, respectively. Boyce et al. (2018) revealed that there were higher proportions of sexual exploitation among female sex workers who were pregnant or married before the age of 16 years compared to female sex workers who were not. In a sample of adolescents in deprived South-African communities, Cluver et al. (2011) found that AIDS illness in caregivers and resulting orphanhood predicted sexual exploitation in both males and females.

Negative Experiences at the Community Level. In multiple studies ($n=13$), the (*lack of a*) *social network* of youth appeared to play a role in the risk of sexual exploitation. The risks related to social networks could be divided into a lack of a social or support network, exposure to the sex trade through friends and family, and negative peer networks. The lack of a social network or social support was qualitatively studied among predominantly females (one study included one male) in different counties (Canada, the United Kingdom, Mexico, Uganda, and Nigeria; Acharya & Bryson Clark, 2021; Hallett, 2016; Louie, 2018; Kiss et al., 2022; Servin et al., 2015). No gender comparisons were made. The studies showed that when facing adversity such as violence or forced migration, these youth had no one to rely on which rendered them more vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Having friends or family who were involved in sex trade by selling or buying sex was found as a risk factor for sexual exploitation in both male and female youth in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada (Chohaney, 2016;

Fedina et al., 2019; Kennedy et al., 2012; Louie, 2018; Klatt et al., 2014; Macias-Konstantopoulos et al., 2015; de Vries et al., 2020). One study among individuals who engaged in commercial sex acts revealed that having family members involved in sex work and having friends who bought sex were significantly associated with child sex trafficking in both genders (Fedina et al., 2019). These associations did not remain significant after controlling for the demographics of age, gender, race, and income, and for runaway behaviors. Lastly, negative peer networks were found to be associated with sexual exploitation in two studies conducted in the United States. A nationally representative study conducted between 1994 and 1996 among adolescents showed that both male and female gang-involved minors had greater odds of involvement in transactional sex compared to non-gang-involved peers (Franchino-Olsen & Martin, 2022). However, it was not clear to what extent youth were the seller or buyer. Furthermore, a qualitative study among ethnic minority adolescent girls revealed that encouragement by peers in law-breaking behavior contributed to a vulnerability to engage in sexual exploitation (Helpingstone et al., 2021).

Problems related to school were a risk factor for sexual exploitation in both males and females from different countries ($n=11$). Only one study conducted a gender comparison. Adjei and Saewyc (2017) found that dropping out of school was linked to a higher likelihood of trading sex for adolescent boys and girls in sub-Saharan Africa. However, a notable result was that the nature of school problems differed between countries. In non-Western regions such as India and Africa, studies among females showed that limited access to education heightened their vulnerability to sexual exploitation, for example, based on promises of economic opportunity (Dalla et al., 2020; Kiss et al., 2022; Macias-Konstantopoulos et al., 2013; Silverman et al., 2007; Williams et al., 2012). The lack of education was attributed to family poverty, limited economic opportunities in the community, or the distance to schools. While in other studies, mainly conducted in the United States, youth did have access to education, but problems such as dropping out of school, lack of education about sexual exploitation, and low grades were associated with sexual exploitation (Adjei & Saewyc, 2017; Chohaney, 2016; Greeson et al., 2019a; Hurst, 2021; Hornor et al., 2022; Servin et al., 2015).

Residential instability as a result of homelessness, multiple out-of-home placements, and migration was found to be a risk factor for sexual exploitation in male and female youth in multiple countries, leading to risky (sexual) behaviors to survive ($n=11$; United States, United Kingdom, Mexico, Greece, Uganda, Nigeria, and Spain; Chimdessa & Cheire, 2018; Coy, 2009; Digidiki & Bhabha, 2018; Greeson et al., 2019b; Hornor et al., 2022; Kiss et al., 2022; Macias-Konstantopoulos et al., 2015; Pereda et al., 2022; Rocha-Jimenez et al., 2018; Self-Brown et al., 2021; Servin et al., 2015). Residential instability as a result of migration was particularly found as a risk factor for unaccompanied minors

in refugee camps in Greece (Digidiki & Bhabha, 2018) and for girls in Mexico, Uganda, and Nigeria (Kiss et al., 2022; Rocha-Jimenez et al., 2018). Two quantitative cross-sectional studies analyzed possible gender differences, but for both male and female youth an association was found between sexual exploitation and living on the streets (Self-Brown et al., 2021) or sleeping in unaccompanied houses (Pereda et al., 2022).

