

# Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children Online in the Philippines: A Review of Online News and Articles

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## ABSTRACT

**Background.** Advances in information and communication technologies facilitate opportunities for sexual exploitation and abuse of children online (SEACO). Despite the presence of laws against child pornography, trafficking, and cybercrime, the Philippines has become known as a key hub of the billion-dollar global child cybersex industry.

**Objective.** The objective of this study was to provide insight on SEACO in the Philippines.

**Methods.** The methodology consisted of a review of readily available news articles and reports. The search term “Philippines cybersex” was used in Advanced Search in Google News (<https://news.google.com.ph>) for English language reports from 1995 to 2015 to describe the geographic distribution of media reported cases of SEACO, the profile of victims and offenders, and how offenders and victims became involved in SEACO.

**Results.** The review found 55 reports and articles from 2011 to 2015. Cases were reported from 9 regions in the country with victims ranging from 18 months to 17 years in age. Three types of SEACO were identified: live streaming of child sexual abuse, child sexual abuse material (child pornography), and sextortion using minors.

**Conclusion.** Cases of SEACO were found to be present throughout the country. National policies and preventive measures are needed to stem this crime.

*Key Words: child sexual abuse, live-stream child abuse, Philippines, sexual exploitation*

## INTRODUCTION

Accessibility to information and communication technologies (ICTs) has become widespread worldwide. At the same time, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation are increasingly taking place through the use of ICTs. While the internet presents opportunities for knowledge and development in children, online risks such as sexual exploitation and abuse of children online (SEACO) also occur. A pilot study conducted 2016 in the Philippines identified exposure to exploitative strangers and cybersex as some of the risks that Filipino children are prone to when they go online. In the study, 114 children aged 9 to 17 years disclosed that all of them have been exposed to cybersex, sexual messages/materials, and sexual grooming in different forms and modes through Facebook, porn websites, group chats, pop up menu, sexual tweets, sexual games, and sexual images sent as a joke. Children also disclosed that they have

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experienced receiving and sending sexual messages in words, pictures or videos, commonly known as “sexting.”<sup>1</sup> As seen in the study, ICTs enable rapid and widespread production, exchange, and distribution of potential child sexual abuse material through social media, newsgroups, email, and/or instant messaging systems. In addition, a UNICEF study revealed that 8 in 10 Filipino children and adolescents are in danger of being bullied or being sexually abused online.<sup>2</sup> Aside from cyber bullying and sexting, other ICT-facilitated threats to children in the Philippines include exposure to pornography or sexually explicit content; online grooming and sexual solicitation; offline sexual abuse facilitated by the internet and social media; child abuse material (child pornography), and online commercial sexual exploitation of children.<sup>3</sup>

The Philippines has become known as a top global source of materials on child sexual abuse. More than 20,000 child pornographic images are uploaded to the internet everyweek.<sup>4</sup> In 2005, a random search made by a research team found photos of individuals appearing to be aged between 11 and 17 years in various nude poses and sexual acts. They were recognized as Filipinos because of their build, clothing and facial structure.<sup>5</sup> In the same year, a paper on cyber trafficking of Filipino girls found evidence of commercial sexual exploitation of Filipino children online.<sup>6</sup>

The 2016 Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse defines online child sexual abuse in two ways: “sexual abuse of children that is facilitated by ICTs (online-facilitated child sexual abuse)” and “sexual abuse of children that is committed elsewhere and then repeated by sharing it online through, for instance, images and videos.”<sup>7</sup> It is also important to note that online child sexual exploitation is not a distinct type of sexual exploitation. In this case, the internet is used to exploit children hence online child sexual exploitation is an umbrella term to indicate sexual exploitation with an online component. The online manifestations of child sexual exploitation include: a) child pornography or child abuse material, b) live online child sexual abuse, and c) solicitation of children for sexual purposes.<sup>7</sup>

Live streaming of child sexual abuse is a new form of child abuse and exploitation enabled by ICTs.<sup>8</sup> Currently, many live stream child sexual abuse cases have been noted to be on the rise. Live stream child sexual abuse is conducted in a private place (usually a house) organized by an ‘operator’ where children undress and perform sexual acts on each other following instructions from a remote pedophile through a webcam. Money is sent to the ‘operator’ through an international wire transfer as payment for the ‘show’ which lasts from 15 to 30 minutes.<sup>9</sup> Money is sent through Western Union or local money-transfer agencies like Cebuana Lhuiller and GCash.

