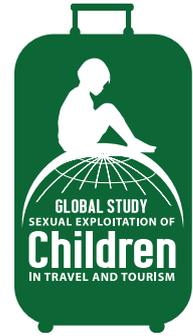


# SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN & VOLUNTOURISM



## WHAT IS VOLUNTOURISM?

Volunteer tourism, (or voluntourism) describes a field of tourism, in which travellers visit a destination and take part in projects in the local community. Projects are commonly nature-based, people-based, or involve restoration of buildings and artefacts.<sup>1</sup> Volunteers are usually short-term and unskilled, and the purchase of travel experiences such as accommodation is often included alongside the volunteer placement. Among the most popular placements are those that offer opportunities to volunteer with children such as teaching in a school, organizing activities with children in a day-care centre or 'caring' for children in an orphanage (sometimes referred to as 'orphanage tourism').

## THE RISKS

Volunteering is a valuable way to contribute to society that can bring positive benefits to both the community and the volunteer. But despite the best of intentions, certain forms of voluntourism have been shown to have a range of harmful consequences, including increasing the risk of child sexual exploitation.

### 1. Lack of appropriate regulations and supervision

Many organizations that offer voluntourism placements lack appropriate child protection policies and procedures and many fail to conduct any type of background checks. This creates pathways for unknown adults to easily make contact with vulnerable children. While the majority of volunteers may have no malicious intent this nonetheless creates an opportunity for travelling child sex offenders to easily access children and commit sex crimes under the cloak of respectability. Furthermore, staff and other volunteers in these settings are often untrained and may be ill equipped to recognize and respond to indications of suspected exploitation and abuse.

### 2. Normalized irregular interactions with strangers

Voluntourism placements are often short term and many volunteers come and go through these children's lives. For the child, this normalizes frequent and irregular interaction with strangers which impacts their ability to recognize signs of danger. The sense of abandonment when relationships with volunteers end can also result in attachment disorders and other emotional stress for already vulnerable children. This is especially the case for children in residential care facilities (such as orphanages) who already lack the primary care and protection of their parents.

### 3. Imbalance of power

Volunteers are often granted substantial responsibilities or perceived as having more knowledge and skills due to their status as foreigners. These circumstances can create an imbalance of power between volunteers, and local people and children which can be easily taken advantage of by offenders. Exploiting power is a common strategy of child sex offenders who manipulate the trust of children, parents and communities, such as by offering money or gifts to keep their crimes unreported or convincing victims that no one will ever believe them.

#### 4. Violation of children's privacy

Volunteers often like to photograph their experiences abroad. However, taking photographs of children without parental consent, particularly of vulnerable children, violates their right to privacy. Furthermore, sharing photos online can disclose a child's identity, location or other personal details, exposing them to further risk of grooming and exploitation. Volunteers should remember that if you shouldn't take photos of unfamiliar children in your home country, then you shouldn't do it abroad.

## THE WAY FORWARD

Travel and tourism companies that facilitate, and organizations that offer volunteering placements, must ensure that the protection of children is their paramount concern. They must evaluate the impact of any of their activities on the wellbeing and safety of children. Article 3 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child states that: *"In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration"*.<sup>2</sup>

The Global Study on Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism (SECTT), which includes input from 67 partners worldwide, provides clear recommendations to prevent the sexual exploitation on children:

#### Travel and tourism companies

- Ensure that organizations that host volunteers have genuinely implemented child protection policies and procedures to guarantee the safety of children. Procedures should include at a minimum international police clearance, reporting mechanisms and a code of conduct for any volunteers as well as governing existing staff.
- Become a member of The Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism or - at a minimum - adopt and enforce explicit corporate policies against sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism and prioritize training on sexual exploitation in travel and tourism.

Members of [The Code](#) adhere to six criteria, which include implementing child protection policies, creating awareness of child sexual exploitation amongst stakeholders and travellers, and training staff to report suspected cases. The Code has a [voluntourism policy](#) that mandates all members must refrain from offering packages that include volunteering with or visiting children in residential care. Members that include other forms of voluntourism must adhere to an extra set of criteria that reflect a sound child protection framework.

#### Civil society organizations

- Ensure that a child protection policy and procedures (including police clearances), and a code of conduct are developed, enforced/operational for ALL employees and volunteers who come into contact with children.
- Raise public awareness about sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism and the role citizens, including children can play in its prevention.
- Identify and promote best practice models for preventing and responding to sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism.

A number of organizations are working to end orphanage tourism and the institutionalization of children, including [Rethink Orphanages](#), which has led several travel and tourism companies to withdraw from offering orphanage tourism. Organizations like [Lumos](#), have worked to support donors, governments and communities to redirect funds from residential care towards family reunification and family strengthening to care for vulnerable children. [ECPAT Austria](#) and [ECPAT Germany](#) also work to better protect children in volunteering and proposed a range of ways to better protect children in destination countries during a [panel](#) during ITB Berlin in 2018.

### National authorities

- Adopt mandatory policies and procedures that protect children in new public or private tourism developments, including the obligation to conduct thorough human-rights impact assessments.
- Establish government-regulated child protection standards for the tourism industry.
- Ensure that any circumstances where volunteers are in contact with children are closely regulated through, for example, international police clearances and codes of conduct.
- Ensure that national legal frameworks address SECTT adequately.

Several countries in Latin America have mandated compliance with national codes of conduct for child protection as a prerequisite for travel and tourism industry to operate in the country.

In 2018 Australia became the first country to define orphanage trafficking through its Modern Slavery Act.

**READ THE  
FULL GLOBAL STUDY  
RECOMMENDATIONS**

**READ THE CODE'S  
VOLUNTOURISM  
POLICY**

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