Six studies, conducted in the United States and Canada, identified *child welfare involvement* as a risk factor for sexual exploitation. This included (family) involvement in foster care, residential care, child protection services, and poor relationship with services (Fraley & Aronowitz, 2021; Greeson et al., 2019b; Hornor et al., 2022; Louie, 2018; Varma et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2021). Four studies included males and females; however, no comparisons between genders were made regarding the association between child welfare involvement and sexual exploitation.

Exposure to violence (such as community and dating violence, being shot, cut or stabbed) was a risk factor for sexual exploitation in both male and female youth ($n=4$). Three studies were conducted in the United States and one in Uganda. Overall, some mixed results were found regarding gender. In a population-based sample in the United States, Franchino-Olsen et al. (2021) found an association between the experience of community violence and increased odds of sexual exploitation in both genders, with males experiencing community violence more often than females. In the same population-based sample, Franchino-Olsen and Martin (2022) investigated the relationship between gang membership and sexual exploitation while controlling for violence victimization among others. In the multivariable logistic regression analysis, violence victimization was significantly associated with sexual exploitation for females, but not in males. Furthermore, Self-Brown et al. (2021) found significant associations between physical dating violence and sexual exploitation in females, but not in males.

Negative Experiences at the Societal Level. A substantial body of research has linked sexual exploitation to *economic vulnerabilities*, such as poverty, low parental education, debts, financial insecurity, material need, and lack of economic opportunities ($n=17$). Notable is that most studies involved non-Western countries, such as India, Mexico, Uganda, Nigeria, and Rwanda (Acharya & Bryson Clark, 2021; Dalla et al., 2020, 2022; Goldenberg et al., 2015; Kiss et al., 2022; Macias-Konstantopoulos et al., 2013; Njoku et al., 2022; Rocha-Jimenez et al., 2018; Silverman et al., 2007; Williams et al., 2012, 2018). In these countries, economic vulnerabilities were more often characterized as environmental factors such as a lack of educational or labor opportunities in the environment and a lack of resources due to migration or living in refugee camps. Whereas in Western continents, economic vulnerabilities more often stem from family factors such as low parental education and family poverty (Barnert

et al., 2022; Cole, 2018; Franchino-Olsen & Martin, 2022; Klatt et al., 2014; Louie, 2018; Macias-Konstantopoulos et al., 2015). Overall, three studies analyzed risks by gender, but no significant differences were found.

Other negative experiences at the societal level concerned *gender, social, and cultural inequalities* ($n=5$); *normalization of sex trade in the environment* ($n=3$); *a failing legal system* ($n=2$); and *terrorism* ($n=1$) and were mainly found in non-Western countries such as India, Brazil, and Nigeria (Dalla et al., 2020, 2022; Digidiki & Bhabha, 2018; Jani & Felke, 2017; Macias Konstantopoulos et al., 2013; Njoku et al., 2022; Silverman et al., 2007; Williams et al., 2012). These studies predominantly involved females and no gender comparisons were made. Female-specific vulnerabilities were found, such as the sexual objectification of women, gender-based mistreatment in the family, sex work among girls, and selling daughters being seen as normative.

Negative Affect States. Six studies, conducted in the United States, Canada, Greece, and the United Kingdom found risk factors regarding *social and emotional problems* in male and female youth, such as difficulty forming healthy relationships, interpersonal problems, and negative emotions and affect states (Coy, 2009; Digidiki & Bhabha, 2018; Homma et al., 2012; Macias-Konstantopoulos et al., 2015; Reid et al., 2021; Reid & Piquero, 2016). Two studies analyzed gender differences. Among substance-using high school students in Canada, Homma et al. (2012) found no significant differences between male and female youth regarding the risk factor feelings of hopelessness and impulsivity. In a sample of male and female youth offenders, Reid and Piquero (2016) found that negative emotions were associated with sexual exploitation in males but not in females.

Negative self-image and the need for affection was a risk factor for sexual exploitation in six studies conducted in the United States, the United Kingdom, Brazil, India, and the Philippines (Cole, 2018; Coy, 2009; Fogel et al., 2017; Macias-Konstantopoulos et al., 2013, 2015; Perkins & Ruiz, 2017). The need for affection was only found in studies involving female youth. One study among professionals working with high-risk youth analyzed possible gender differences from the professional's perspective and no differences in gender regarding negative self-image as a risk factor for sexual exploitation were found (Cole, 2018).

