Assessing the conservation and targets of putative sRNAs in *Streptococcus pneumoniae*

Matthew C. Eichelman, Michelle M. Meyer
Department of Biology, Boston College

Abstract

RNA regulators are often found in complex regulatory networks and may mediate metabolism and virulence in bacteria. Small RNAs (sRNA's), a class of non-coding RNAs that interact with an mRNA transcript via base pairing, modulate translation initiation and mRNA degradation. To better understand the role of sRNAs in pathogenicity several studies identified sRNAs in *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, however little functional characterization has followed. The goal of this study is threefold: 1) take an inventory of putative sRNAs in *S. pneumoniae*; 2) assess the conservation of these sRNAs; and 3) examine their predicted targets. Three previous studies in *S. pneumoniae* identified 287 putative sRNAs by high-throughput sequencing using a variety of distinct inclusion criteria. This study narrows the candidates to a list of 59 putative sRNAs. BLAST analysis shows that each of the 59 sequences are highly conserved across the *S. pneumoniae* pangenome while only 5 sRNAs have corresponding sequences with substantial similarity in other members of the Streptococcus genus. We used four RNA-RNA interaction prediction programs (IntaRNA, CopraRNA, sRNARFTarget, and TargetRNA3) to predict targets for each of the 59 putative sRNAs. Across all probable predictions, only seven sRNAs have overlap in the targets predicted by multiple programs, four of which target numerous transposases. Moreover, sRNAs targeting transposases do so with nearly identical and perfect base pairing. One sRNA, named M63 (Spd_sr37), has several probable targets in the CcpA regulon, a network responsible for global catabolite repression, suggesting a possible biological function in control of carbon metabolism. Further, each M63-target interaction exhibits unique base pairing increasing confidence in the biological relevance of the result. This study produces a curated list of S. *pneumoniae* putative sRNAs whose predicted targets suggest functional significance in transposon and carbon metabolism regulation.

Introduction

Streptococcus pneumoniae is a Gram positive bacterium that causes various diseases including pneumonia, meningitis, bacteremia, otitis media and sinusitis, and invasive pneumococcal disease is particularly dangerous in children and the elderly (CDC, 2013). In 2004, invasive pneumococcal disease was responsible for approximately 4 million illness episodes, 445,000 hospitalizations, and 22,000 deaths (Huang et al., 2011). Despite the threat *S. pneumoniae* poses, important components of regulation relating to metabolism and virulence remain less well characterized. Small regulatory RNAs (sRNA) are sequences of 40-500 nucleotides (nt) in length (Li et al., 2012) that can be transcribed by 5'-UTRs, 3'-UTRs, coding, and non-coding sequences (Felden and Augagneur, 2021), however, studies seeking to identify sRNAs tend to focus on intergenic regions. Among the different types of sRNAs are *trans*-encoded and *cis*-encoded RNAs. *Trans*-encoded sRNAs regulate genes from distant regions often with imperfect complementarity allowing them to interact with more than one target (Jabbour and Lartigue,

2021). *Cis*-encoded sRNAs act on the mRNA transcript encoded by the opposite DNA strand leading to perfect complementarity (Zorgani et al., 2016) (Figure 1a). sRNAs modulate the expression of target mRNAs by base pairing to sequester a ribosome binding site or accelerate decay (Papenfort and Vanderpool, 2015). Some sRNAs are dependent on a chaperone like the Hfq or FinO family proteins that have a well-characterized role in aiding the formation of duplexes between sRNAs and their mRNA targets in Enterobacteriaceae. However, there are no confirmed RNA chaperone homologs in the *S. pneumoniae* genome (Zhang et al., 2003).