These money transfer methods help identify and trace online child sex abusers. Recently, alternative ways like prepaid debit cards and Bitcoins have been used including

online money transfer sites such as Xoom and Azimo. These alternative ways of money transfer offer anonymity or false identities for financial transactions and can hinder prosecution of individuals involved.<sup>10</sup>

Poverty is seen to be a key driving force for children in becoming victims of online child sexual abuse; other driving forces include a good grasp of the English language, affordable and widespread internet access, the “easy money” perception of webcam sex, and a cultural norm of “family first” that promotes choosing the needs of the family over the child’s welfare.<sup>3</sup> In addition, consumerism among youth may drive involvement in online sexual exploitation where money is spent on food, internet access, clothes, cell phone load, alcohol, and drugs.<sup>11</sup>

In 2013, an exploratory study on the nature and extent of livestream sexual abuse in the Philippines conducted by Terre des Hommes found three main categories according to scale of operation: individual operations, family-run operations, and large-scale, organized operations called “dens.”<sup>11</sup> Individual operations are run from private homes, internet cafes or a “Pisonet” (computers that will provide internet access for 5 minutes for every PhP 1.00). Children involved in online sexual abuse are also commonly involved in street prostitution. Family-run operations are common in very crowded and poor neighborhoods where children are coerced by parents and other family members. Dens are larger-scale operations involving whole neighborhoods or organized criminal group operations where children are hired or trafficked.

Locally published studies on the topic are few and most of the information comes from gray literature (i.e., organization research reports, student theses, and government reports and documents). News stories and articles are alternative sources of information. While the facts presented in media reports are not based on a systematic investigation of materials and resources as in published research, these can still provide contextual background and preliminary data for further investigation.

This review aimed to present preliminary information on SEACO in the Philippines using online news reports and media articles and provide insight into the geographic distribution of media reported cases of SEACO, the profile of victims and offenders and how offenders and victims become involved in SEACO.

## METHODS

To present preliminary information on SEACO in the Philippines, a review using online news reports and media articles was conducted. The search term employed “Philippines cybersex” using Advanced Search in Google News (<https://news.google.com.ph>) including articles from 1995 to 2015 and only those published in English. “Cybersex” was used as a search term to obtain the earliest articles published on this topic online as reported in studies published in 2005.<sup>5,6</sup>

Google News groups together similar reports from different sources. When multiple articles covered the same case, the article with the most comprehensive information was included. Information was extracted and entered in a spreadsheet independently by two authors (SH and AL). A third author (JA) resolved discrepancies (i.e., inconsistent information). Duplicate articles and those that did not include information on details of the occurrence of SEACO in the Philippines were discarded (i.e., articles reporting on legislation, policies or programs; feature or opinion articles; columns and editorials); and articles where payment or subscription was needed were also not included.

## RESULTS

A total of 546 unique articles of potential relevance were identified from which 72 articles were selected and assessed for eligibility. Eventually, 55 articles were included in the qualitative synthesis (Figure 1).

The majority of news reports came from local online news sources (75%) and consisted of reports on the arrest or conviction of an offender (84%). The rest of the articles were features on victims or offenders. There were 3, 5, 10, 16, and 16 reports identified in 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015,