Mental health problems (e.g., mental health problems in general, suicidal ideation, and psychoticism) as a risk factor for sexual exploitation were found in four studies, all conducted in the United States ($n=5$; Cole, 2018; de Vries et al., 2020; Panlilio et al., 2019; Reid & Piquero, 2014). Among a sample of professionals working with at-risk youth and/or crime victims and offenders (Cole, 2018) and a sample of youth offenders (Reid & Piquero, 2014), similarities across gender were revealed regarding, respectively, a youth's mental health and psychoticism as a vulnerability factor for sexual exploitation. One study did find gender differences.

Panlilio et al. (2019) revealed that suicidal ideation was associated with sexual exploitation in both genders, but that being male increased the probability of suicidal ideation.

Poor Coping and Risk Behavior. Multiple studies among both male and female youth showed that *substance use* (drug and alcohol use/dependency, early initiation of substance use) was associated with sexual exploitation ($n=20$). Two studies were conducted in sub-Saharan Africa and Uganda (Adjei & Saewyc, 2017; Self-Brown et al., 2021) and one in the United Kingdom (Klatt et al., 2014), but the majority were conducted in the United States (Cole, 2018; Cyders et al., 2021; Franchino-Olsen et al., 2021; Homma et al., 2012; Hornor et al., 2022; Louie, 2018; Macias-Konstantopoulos et al., 2015; McNeal & Walker, 2016; O'Brien, 2018; Panlilio et al., 2019; Perkins & Ruiz, 2017; Reid, 2011, 2014; Reid & Piquero, 2014, 2016; Self-Brown et al., 2021; Varma et al., 2015). Of the 10 studies that analyzed the association between substance use and sexual exploitation by gender, only three studies revealed significant differences. In a nationally representative sample of youth involved in child welfare in the United States, Panlilio et al. (2019) found that substance use was a risk factor for both males and females, but being male increased the probability of drug and alcohol use. By contrast, among a sample of youth offenders Reid and Piquero (2016) revealed that the association between age of initial alcohol/drug use and sexual exploitation was larger for females compared to males. Finally, Self-Brown et al. (2021) found an association between alcohol use and sexual exploitation in females living in the slums of Uganda, but not in males.

Running away from home or residential care was cited as a risk factor for sexual exploitation in both male and female youth by a substantial body of research ($n=15$), conducted in the United Kingdom and Spain (Biehal & Wade, 1999; Pereda et al., 2022), Mexico (Servin et al., 2015) but mainly in the United States (Barnertt et al., 2022; Chohaney, 2016; Cimino et al., 2017; Fedina et al., 2019; Franchino-Olsen et al., 2021; Hornor et al., 2022; Panlilio et al., 2019; Pereda et al., 2022; Reid, 2011, 2018; Reid & Piquero, 2016; Roe-Sepowitz, 2012; Varma et al., 2015). No significant differences in gender were found with the exception of the study of Panlilio et al. (2019). In this study being male increased the probability of running away, although running away was associated with a higher risk of sexual exploitation in both genders. In addition, in one study running away was a predictor in the opposite direction: Klatt et al. (2014) found that running away significantly decreased a person's risk of being sexually exploited. A notable finding is that Fedina et al. (2019) revealed that running away was a strong predictor for sexual exploitation in individuals involved in the sex industry. After accounting for other variables that were significantly associated with sexual exploitation at the bivariate level (e.g., sexual and emotional abuse, having family members involved in sex work), only running away remained significant.

Sexual (risk) behavior as a risk factor for sexual exploitation ($n = 14$) could encompass age-related risks (younger age at first sex, having an older boy or girlfriend), survival sex (trading sex to meet basic needs), multiple sexual partners, prior sexual transmitted infections, normalization of unwanted sex, or getting into cars with strangers. Risks regarding sexual behavior were found in both male and female youth. Two studies were conducted in Africa (Adjei & Saewyc, 2017; Chimdessa & Cheire, 2018) and the others in the United States (Chohaney, 2016; de Vries et al., 2020; Hornor et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2017; O'Brien, 2018; Panlilio et al., 2019; Reid, 2011, 2018; Reid & Piquero, 2014, 2016; Roe-Sepowitz, 2012; Varma et al., 2015). Of the five studies that compared male and female youth, only one study found gender differences. Reid and Piquero (2016) found that age at first sexual experience had a significant negative relationship with sexual exploitation for males, while no association was found for females. However, according to the authors, this could have been due to the small sample size of females.