Identification of putative sRNAs in *S. pneumoniae* has been performed several times, but follow-up characterization has been extremely limited. The exception is a group of sRNAs called cia-dependent sRNAs (csRNAs) that have been studied across Streptococcus with considerable work done in *S. pneumoniae*. The csRNAs are controlled by the CiaRH two-component system (TCS) that is involved in natural competence and general virulence (Halfmann et al., 2007, Marx et al., 2010, Tsui et al., 2010). In *S. pneumoniae* the CiaRH TCS expresses five sRNAs, with experimentally verified targets, that prevent autolysis triggered by various conditions, like the presence of deoxycholate, to allow the maintenance of stationary growth phase (Mascher et al., 2006). The csRNAs have also recently been implicated in promoting Zn homeostasis (De Lay et al., 2024). Three previous studies identified hundreds of additional putative sRNAs using diverse inclusion criteria. Some of these sequences may be annotated as homologs of RNA families such as Pyr elements (RF00515) or TPP riboswitches (RF00059), BOX elements (AT-rich repeats that are highly transcribed), or ribosomal protein leaders (sequences in the 5'-UTR of ribosomal protein transcripts that control the concentration of the ribosomal protein) (Mann et al., 2012, Fu et al., 2013, Babina et al., 2015). However, it remains unclear which of the remaining sequences are regulatory. Here we find that 59 of the putative sRNAs are highly conserved in the *S. pneumoniae* pangenome and we predict the mRNA targets of these sRNAs. The predictions suggest 8 putative sRNAs, which have highly probable targets, interact with transposases and genes involved in carbon metabolism regulation.

Results and Discussion

S. pneumoniae genome contains +70 putative sRNAs

In assessing which previously identified sRNA candidates are likely to have a biological function and prioritize candidates for further investigation we examined a pool of 287 putative sRNAs originating from three studies (Acebo et al., 2012, Mann et al., 2012, and Sinha et al., 2019, Additional Datafile 1). We note 72% are functionally uncharacterized whereas the other 28% may be annotated as homologs of *cis*-regulators, BOX elements, or csRNAs (Figure 1b). We further narrowed this pool to a list containing only sequences identified in multiple studies, sequences confirmed by Northern blot or RT-qPCR, and the previously characterized csRNAs while excluding *cis*-regulators and BOX elements. This new list contains 81 putative sRNAs that were assigned names "M1" through "M81". However, 5 sequences are <50 nt and were subsequently removed from the list leaving a final total of 76 candidate sRNAs (Figure 1c). We observe that many of these sRNAs were found in a single study emphasizing the different sequencing strategies and inclusion criteria of the previous studies (Figure 1d). After compiling the final list for further analysis, we conclude there are over 70 putative sRNAs in the *S. pneumoniae* genome (Additional Datafile 2).