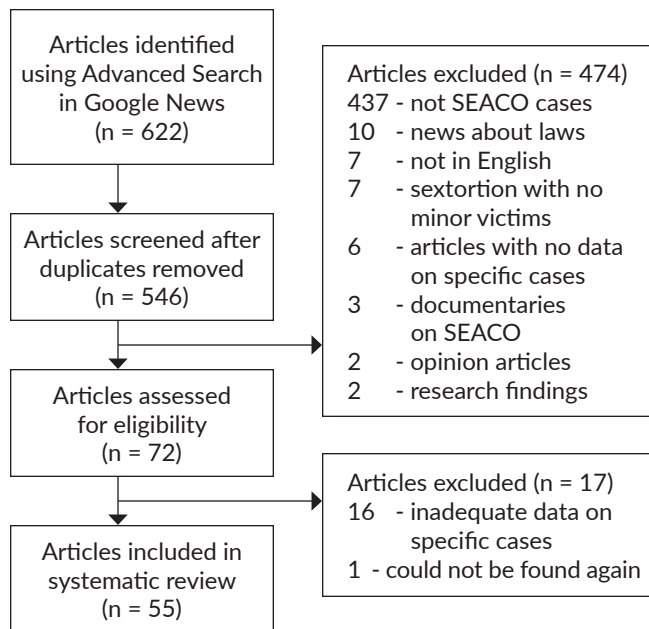


Figure 1. Flowchart for selection of articles.

respectively. The earliest article recovered was published by an international news agency on March 3, 2011 and featured the raid of a cybersex den in Olongapo City, where six minors aged 13 years and above were rescued. The most recent article was locally published on December 5, 2015 which reported the rescue of five minors from a cybersex operation run by their aunt in Cordova, Cebu.

## Forms of SEACO

Table 1 presents descriptions of actions involving child victims, offenders, and the form of ICT used. The reviewed articles revealed three main forms of online sexual exploitation of children: (1) live streaming of child sexual abuse, (2) child abuse material (child pornography), and (3) sextortion using minors.

## Geographic distribution of SEACO cases

Since the news reports and feature articles may overlap and cover the same SEACO case, information on the identity of offender, location of arrest or conviction and date of publication were extracted and consolidated to determine the actual number of cases. Out of 55 articles, 43 unique cases of SEACO were identified. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of SEACO cases by region.

## Victims

The victims' age and sex were not given in almost half of the articles. In 26 news reports that provided information on the sex of victims, the children rescued were female only (72%), male and female (24%), and male only (4%). In 25 news reports that provided information on the age of victims, the age ranged from 18 months to 17 years.

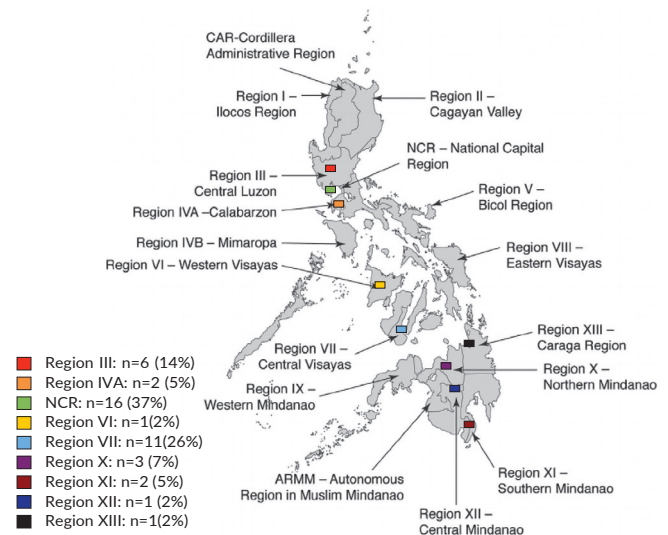


Figure 2. Distribution of SEACO cases reported between 2011 and 2015 by region.

## Offenders

Table 2 lists the different types of offenders based on offender descriptions derived from the news reports and the number of offenders under each type. More than half of the identified offenders were reported to be operators (58%). The rest were operator-perpetrators (14%), pimps (14%), clients (10%), and recruiters (4%). There were slightly more male offenders (56%) than female offenders (44%). All the clients were male. One third of the offenders were foreigners.