Risks regarding the problematic use of *the internet and social media* were prevalent among male and female youth in studies conducted in the United States, Spain, and Uganda (Fraley & Aronowitz, 2021; O'Brien, 2018; Pereda et al., 2022; Reid, 2018; Self-Brown et al., 2021). Risks included unsupervised access to social media, chatting and forming interpersonal relationships via the internet, and sharing sexually explicit personal material (sexting). Two studies compared risk factors by gender. While Pereda et al. (2022) found no significant differences between genders in sharing sexually explicit personal material, the study of Self-Brown et al. (2021) showed that among adolescents living in the slums of Uganda, social media use was associated with sexual exploitation for females, but not for males.

Six studies ($n = 6$), all conducted in the United States and involving both male and female youth, found that risks regarding *criminal behavior and justice system involvement*, such as property crime, crimes against persons, involvement with law enforcement, and juvenile detention, were associated with sexual exploitation (Chohaney, 2016; Franchino-Olsen & Martin, 2022; Hornor et al., 2022; McNeal & Walker, 2016; Varma et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2021). Three studies analyzed for possible gender differences and found that the association between criminal behavior and justice system involvement and sexual exploitation was significant for both genders (Franchino-Olsen & Martin, 2022; McNeal & Walker, 2016; Wright et al., 2021).

Protective Factors

Positive Experiences. *Positive and supporting relationships* were found to lower the risk of sexual exploitation in studies among male and female youth conducted in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and sub-Saharan Africa ($n = 9$).

These relationships could involve parents (parental monitoring and supervision, a two-parent family structure, and family connectedness; Adjei & Saewyc, 2017; Cluver et al., 2020; Franchino-Olsen et al., 2021; Franchino-Olsen & Martin, 2022; Homma et al., 2012; McNeal & Walker, 2016). It could also involve relationships outside the family (a positive relationship with substitute carers and teachers or having in general at least one person who provides emotional support and trust; Biehal & Wade, 1999; Helpingstine et al., 2021; O'Brien, 2018). Seven studies investigated gender differences, but no significant differences were found between male and female youth regarding the association between positive and supporting relationships and sexual exploitation.

Five *other* and less studied positive experiences were found. Studies among disadvantaged girls who received treatment due to being sexually abused (Reid, 2014) and American male and female youth offenders (Reid & Piquero, 2014) associated a higher school grade or school completion with declined chances of sexual exploitation. Level of parental education was a protective factor for sexual exploitation in both male and female youth in a population-based study by Franchino-Olsen et al. (2021), conducted in the United States. Among Canadian substance-using high school students, Homma et al. (2012) found that involvement in clubs (e.g., sports) decreased chances for sexual exploitation. However, associations were only significant for females and not for males. Lastly, Cluver et al. (2020) revealed that food security was a positive factor in decreasing the risk of sexual exploitation in female youth in deprived South-African communities, but no significant association was found for males.

Positive Affect States and Healthy Coping and Behavior. Regarding the last two categories of protective factors in the *a priori* model, only two studies were detected. In a qualitative study among system-involved survivors of sexual exploitation in the United States (male and female), *learning and being taught self-worth, interpersonal boundaries, and sexual limit setting* were found to be factors in mitigating the risk of sexual exploitation (O'Brien, 2018). However, it was not reported how many males and females participated in the study. Regarding behavior as a protective factor, Reid and Piquero (2014) showed that *having first sex at a higher age* reduced the likelihood of initial involvement in sexual exploitation before the age of 17 in American males and females.

Demographics Associated With Sexual Exploitation

The current review has explored whether there are differences between male and female youth with respect to the associations between risk and protective factors and sexual exploitation. Results also indicated that in seven studies *gender* was associated with sexual exploitation as a risk factor itself ($n = 7$), although results were ambiguous. A study by Wright et al.