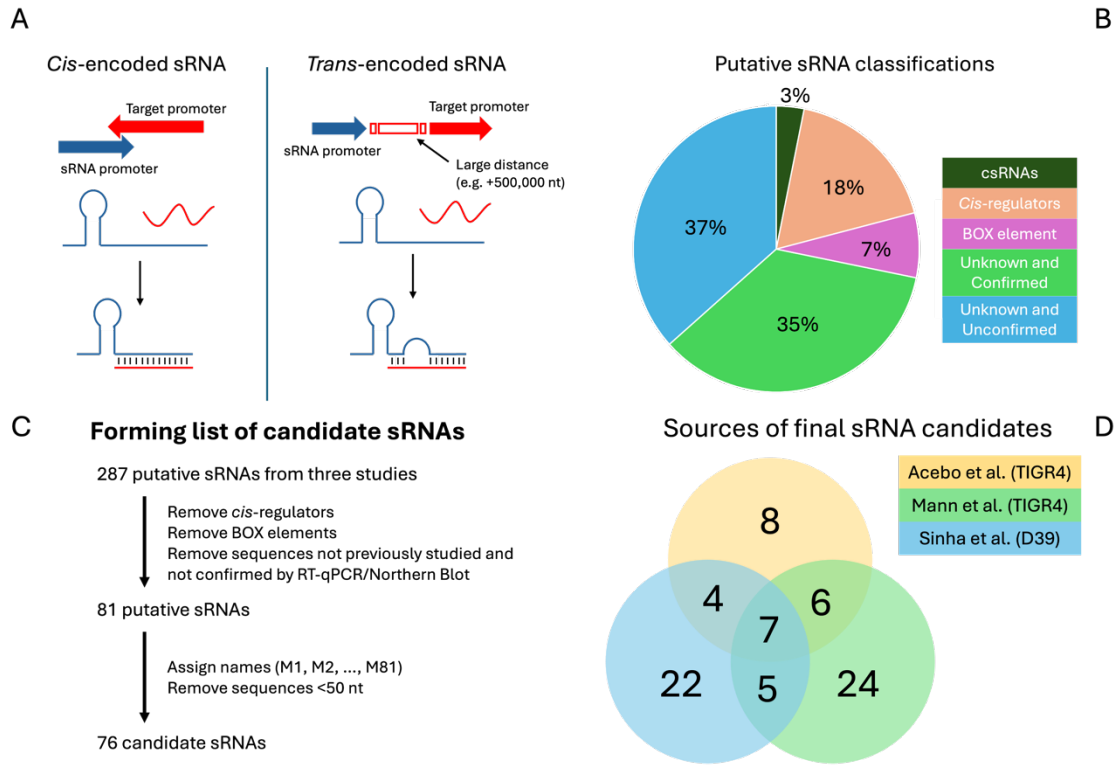

Figure 1: **a**) The *cis*-encoded sRNA, found on the strand opposite to the mRNA coding strand, binds the target mRNA with perfect complementarity. The *trans*-encoded sRNA, expressed from a region distant to the target, binds with imperfect complementarity. **b)** The classifications of the 287 putative sRNAs. **c)** Process of narrowing the 287 putative sRNAs to a list of 76 candidates for further analysis. **d)** Among the candidates, 7 are found in all three studies and 15 are found in two of the three studies.

Majority of sRNA candidates are conserved across the *S. pneumoniae* pangenome

To increase our confidence in the biological relevance of the putative sRNAs and prioritize them for further investigation, we assessed the conservation of the candidate sRNAs across the genomes of 385 *S. pneumoniae* strains. BLAST (Altschul et al., 1990) analysis indicated 70/76 candidates are present in the genomes for a majority of 385 *S. pneumoniae* strains (Figure 2a) (Cremers et al. 2015, Rosconi et al., 2022). Among these 70, only 60 candidates appear to be non-repetitive sequences, 58 of which display average sequence identity >97% to the best hit in each genome, indicating the sequences are highly conserved across the *S. pneumoniae* pangenome (Table 1). Interestingly, 6 of the sRNAs are found in <12 strains and all of them were identified in the *S. pneumoniae* strain TIGR4 (Figure 2a), highlighting the possibility for strain specific sRNAs in *S. pneumoniae*. From this group of candidates, we observed that synteny is preserved (see Methods) across the *S. pneumoniae* strains in 43 of the 60 final candidates. One of the final candidates, M8, was later identified as a *cis*-regulator and removed, leaving a total of 59 sRNAs for further analysis. To determine if any of the sRNAs are conserved to species related to *S. pneumoniae* we also analyzed other members of the Streptococcus genus. Only 5 of the candidate sRNAs align with sequence identities >65% to each of *S. pyogenes*, *S. mutans*, and *S. suis*, and 6 additional sRNA candidates align with only one or two of these organisms. It appears most of the sRNAs are unique to *S. pneumoniae*. This is consistent with the narrow distribution of many sRNAs across other bacterial species (Peer and Margalit, 2014).

