



# The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children and adolescents in Brazil

Research briefing on the impact of Covid-19 on the commercial sexual exploitation of children in Brazil.<sup>1</sup>

Reporting suggests that the Covid-19 pandemic dramatically impacted children's vulnerability to, and experiences of commercial sexual exploitation. In this briefing we summarise emerging evidence and highlight research gaps.

## Key research findings

- The Covid-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted children and adolescents in Brazil, particularly those from less affluent backgrounds.
- The effects of Covid-19 in Brazil have been aggravated by a slow initial vaccine rollout, and the difficulty of adhering to hygiene and isolation protocols in the most densely populated and impoverished areas of the country.
- School closures, parental work redundancies, and the inability of many of many of Brazil's children to access the technology needed to attend remote classes pushed many young people into work (including the commercial sex industry) to provide for their families.
- Statistics surrounding children's exposure to sexual violence paint an unclear picture. Reports of sexual violence against children fell during the pandemic, while reports related child sexual abuse material increased.

## Why is this important?

The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) has been dramatically impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic compounded the financial instability of many households in Brazil – exacerbating the effects of the country's existing economic crisis and amplifying the socio-economic precarity of many Brazilian families. The economic crisis pushed an estimated 3.4 million Brazilian citizens into extreme poverty, and significantly increased unemployment rates across the country.

Social and economic inequalities are widely considered as significant determinants of CSEC vulnerability. Brazil's economic crisis further increased CSEC risk, reducing opportunities for identification and support, changing patterns of offending, and obstructing police inquiry. Yet, evidence on these changing dynamics is extremely limited.

The aggregate impact of the economic crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic means that the nature of CSEC (and potentially its scale) in Brazil is not well understood and subject to change. These challenges pose new challenges to those organisations working in response and highlight gaps in existing policy and practice. It is therefore critical that evidence be generated on the impacts of these intersecting crises on CSEC in Brazil. New policies must respond appropriately to the current context and mitigate against the risk to the country's most vulnerable children and young people.

## Research overview

As part of a larger piece of research that seeks to inform ongoing state and national CSEC policy development efforts, in this briefing we summarise emerging evidence, highlight research gaps, and provide recommendations for mitigating interventions linked to the ongoing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on CSEC in Brazil.

Three key public policy planning processes that underpin CSEC response nationally, and in the Pernambuco region specifically, are currently undergoing phases of consultation and reformulation:

- 1 Brazil's National Plan to Confront Sexual Violence against Children,
- 2 The Pernambuco State Plan to Confront Sexual Violence against Children, and
- 3 The Pernambuco State Plan to Prevent and Eradicate Child Labour.

The scheduled reformulation of these key plans has created a need for robust evidence and survivor voice to influence their replacements.

These frameworks are critical to combat CSEC within Brazil, and regionally within the state of Pernambuco. The National Plan to Confront Sexual Violence against Children provides the overarching framework within which policies, programs, and services to confront child sexual abuse and exploitation in Brazil are delivered. The activities of the existing plan ended in 2020, with its replacement set for development within the implementation period of this research project (2021-2023). The Pernambuco State Plan to Confront Sexual Violence against Children and the State Plan to Prevent and Eradicate Child Labour are the frameworks through which sexual abuse and exploitation of children are addressed within the state of Pernambuco. Both plans concluded in 2021.

## CSEC in Brazil

An estimated 500,000 children and adolescents are forced into commercial sexual exploitation in Brazil. The problem is understood to be simultaneously invisible and yet a partially normalised issue within Brazilian society.

Children victimised through CSEC typically come from some of Brazil's poorest communities. Their exploitation can reflect this, with families in extreme poverty encouraging their children to engage in commercial sex as a means of providing food and subsistence. In other cases, children and young people may be groomed by adult men – sometimes connected to their school, who offer gifts (food, clothing, and tech devices) in return for sexual services. Children who

leave rural communities in search of a better life in the cities may find themselves exploited in street-based sex work or trafficked into sexual exploitation by a trafficking network and subject to debt-bondage.<sup>2</sup>

Some reporting suggests that the Covid-19 pandemic has, at least temporarily, augmented CSEC. Measures introduced to stem the spread of infection largely confined children to their homes, leading to speculation that children were spending more time online as a result, and engaging in more high-risk behaviours online.<sup>3</sup> The risk of domestic sexual exploitation and abuse has also been highlighted.