(2021) among runaway and homeless youth showed that females had a higher likelihood of experiencing sexual exploitation compared to males. Another study on homeless and runaway youth in the United States found that those who were sexually exploited were more likely to be female (Greeson et al., 2019a). Among a sample of youth in the slums of Uganda, sexual exploitation was associated with being female as well (Self-Brown et al., 2021). Furthermore, two qualitative studies indicated a greater risk for females than for males (Biehal & Wade, 1999; Dalla et al., 2022). By contrast, findings from a nationally representative study from 1994 to 1996 in the United States revealed lower odds for females experiencing sexual exploitation compared to males (Franchino-Olsen & Martin, 2022). In another population-based study in the United States, McNeal and Walker (2016) found male adolescents to be significantly more likely to experience sexual exploitation by exchanging sex for drugs or money.

In all, 10 studies which were all conducted in the United States showed that *ethnicity* was associated with sexual exploitation. Victims were more often from an ethnic or cultural minority compared to youth who were not sexually exploited (Barnert et al., 2022; Fedina et al., 2019; Reid et al., 2021), such as African American (Franchino-Olsen et al., 2021; Franchino-Olsen & Martin, 2022; Hornor et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2017; Reid & Piquero, 2014), Latino (Greeson et al., 2019), or multiracial (Chohaney, 2016).

According to four studies which were all conducted in the United States, *LGBTQ+* youth were at higher risk of sexual exploitation. Among a sample of homeless youth, the odds of being LGBTQ+ and sexually exploited were two times higher compared to being heterosexual (Hogan & Roe-Sepowitz, 2020). Among samples of homeless youth as well, transgender youth had a higher likelihood of experiencing sexual exploitation compared to males (Greeson et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2021). Barnert et al. (2022) found that same-sex romantic attraction was significantly associated with exposure to sexual exploitation.

Discussion

This systematic review provides an overview of the risk and protective factors that have been associated with sexual exploitation in youth. Insight is gained into the extent to which these factors apply to male and or female youth and to which countries. Such a cross-cultural overview of the knowledge base on risk and protective factors is a crucial step toward targeted prevention efforts and adequate and timely treatment. Moreover, knowledge gaps have been identified that provide direction for future research.

Key findings

Four key findings are drawn from this overview and they are discussed below, pertaining to (1) common risk factors for sexual exploitation worldwide; (2) underexamined protective

factors for sexual exploitation; (3) differences in risk and protective factors between continents; and (4) gender differences in risk and protective factors.

First, our overview shows common risk factors preceding victimization in youth worldwide (e.g., physical/emotional abuse and neglect, sexual abuse, compromised parenting and family functioning, [lack of a] social network, economic vulnerabilities, substance use, and running away). It is known that different combinations of these risk factors can underlie a youth's vulnerability and can create pathways to sexual exploitation (Choi, 2015; Reid & Piquero, 2016). Research on interactions between risk factors is scarce. But by integrating this knowledge on risk factors into theoretical frameworks—as was done in the current study using an *a priori* framework (see Table 2), researchers are increasingly able to explain the cumulation of risk factors. Such frameworks, for example, explain that negative experiences (e.g., abuse and poverty) often result in negative affect states (e.g., mental health problems) which induce maladaptive coping strategies and risk behavior (e.g., running away or survival sex) placing youth in vulnerable positions for sexual exploitation (Agnew, 2006; Edwards & Mika, 2017; Franchino-Olsen, 2021; Gerassi, 2015; Reid, 2011, 2014; Reid & Piquero, 2014; Wilson & Wisdom, 2010). These relationships can be bidirectional as it is known that having experienced multiple forms of traumatic experiences increases the risk of sexual exploitation and vice versa (Musicaro et al., 2017). Knowing that these common risk factors can place youth in vulnerable positions for sexual exploitation contributes to intercepting the negative cycle of adversity. It clarifies areas where professionals in practice and policy can implement prevention efforts. It also gives professionals in practice direction for screening and (early) identification of victims or youth at risk.

There are some limitations regarding these frameworks. Not one of them is exhaustive because this review has shown that research into vulnerabilities for sexual exploitation often involves Western study populations. Therefore, risk factors listed in these frameworks do not necessarily involve cross-cultural validity. Future research should gain more insight into how risk and protective factors interact against the background of cultural and societal issues, which is key in prevention efforts and timely treatment (Franchino-Olsen, 2019).