**Table 1.** Reported activities of child victims and offenders and the form of ICT used based on reviewed articles

Child	Offender	ICT used
<b>Live streaming of child sexual abuse</b>		
Pose nude	Customer requests children to show their bodies and requests for another show if satisfied	Webcam
Perform sexual acts while chatting with clients	Customer orders girls on the other part of the Pacific to act out his sexual fantasies while a trafficker would help direct them as cameraman	Live camera Live streaming
Lewd performances		Lewd performances via videochat
Asked to do sexual acts with other minors as well as adults, including intercourse as well as acts involving sextoys	Male customer types his instructions onto a computer and watches via a live camera	
Follow whatever foreign customers would ask them to do	Live sex show Client calls them out and they will perform whatever the client tells them to do while he pleasures himself	
Sexually abused on camera	Customer watches the live-streaming of children being sexually abused in the Philippines Live videos beamed to a pornographic site	Online porn service Pornographic website
Girls forced to watch men they serve on screen	Pays underage girls for sex and posting their sex videos online for foreign pedophiles Forces children to have sex with him and each other in front of web cameras Children forced to kiss each other and perform oral sex on the man while being videoed and photographed	Cybersex through Facebook
	Foreigners Internet customers worldwide Overseas online audience Watchers in Asia, US, Europe Mostly American and Australian patrons	Clients met through online dating group "Cupid", under the group "Adult"
<b>Child sexual abuse material</b>		
	Uploads videos of minors to a pornographic website Possesses, produces, sells, distributes and transmits child pornography Videos sold to online customers around the world	Sold, transmitted and distributed videos through Skype
	Sold made-to-order videos online	Communicated directly with customers through email or IM
	Recruits minors and pays them	Cell phones used to take lewd videos of girls
<b>Sextortion using minors</b>		
Minors being used as video chatters to lure victims	Operators chat online with client and pretend to be women or girls depending on what the client wants. They would then upload pictures and pre-recorded video of a nude girl or woman they claim to be.	

**Table 2.** Number and types of offenders according to acts described in the news reports

Type of offender	Definition	Number
Recruiter	Individual who transports children as part of a cybersex operation	2
Operator	Individual who owns or operates a cybersex den Individual who transacts with clients for live-stream sexual performance of children online Individual who produces, sells, distributes and transmits child abuse material (i.e., images, videos) over the internet Includes accomplices	29
Operator-Perpetrator	Operator who has sexual contact with the child as part of the live-stream sexual performance or child abuse material	7
Pimp	Individual who recruits children and arranges their sexual exploitation	7
Client	Individual who watches a live-stream of children being sexually abused online Individual who directs a live-stream sexual performance Individual who possesses child abuse material in his/her computers, typically, a foreigner	5
	<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>

Table 3 shows the characteristics of the foreign offenders reported to be involved in SEACO in the Philippines. Out of 14 offenders, six were out of the country. Several clients in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom had been charged or convicted in relation to SEACO in the Philippines. A number of foreigners in possession of child pornography and/or operating cybersex dens had also

been arrested, along with local partners in Manila, Bulacan, Olongapo City, province of Cebu, General Santos City, and Cagayan de Oro City. There were no reports of convicted local offenders. Among the local offenders, there were 11 (30%) who were biologically related to the victims (Table 4). The family members involved were in their 30s and consisted mostly of mothers.

**Table 3.** Characteristics of foreign offenders involved in SEACO in the Philippines according to news reports

Nationality of offender	Type of offender	Age of offender (years)	Status	Location of offender <sup>a</sup>	Location of victim
American	Client	55	In jail	Washington, Pennsylvania, USA	Cebu City
American	Client	55	Arrested in 2003, In jail	Lexington, Kentucky, USA	Cordova, Cebu
American	Operator-Perpetrator	60	Arrested	General Santos City	General Santos City
Australian	Client	68	Convicted	Melbourne, Victoria, Australia	Cebu
Australian	Client	43	Arrested	Australia	—
Australian	Operator-Perpetrator	65	Arrested	San Jose Del Monte, Bulacan	San Jose Del Monte, Bulacan
Australian	Operator-Perpetrator	50	Arrested	Cordova, Cebu	Cordova, Cebu
Australian	Operator-Perpetrator	51	Arrested	Cagayan de Oro	Cagayan de Oro; Surigao; Malaybalay, Bukidnon
British	Client	74	Charged in court	Wirral, North West England	
Irish	Operator-Perpetrator	>60	Arrested	London, United Kingdom	Mactan and Babag in Lapu- Lapu City
Japanese	Operator-Perpetrator	37	Arrested	Manila	Manila
Norwegian	Operator	61	Arrested	Olongapo City	Olongapo City
Swede	Operator	31	Arrested in 2009,	Cagayan de Oro City	Cagayan de Oro City
Swede	Operator	35	convicted in 2011		

<sup>a</sup> Location of offender is indicated as the area where the offender operated, where charges were filed in court, or where an offender was convicted in court.