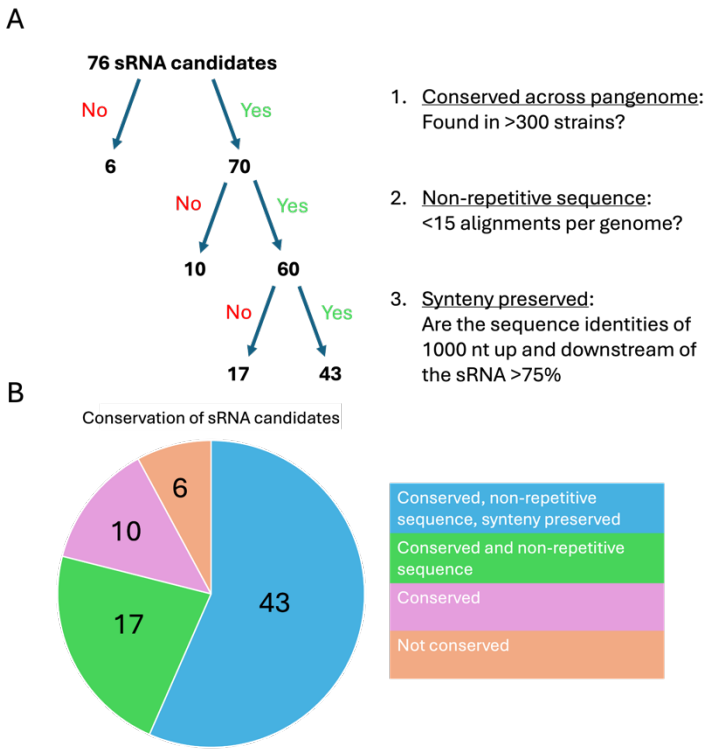

Figure 2: **a)** The conservation of sRNA candidates across the *S. pneumoniae* pangenome. **b)** The four degrees of conservation of the sRNA candidates. "Conserved", "non-repetitive sequence", and "synteny preserved" refer to the criteria for each level of the tree diagram in part a.

The 76 in-house sRNAs and their conservation						
In-house ID	Other IDs	TIGR4 coordinates	D39 coordinates	Sequence identity	Genomes with match	Matches per genome
M1	srn061/F7/CcnE	209768-209916	212278-212426	99.99%	385[1]	1
M2	srn135	438151-438275		100.00%	8	1
M3	srn151	501260-501363		96.32%	385	19
M4	F15	501732-501843		99.04%	385[1]	1
M5	srn206	781187-781304		99.77%	384[1]	1
M6	srn231	853483-853605		97.97%	348[1]	1
M7	srn235/F59/Spd_sr49	869478-869804	825803-826129	99.39%	385[1]	1
M8**	srn241/F35	909029-909179		98.93%	385[1]	1
M9	srn254/F38/Spd_sr17	956782-956927	912572-912717	97.90%	385[1]	1
M10	srn266/Spd_sr55	1035442-1035581	1697549-1697677	97.33%	385	15
M11	srn277/F41	1071102-1071213		91.09%	4	1
M12	srn351/R21/Spd_sr78	1461066-1461188	1404039-1404161	99.93%	385[1]	1
M13	srn477/Spd_sr105	1984829-1984968	1873277-1873416	99.86%	385[1]	1
M14	trn0978	1986229-1986310		99.70%	385[1]	1
M16	srn491/Spd_sr106	2005533-2005682	1892401-1892550	99.86%	385[1]	1
M17	srn502/F66/Spd_sr109	2086085-2086325	1972860-1973100	99.55%	385	2
M18	srn503/F67/Spd_sr111	2086380-2086628	1973155-1973403	98.41%	385	2
M19	trn0012/CcnC	24164-24263	23967-24066	99.62%	385	2
M20	trn0057	124989-125050		97.19%	385	1
M21	Spd_sr18		134413-134576	96.75%	385	92
M22	trn0157/F10	284239-284316		99.67%	374[1]	1
M23	trn0332/F25/Spd_sr42	623244-623344	587440-587542	95.89%	378[1]	1
M24	trn0485/F60	950115-950195		99.99%	385[1]	1
M25	trn0696	1423633-1423713		93.05%	364	1
M27	trn0830/R12	1731041-1731439		94.32%	385	209
M28	trn0935/R9	1903548-1903637		99.82%	385	19
M29	trn1025	2048577-2048643		99.99%	366[1]	1
M30	R7	1791010-1791079		98.58%	385	6
M31	R8	1892645-1892716		99.54%	9	1
M32	R14	1034021-1034099		98.69%	385[1]	1
M33	R17/Spd_sr69	1277241-1277387	1217391-1217537	97.32%	385	79
M34	R18/Spd_sr72	1364575-1364763	1299979-1300167	98.30%	379[1]	1
M36	F1	91593-91663		99.09%	361	1
M37	F3	117143-117247		98.43%	385	1
M39	F6	130439-130494		98.30%	383[1]	1
M40	F8/CcnA	228626-228807	231143-231324	97.12%	385[1]	2
M41	F11	286614-286707		99.13%	384[1]	1
M42	F14	499570-499688		99.77%	339[1]	1
M43	F18	538437-538491		97.84%	385	7
M44	F19/Spd_sr33	543000-543149	508238-508388	99.11%	385[1]	1
M45	F22	592573-592711		99.44%	385[1]	1
M46	F24	610528-610659		98.04%	385	12
M47	F31	810811-810861		98.29%	385	12