Prospective offenders too were likely impacted by the pandemic. Contact-based sexual offenders were unable to travel due to pandemic restrictions, and some speculate that this may have caused a shift, causing offenders to transition to, or increase their offending online – including in the purchase of live-streamed sexual abuse.<sup>4</sup>

## Covid-19 and Brazil

On December 31st, 2019, the Chinese government announced to the world an outbreak of pneumonia cases in the city of Wuhan, caused by a new, and novel, coronavirus – Covid-19. The virus quickly spread and prompted the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare a pandemic. In Brazil, the Ministry of Health declared a public health emergency on February 23rd, 2020 (Ordinance 188/GM/MS2020), and on February 6th, the Brazilian government subsequently passed Federal Law No. 13,979 establishing isolation and quarantine measures to address the public health emergency resulting from the spread of the Covid-19 virus.

Despite the adoption of these initial measures by governments in states around Brazil, Covid-19 continued to spread at an alarming rate. By March 2022, Brazil had registered 652,207 deaths resulting from Covid-19.<sup>5</sup>

The pandemic initially affected those in the most affluent neighbourhoods of Brazil's cities, carried by those returning from European travel. It later spread to the outskirts of major cities, where population density is high and where people were less equipped to heed the guidance of the WHO and government due to cramped living conditions and the unavailability of hygiene equipment, such as sanitizer and facemasks.

General requirements for social isolation, confinement, and hygiene care, and other preventive measures could not be met equally by all families, and their children. Guidelines typically do not recognise differences between social groups, and Brazilian families experienced Covid-19 in different ways, due to differences in their living conditions and circumstances. Families unable to purchase hygiene materials and food items suffered most severely. In the most densely populated areas, clean fresh water, and basic

sanitation are not guaranteed – making it difficult for many to comply effectively with the restrictions introduced to stem the spread of Covid-19 infection.

Brazilians were further impacted by the state’s decision to issue “Covid kits” that contained drugs that were later found to be ineffective in treating the effects of the coronavirus. The Brazilian government also initially refused vaccines that were being prepared for rollout elsewhere in the world and imposed restrictions on the social freedoms of Brazilian residents.

The federal government’s position was the target of a Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPI), to:

*Determine, within 90 days, the actions and omissions of the Federal Government in dealing with the Covid-19 Pandemic in Brazil and, in particular, in the worsening of the health crisis in Amazonas with the absence of oxygen for hospitalized patients; and possible irregularities in contracts, fraud in bids, overbilling, diversion of public resources, signing of contracts with shell companies to provide generic or fictitious services, among other illicit acts, using resources originating from the Federal Union, as well as other actions or omissions committed by federal, state and municipal public administrators, in dealing with public affairs, during the duration of the calamity caused by the Coronavirus Pandemic "SARS-CoV-2", limited only with regard to the supervision of Union resources passed on to other federated entities for actions to prevent and combat the Covid-19 Pandemic, and excluding matters of constitutional competence attributed to the States, Federal District and Municipalities. (Senate, 04/27/2021)*

Epidemiologist Pedro Hallal spoke at the CPI, drawing attention to the severity of the pandemic’s impact in Brazil. He remarked that “Since the beginning of the pandemic, Brazil had an accumulated mortality of 2,345 per million inhabitants, while the global average was 494 per million. In other words, four out of five deaths would have been avoided if we were on the world average.”<sup>6</sup>

Professor Hallal indicated at least 400,000 deaths could have been prevented in Brazil, if actions taken in response to the Covid-19 pandemic had been more rigorous. Further evidence presented suggested that had the government accepted the offer of vaccines when they were initially offered in August 2020, the vaccination campaign could have begun in January 2021 – and over 2 million doses administered per day, resulting in 145,000 fewer deaths in 2021.<sup>7</sup>

## The Impact of the pandemic on children and adolescents

Available statistics go some way to revealing the massive extent of the pandemic’s impact on Brazilian children. For instance, one report indicates that more than 113,000 Brazilian minors lost one or more of their parents to Covid-19 between March 2020 and April 2021.<sup>8</sup> That number grows to 130,000 when accounting for children and young people whose primary caregiver was a grandparent. Such numbers are recognised to be a direct result of the federal government’s actions in dealing with the pandemic.