### Type of operation

Table 5 shows the distribution of cases according to type of operation. There were five cases of family-run operations of SEACO where children were exposed to cyber pornography by parents or other family members, typically mothers. Three of the reported cases were located in Barangay Cogon, Cordova, Cebu. The family members' involvement included being the pimp of their daughters, guiding the sexual performances on- and off-camera and sexual abuse of a child on-camera. There were two mothers involved in cybersex who exposed their daughters when their clients asked for children.

There were 20 cases that involved cybersex dens, hidden in two- or three-story houses and rented apartments, several in slum areas. There was one encounter that occurred in a hotel room. Minors were initially recruited as a babysitter or domestic helper, or for work in internet cafés in the city and later forced into cybersex. Cybersex operations involved uploading sexually explicit images of children, nudity in front of a webcam, and live sexual performances with children or among children. In one operation, snapshots of naked children cost USD50, nudity in front of the webcam cost USD100, and a live sex show among children cost as high as USD500. The children, or parents, got USD10-USD18 per show. Sudden show of increased wealth would arouse suspicion in the community but did not always prompt reporting. The cybersex dens were discovered through disclosure from child victims, tips from foreign agencies, through information arising from investigations (i.e., arrest of a client in another country), and through local surveillance based on tips from neighbors and informants. The increased fortune of operators also leads to the proliferation of operations within communities, giving rise to a "cottage industry" in some towns. In raids conducted of cybersex dens, authorities confiscated cell phones, computers,

**Table 4.** Characteristics of offenders related to victims

Relation to child	Age	Type of offender	Location
Biological mother	31	Operator	Cordova, Cebu
Mother's partner	37		
Biological mother	—	Operator	Taguig City
Biological mother	35	Operator-Perpetrator	Barangay Ibabao, Cordova, Cebu
Biological father	37	Operator	
Biological mother/aunt	31	Operator	Davao City
Biological mother/aunt	30	Operator	
Biological mother	—	Pimp	San Jose del Monte, Bulacan
Biological mother	—	Operator	Barangay Cogon, Cordova, Cebu
Paternal grandmother	—		
Uncle	30	Operator	Barangay San Roque, Navotas City

**Table 5.** Number of SEACO cases by type of operation

Type of operation	Number of cases
Individual	0
Family-run operations	7
Cybersex den	27
Cybersex center	8
Sextortion	1
Total	43

laptops, and tablets containing sexually explicit images of children as well as receipts for money transfer remittances from foreigners.

In eight cases, cybersex operations masqueraded as fake call centers or business establishments that sold child pornography. One of the operations rented a building within a school compound. The staff of the cybersex operations would chat online with foreigners, enticing them to subscribe to pornographic websites that contain images of Filipino

children. Compared to cybersex dens, cybersex centers did not appear to involve actual children, but they operated as venues for sextortion or the online sale of child sexual abuse material. In sextortion, victims are found through social media, such as Facebook, and lured into cybersex using video call services such as Skype. The sexually explicit exchange is recorded by the suspects and is used to blackmail the victim in exchange for money.

## DISCUSSION

Despite the Philippines having a reputation as a global hub for cybercrime, including child sexual exploitation, not much is known about this topic. Our review of media reports aimed to provide a picture of SEACO, however, our study was limited due to the following constraints. First, we included only online news reports as these are readily available. In trying to get more in-depth reports, we tried to obtain data from law enforcement agencies and child protection services, however, information was deemed confidential and classified. Conversely, a journalistic investigation published in 2016 revealed that in 2013, 57 live-streaming criminal cases have been reported in the Philippines which rose to 80 cases in 2014. In 2015, 167 ongoing, live-streaming criminal cases were reported in the Philippines.<sup>12</sup>

Second, while the earliest news report obtained was from 2011, earlier studies have documented raids of cybersex dens and the rescue of minors as early as 2005<sup>5,6</sup>. Thus, the article from 2011 was an inaccurate marker of the emergence of SEACO in the Philippines and only reflected the point at which news reports became available online.