M48	F33	863736-863817		98.28%	385[1]	1
M49	F36	941435-941486		99.66%	385[1]	1
M50	F39	972498-972606		98.15%	385[1]	1
M51	F40	1063101-1063150		100.00%	4	1
M52	F43/Spd_sr63	1216148-1216245	1170289-1170386	99.87%	385[1]	1
M53	F45	1408204-1408274		100.00%	384[1]	1
M54	F48	1778293-1778426		99.27%	385	36
M56	F53	588512-588589		99.92%	385	26
M57	F55	1696066-1696161		97.13%	385	48
M58	F56	158993-159089		98.09%	11	1
M59	F61	972327-972383		98.82%	385[1]	1
M60	F62	995726-995786		100.00%	9	1
M61	Spd_sr5		39980-40081	97.40%	358[1]	1
M62	Spd_sr6		41494-41558	97.76%	384	7
M63	Spd_sr37		131773-131841	99.83%	385[1]	1
M64	Spd_sr14		149223-149340	99.59%	385[1]	1
M65	CcnB		231331-231426	99.71%	385	3
M66	Spd_sr24		231853-232034	99.34%	371	1
M67	CcnD		233715-233808	99.89%	385[1]	1
M68	Spd_sr31		476085-476234	98.76%	385[1]	1
M69	Spd_sr47		825484-825544	99.38%	385[1]	2
M70	Spd_sr60		1079136-1079199	99.99%	383[1]	1
M71	Spd_sr67		1212230-1212526	98.77%	365[1]	2
M72	Spd_sr71		1264469-1264569	99.06%	385	37
M73	Spd_sr81		1464371-1464684	99.17%	385[1]	1
M74	Spd_sr83		1528062-1528186	99.64%	385[1]	1
M75	Spd_sr84		1595446-1595563	98.99%	385[1]	1
M76	Spd_sr89		1673201-1673322	99.92%	385[1]	1
M77	Spd_sr96		1759320-1759411	100.00%	385[1]	1
M78	Spd_sr108		1913212-1913442	97.60%	385	52
M79	Spd_sr110		1973001-1973113	99.16%	385	2
M80	Spd_sr112		1973343-1973456	98.78%	385	2
M81	Spd_sr116		2020113-2020228	99.98%	385[1]	1

Table 1: The 76 candidate sRNAs and their conservation. In the "Other IDs" column, sRNAs with the prefix "srn", "trn", "R", and "F" were identified in TIGR4 (Acebo et al., 2012, Mann et al., 2012) and sRNAs with the prefix "Spd_sr" and "Ccn" were identified in D39W (Sinha et al., 2019). The TIGR4 coordinates indicate the sequence location in the NC_003028.3 genome. Likewise, D39 coordinates corresponds to the NC_008533.2 genome. The "Sequence identity" and "Matches per genome" are averages across the 385 strains. Preservation of synteny indicated by [1] in the "Genomes with match" column. **M8 later identified as a *cis*-regulator (pyrR element: RFAM:RF00515).

RNA target prediction programs struggle to correctly predict validated targets

Several RNA-RNA interaction prediction (RIP) programs have been developed to predict mRNA:sRNA interactions with newer models displaying the highest accuracies. These include IntaRNA (Busch et al., 2008, Wright et al., 2014, Mann et al., 2017, Raden et al., 2018), CopraRNA (Wright et al., 2013, Wright et al., 2014, Raden et al., 2018), sRNARFTarget (Naskulwar and Peña-Castillo, 2022), and TargetRNA3 (Tjaden, 2023). The programs take various approaches with newer RIP programs implementing machine learning algorithms.