However, the full extent of the pandemic’s impact was not isolated to physical health. It also had a distinct impact on young people’s access to education. Data from UNICEF reveals that that by November 2020, an additional 5 million Brazilian children under the age of 18 were without access to education compared to the previous year’s figure of 1.1 million. Access to education was impacted by parental unemployment, school closures resulting from the pandemic, and a lack of internet and computing equipment through which to access remote school classes. Florence Bauer, a UNICEF representative in Brazil stated:

*“The pandemic has made even clearer the importance of school, and face-to-face classes, to ensure education, mental health, nutrition and protection for girls and boys against violence. We know that the most vulnerable students were those least able to learn in recent years, and many dropped out of school. It is urgent, then, to go after each one, and invest so that they can go back to school, recover the lost learning, and move forward.”<sup>9</sup>*

Mental health is another area where children were strongly affected during the pandemic. Factors such as isolation, absence from school, and a loss of contact with family and friends are all considered to have contributed to the deteriorating mental health of children in Brazil. According to experts in the Psychiatry and Clinical Psychology of Children and Adolescents, 1 in 4 children who were isolated due to Covid-19 exhibited symptoms of depression and/or anxiety.<sup>10</sup> A lack of public policy in this field is resulting in long-term trauma that impacts young people as they transition into adulthood, and there is a clear requirement for renewed efforts to care for the mental health of children and adolescents.

According to estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO), 14 million Brazilians will be unemployed by 2022.<sup>11</sup> Unemployment significantly increases poverty and hunger, and the National Council on Food Insecurity (in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic) estimates that over 55% of Brazilian households experience food insecurity, affecting

approximately 116.8 million people.<sup>12</sup> Economic precarity and hunger has lead more children and adolescents to look for work to contribute to their family's income and survival. Some even become the sole income generator of the family.

As a result, child labour is not uncommon. Children of families that grow up and live in these states of vulnerability and insecurity have increasingly fewer opportunities, and less economic capacity to overcome challenges.<sup>13</sup>

## Exposure to sexual violence

In addition to increasing rates of orphanhood, reduced access to education, deteriorating mental health, rising hunger and experiences of child labour, the pandemic has also made more children and adolescents vulnerable to sexual violence. Despite this apparent increase in vulnerability however, actual reports of sexual violence decreased, attributed to school and other closures which reduced opportunities for identification and disclosure. In 2020, 14,621 reports of sexual violence against children and adolescents were registered by the national hotline - Dial 100, a reduction of 4.5% when compared to 2019.

However, reports relating to child sexual abuse material increased. In the first four months of 2021 alone, 15,856 pages associated with child sexual abuse material were reported – with 7,248 removed.<sup>14</sup> These figures represent a 33.45% growth in reporting when compared to the same period in 2020, in which 11,881 pages were reported.

In the first year of the covid-19 pandemic, SaferNet Brasil received 98,244 anonymous reports of internet pages containing child sexual exploitation and abuse images - a historic high since records began in 2006. The number is more than double (102.24%) compared to the 48,576 pages reported by internet users for the same reason in 2019. It is believed that the pandemic caused and continues to cause abrupt changes in the routines of families, and children and spending increasing amounts of time, potentially further exposing them to risky situations and the threat of exploitation and abuse.<sup>15</sup>