Second, protective factors are underexamined. This may reflect a greater focus in research on factors that contribute to victimization than factors that prevent victimization. Yet, one common factor was found in male and female youth on several continents: positive and supporting relationships. This is in line with the literature, emphasizing that social support and meaningful relationships are crucial in the context of resilience (Morris et al., 2018). They can mitigate the impact of childhood adversity, sexual exploitation and promote mental health and positive development (Barnová & Tamášová, 2018; Landers et al., 2020; Scoglio et al., 2021).

A model that gives guidance in the understanding of these mechanisms is the ICARE model (Hays-Grudo et al., 2021). Our results underline the importance that professionals incorporate a strength-based approach in treatment programs for vulnerable and/or sexually exploited youth and their families (Landers et al., 2020). Future research should provide more insight into which protective factors are relevant in the context of sexual exploitation and their interconnectedness with risk factors.

Third, besides commonalities in risk and protective factors worldwide, geographic differences were found. Especially regarding the risk category negative experiences at the community and societal level, which seemed to differ between Western and non-Western continents. In non-Western continents, relatively more environmental factors related to economic vulnerabilities or residential instability were cited (e.g., forced migration, limited access to school or the labor market, and lack of basic needs). In Mexico, for example, forced migration due to drug violence resulted in a lack of a social network and labor market opportunities, which made youth more vulnerable to sexual exploitation (Acharya & Bryson Clark, 2021; Rocha-Jimenez et al., 2018). In India, prostitution was one of the few viable options for females to provide a family income as a result of a normalization of sex trade in the family or environment and poverty (Dalla et al., 2020; Macias-Konstantopoulos, 2013; Silverman et al., 2007). This is in line with the knowledge that youth living in poor environments are especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation and that low-income non-Western countries report much higher numbers of youth victims (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020). This endorses the need for a cross-cultural perspective on risk and protective factors for sexual exploitation, as the extent to which factors contribute to vulnerabilities may differ between continents. Another difference between continents was that some risk factors were only cited in non-Western continents (e.g., terrorism; child marriage or pregnancy; AIDS) and others only in North America (e.g., child welfare involvement, intellectual disabilities, mental health problems). This may reflect that the prioritization of research topics differs between continents. For example, intellectual disabilities are present in youth worldwide but have only been studied in the United States as a risk factor for sexual exploitation. Moreover, although AIDS affects every country in the world, it is likely to be a more evident topic in Africa as it has reached epidemic proportions (International Labor Organization, s.d.). To fully understand such geographic differences, an important next step for future research is to gain more insight into the broader range of possible risk and protective factors for sexual exploitation worldwide.

Finally, results indicate that male youth are underrepresented in the literature on risk and protective factors for sexual exploitation, while a systematic review by Moynihan et al. (2018) showed that sexual exploitation is a global issue

in male youth, in both high- and low-income countries. The fact that the stereotypical victim of sexual exploitation tends to be female is worrisome in this context. Especially given that the present findings demonstrate that the majority of risk and protective factors that have been studied in both genders were significant for male as well as female youth. However, we did find indications that gender may predispose males to encounter some risk factors more frequently than females. For example, running away, experiencing violence in the community and substance use were risk factors in both genders, but male youth had higher odds of experiencing these risk factors (Franchino-Olsen et al., 2021; Panlilio et al., 2019). Gender may indirectly contribute to the association between certain risk and protective factors and sexual exploitation. Yet, the limited data, variety in methodologies, and heterogeneous populations in the included studies currently prevent reliable comparisons between male and female youth. Hence, there are still blind spots, preventing definitive statements about risks tied to gender (Franchino-Olsen, 2019). The same might be the case with LGBTQ+ youth, youth with intellectual disabilities, and youth from ethnic minorities, who may have a predisposition to encounter risks such as poverty, homelessness, or engagement in survival sex more often (Fedina et al., 2019; Franchino-Olsen et al., 2019). In future research, more consideration should be given to these diverse and marginalized groups and their possible additional vulnerabilities. Only then can prevention and timely treatment efforts be tailored to the unique needs of the heterogeneous population of sexually exploited youth. Table 3 shows the clinical implications resulting from the key findings described above.