Third, we aimed to gain more insight into the characteristics and circumstances of SEACO victims because of the challenges in gaining access to and collecting information from this vulnerable population; however, the news reports revealed very little information about SEACO victims. Fourth, details of SEACO operations that could be gathered from the news reports were limited by the amount of information contained in the news reports. However, we think this review has contributed new and important information on the forms of SEACO and characteristics of offenders that have not been previously documented by other studies.

In this review, incidents of SEACO were first reported in Olongapo City, Cordova (a municipality in Cebu), Cagayan de Oro, and Davao City. In the succeeding years, cases were reported from contiguous provinces and cities, suggesting that physical proximity may be a factor in the spread of SEACO to other areas (Figure 3). Webcam child prostitution has been observed to be more prevalent in areas known for sex tourism, although a geographical link requires further investigation.<sup>13</sup> The areas identified in this review also coincided with research focus areas selected for the incidence of livestream child sexual abuse: Angeles City, Taguig City, Cebu City, and the municipality of Cordova in the province

of Cebu.<sup>11</sup> As expected, there was very little and vague information on victims due to confidentiality. Since there were no consistent reports of the age and sex distribution of victims, this review provided limited information on the characteristics of victims other than that of the youngest age of a victim involved in SEACO, which was reported to be 18 months old.

The offender categories provided more information on the range of offenders involved in cybersex operations, including consumers of child sexual abuse material and operators of cybersex operations. Research suggests that offender motives vary according to type of offender: most child sexual abuse material consumers are motivated by sexual gratification while other offenders are interested in profit alone.<sup>10</sup> Although studies typically describe consumers of SEACO as white men, this study found foreigners not only as clients overseas but as partners of local operators. The foreign offenders were mostly in their mid-50s, older than the average age of 40 years seen in other studies.<sup>3</sup> Both men and women have been found to be involved as offenders in SEACO but females are reportedly involved to a limited extent. Their offenses are usually related to the possession, production, and distribution of child sexual abuse material.<sup>14</sup> In commercial sexual exploitation, women are typically involved in running business operations and recruitment.<sup>8</sup> Women are rarely the primary offender in child sexual abuse.<sup>14</sup> However, this review found that almost half of the offenders were women (44%) and that they played active roles in SEACO. Their active participation ranged from recruitment, trafficking and operating cybersex operations to the sexual abuse of a child during webcam performances. This review also highlighted the involvement of mothers in live streaming of child sexual abuse.

Individual operations involving children in webcam sexual performances from private residences, Internet cafés or “Pisonet” were not covered by the news reports. These operations lack an adult operator; inability to conduct money transfer payments and poor English skills may make it difficult for children to receive payments.<sup>11</sup> The absence of an organized operation possibly allows this type of live stream sexual abuse to escape police surveillance.

Livestream child sexual abuse constitutes a violation of several Philippine laws. A suspect may be charged with three different offenses, namely, child trafficking, child pornography, and child abuse.<sup>12</sup> In August 2015, the Philippines Department of Justice issued an advisory including the following laws as applicable on the issue of online child sexual abuse: UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, Lanzarote Convention, Republic Act No. 7610 or the “Special Protection of Children against Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act,” Republic Act No. 9775 or the “Anti-Child Pornography Act of 2009,” Republic Act No. 9262 or the “Anti-Violence against Women and their Children Act of 2004,” and Republic Act No. 10175 or “Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012.”<sup>12</sup> Despite having

these laws in place, reporting and prosecution of suspects is hindered by a shortage of personnel to implement the laws, Philippine privacy laws, delay in prosecution due to authentication of foreign evidence, lack of knowledge among legal practitioners, low age of consent, and lack of support for victims.<sup>9,10,12</sup>

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Cases of SEACO have increasingly been reported in news and feature articles from almost every region in the country over the past ten years. The national legal framework for responding to SEACO is comprehensive and in compliance with international standards. However, grappling with the problem of sexual exploitation and abuse of children online requires measures to prevent the proliferation of this “industry” in the country. Identifying factors and addressing issues that encourage proliferation will be essential to impede its spread. More information on victims and the circumstances that lead them to become involved in SEACO is needed. The other players in SEACO also need to be looked into, including law enforcement authorities, telecommunications companies and money transfer agencies. Our review is the first step in confronting this problem.

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### Statement of Authorship

All authors have approved the final version submitted.

### Author Disclosure

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