The Brazilian Public Security Forum in partnership with UNICEF in 2021 revealed that in Brazil there are 36,000 rapes per year, and that approximately 100 children and adolescents under the age of 14 are raped each day in Brazil. About 80% of victims of sexual violence in the country are girls. It is particularly worrying to reflect that the numbers quoted regarding sexual violence against children and adolescents do not correspond to the reality of this serious crime. This is a clandestine issue. Numbers are underreported due the fear of denunciation and a disbelief that the country's security and justice system have the means and willingness to properly address it. Underreporting can also be explained by the lack of a unified database that consolidates reports and records made by different official governmental bodies. Most recently the National Reporting Hotline, the 'Hotline 100', whose annual reports are not available to society and researchers, was dismantled.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This research briefing was prepared by Professor Valeria Nepomuceno Teles de Mendonca (Professor of the Social Services Department from the Federal University of Pernambuco), with contributions by Dr. Ben Brewster and Dr. Katarina Schwarz from the University of Nottingham Rights Lab, and researchers at the Freedom Fund. The project "Approaching Commercial and Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents in Brazil" is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/V01336X/1).

<sup>2</sup> Freedom Fund, "Hotspot Projects - Brazil," accessed March 16, 2022, <https://freedomfund.org/programs/hotspot-projects/brazil-hotspot/>.

<sup>3</sup> Interpol, "Threats and Trends Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse - Covid-19 Impact," 2020, <https://www.interpol.int/en/How-we-work/COVID-19>.

<sup>4</sup> Interpol.

<sup>5</sup> Hygino Vasconcellos and Ricardo Espina, "Covid: Brasil Registra 219 Mortes Em 24 h e Média Móvel Fica Em 430 Óbitos," *UOL*, 2022, <https://noticias.uol.com.br/saude/ultimas-noticias/redacao/2022/03/06/covid-19-coronavirus-casos-mortes-06-de-marco.htm?cmpid=copiaecola>.

<sup>6</sup> Bruno Domínguez, "Half a Million Lives Lost, an Interview with Dr. Pedro Hallal," *Radis Magazine* (Rio de Janeiro, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Domínguez.

<sup>8</sup> Sociedade Maranhense de Direitos Humanos, "Denúncia de Violações Dos Direitos à Vida e à Saúde No Contexto Da Pandemia Da Covid-19 No Brasil," 2021, [https://dhsaude.org/relatorio/documento\\_denuncia\\_portugues/](https://dhsaude.org/relatorio/documento_denuncia_portugues/).

<sup>9</sup> UNICEF, "Cenário Da Exclusão Escolar No Brasil: Um Alerta Sobre Os Impactos Da Pandemia Da COVID-19 Na Educação," 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/brazil/media/14026/file/cenario-daexclusao-escolar-no-brasil.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> UNICEF, "Salud Mental e Infancia En El Escenario de La COVID-19. Propuestas de UNICEF España," 2020, [https://www.unicef.es/sites/unicef.es/files/comunicacion/COVID19\\_UNICEF\\_Salud\\_Mental.pdf](https://www.unicef.es/sites/unicef.es/files/comunicacion/COVID19_UNICEF_Salud_Mental.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> International Labour Organization, "World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2022," 2022, [https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/trends2022/WCMS\\_834081/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/trends2022/WCMS_834081/lang-en/index.htm).

<sup>12</sup> Rede PENSSAN, "National Survey of Food Insecurity in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Brazil," *VIGISAN*, 2021, [http://olheparaafome.com.br/VIGISAN\\_AF\\_National\\_Survey\\_of\\_Food\\_Insecurity.pdf](http://olheparaafome.com.br/VIGISAN_AF_National_Survey_of_Food_Insecurity.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Josiane Rose Petry VERONESE and Geralda Magella de Faria ROSSETTO, "A Intensificação Da Vulnerabilidade No Trabalho Infantil Em Tempos de Pandemia," in *Trabalho Infantil e Pandemia*, ed. Fabiana Dantas Soares Alves da MOTA and Palmeira Zéu SOBRINHO, 2020, 29–51, <https://www.passeidireto.com/arquivo/92904131/e-book-trabalho-infantil-e-pandemia-2/10>.

<sup>14</sup> SaferNet Brasil, "Denúncias de Pornografia Infantil Cresceram 33,45% Em 2021, Aponta a SaferNet Brasil," 2021, [https://new.safernet.org.br/home4?field\\_subject\\_value=All&field\\_type\\_value=All&page=1](https://new.safernet.org.br/home4?field_subject_value=All&field_type_value=All&page=1).

<sup>15</sup> SaferNet Brasil.

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