Strengths and Limitations

Research on risk and protective factors for sexual exploitation in youth is still limited. This study is a unique contribution to the understanding of vulnerabilities for sexual exploitation as our overview adds a cross-cultural perspective on both risk and protective factors in male and female youth. The present review thereby contributes to the clarification of targets for prevention efforts, timely treatment, and future research. In addition, the overview of risk and protective factors is not just an enumeration of the wide range of factors. By categorizing them based on a theoretically based a priori framework, it was possible to gain a better understanding of the possible cumulation of risk factors and the potential role of protective factors. Although we found that such theoretical frameworks are not yet exhaustive with regard to a worldwide perspective and protective factors, we were able to make recommendations on what is needed to fill these knowledge gaps. Another strength was that the methodology of this systematic review was accurate and structured. This was reflected in the strong inter-rater reliability, the followed PRISMA guidelines, and the quality appraisal of the included studies, which is not common in research on sexual exploitation.

Table 3. Clinical Implications for Practice, Policy and Research.

Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase awareness and knowledge among professionals working with vulnerable children and youth about risk and protective factors for sexual exploitation • Early interventions in vulnerable children and youth and their families to intercept the often-present negative cycle of adversity are urgently needed
Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance social networks of children and youth • Structurally address the issue of poverty and social inequalities to enhance economic opportunities at all levels of society • Strengthen policies around vulnerable youth by investing in positive and supportive relationships
Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investigate protective factors for sexual exploitation and their interaction with risk factors to gain a better understanding of pathways into victimization • Include male youth in research to gain a better understanding of their specific vulnerabilities and possible gender differences • Gain more insight into sexual exploitation worldwide to be able to match the needs of culturally diverse populations • Focus on diverse and marginalized populations to be able to match practice and policy to everyone's unique needs

Several limitations have to be considered. Sexually exploited youth are a heterogeneous population and we included a broad range of study samples (e.g., nationally representative and school-based samples, youth involved in child welfare, migrants, and youth offenders). It should be taken into consideration that certain risk and protective factors may be more relevant to different groups of youth, as we did not distinguish between them when synthesizing the results. Moreover, the limited data combined with heterogeneous study samples and methodologies prevented us from making definitive statements on gender differences, the complex interconnectedness between factors, the predictive power of associations, and reliable comparisons between subgroups. However, this systematic review does identify target points for practice, policy, and future research that help to shed more light on these issues. Also, only peer-reviewed articles were included, while there may be gray literature (e.g., policy documents or reports from organizations such as the United Nations and ECPAT International which study and combat sexual exploitation) that contribute to a fuller picture of risk and protective factors worldwide. Another limitation concerns the inconsistent definitions of sexual exploitation in literature. Although the definitions in the included studies had to be in line with our operationalization (UN Secretary-General, 2003, p. 1), studies still differed in terminology. Some definitions were broader than

others, for example regarding the nature of the sexual involvement. This is a well-known methodological challenge in research into human trafficking and can result in challenges for the interpretation and disaggregation of outcome data (Mitchell et al., 2017; Moynihan et al., 2018). Regardless of these limitations, this systematic review is unique in presenting an evidence-based overview of both risk and protective factors for sexual exploitation in male and female youth worldwide. It provides practice, policy, and future research guidance in their efforts for more targeted prevention efforts, adequate treatment, and filling knowledge gaps.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Sexual exploitation is an important concern for youth to proactively address, as they are at elevated risk of becoming victims. This systematic review makes a unique contribution to the understanding of vulnerabilities in youth by providing a first overview of both risk and protective factors from a cross-cultural perspective. The broad range of child, family, and environmental risk factors underline that sexual exploitation is a complex phenomenon. It is a detrimental outcome of multiple possible underlying risks and pathways. Sexual exploitation therefore requires a multidimensional approach, involving health care, education, police, law, and policy. The identified common risk factors in youth worldwide with regard to negative life experiences and risk behavior emphasize the need for early interventions in vulnerable children and their families. In this, a strength-based approach is crucial to intercept the often-present negative cycle of adversity. Given that societal risks such as poverty and social inequalities play an important role in the onset of sexual exploitation, policy should structurally pay attention to these themes, especially in non-Western countries. A logical consequence of the complexity of sexual exploitation is that our review revealed many knowledge gaps. Future research should shed more light on protective factors, the interconnectedness between factors, marginalized populations, and the role of culture and gender. This must contribute to a deeper understanding of the pathways to sexual exploitation in youth worldwide. Our results have made a valuable contribution to this and provide practice, policy, and research guidance in the establishment of more targeted prevention efforts, adequate interventions, and future research.

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