Despite the improvement over time, all the tools have a high false positive rate (Tjaden, 2023). Moreover, most of the data on which the models are validated and trained is from Hfq-dependent sRNA networks in *Escherichia coli* that may not be reflective of sRNA-target interactions in organisms without Hfq like *S. pneumoniae*. This poses a challenge to determining the validity of a predicted target through computational methods alone. By examining the targets of multiple programs with different approaches we hope to increase the confidence in the validity of predicted sRNA-target pairs.

As a baseline evaluation of the RIP programs, we compared the predicted and known targets of the csRNAs using IntaRNA, sRNARFTarget, and TargetRNA3 (Table 2) (Schnorpfeil et al., 2013). None of the programs correctly predicted any of the known csRNA targets (SP_2237, SP_0090, SP_0161, SP_0626, and SP_1215) as the most likely target. If we include the top five most likely targets, then IntaRNA correctly predicts that csRNAs 2 and 3 target SP_0090 (SP_RS00460) and both IntaRNA and TargetRNA3 correctly predicted that csRNA4 targets SP_0090. We also confirmed that the sequences we examined are consistent with reported 5' and 3' RNA-seq data in TIGR4 (Warrier et al., 2018, Furumo and Meyer, 2024) to ensure our inputs were not causing the low accuracy. These results support the existing notion that even the best RIP programs suffer from a high false positive rate, but do provide informative results.

RIP programs predict thousands of sRNA-target pairs

We used multiple programs to make target predictions for the candidates. For all 59 sRNAs we used IntaRNA, sRNARFTarget, and TargetRNA3. Targets were predicted in six different *S. pneumoniae* strains: TIGR4, D39, and four arbitrarily selected strains from PRJNA514780 (Rosconi et al., 2022) (see Methods). We also used CopraRNA, but only for a group of 5 sRNAs with sequence identities >65% in each of *S. pyogenes*, *S. mutans*, and *S. suis* because of the algorithm's comparative approach. CopraRNA made predictions for *S. pneumoniae*, *S. pyogenes*, *S. mutans*, and *S. suis* instead of the various *S. pneumoniae* strains. Each program produces a variable number of outputs per sRNA per strain/species. IntaRNA and CopraRNA made five predictions (a customizable parameter), sRNARFTarget predicted a probability for every gene in the *S. pneumoniae* transcriptome (>2000 genes), and TargetRNA3 reported a variable number of targets with a probability and p-value above a customizable threshold.

In total, we obtained thousands of predictions, the majority of which have low probabilities (≤0.5) (See Additional Datafiles 3-7) To focus our attention on likely sRNA-target pairs without excluding too many predictions we settled on targets with a predicted probability ≥0.7, referred to as probable going forward. We also define the term MPT, most probable target, as the prediction given the highest probability across all predictions for a given sRNA. Lastly, we define a consensus target as a gene that was predicted to be the MPT for an sRNA in at least four of the six *S. pneumoniae* strains. This term only pertains to the predictions made by IntaRNA, sRNARFTarget, and TargetRNA3. We observe none of the sRNARFTarget predictions are probable. This in combination with our baseline evaluation of the csRNAs led us to focus on the predictions made by IntaRNA, TargetRNA3, and CopraRNA when applicable.

To assess whether the sRNAs are interacting with an mRNA region likely to affect overall structure and function, we examined the mRNA structures and sRNA-mRNA base pairing. RNAfold (Lorenz et al., 2011) predicted the structure of the mRNA interacting sequences including 25 nucleotides up/downstream. We denote a structured region to be a segment of the

mRNA sequence base pairing with itself. Across the MPTs predicted by IntaRNA and TargetRNA3, 52 out of 59 sRNAs in each strain and each method base pair with a structured region. We see that base pairing may occur with as little as two nucleotides or over 20 nucleotides in structured regions. Regardless of length, we believe that interactions in a structured region are more likely to induce conformational changes.

sRNAs may play a role in pathogenesis via their targets

Previous studies used transposon insertion mutants to conclude specific sRNAs may support virulence in TIGR4 (Mann et al., 2012). We compared our predicted targets for these sRNAs to evaluate these hypotheses. Previous work suggested 8 putative sRNAs (Table 3) play a definitive role in pathogenesis, and some individual loci were identified by microarray analysis of attenuated sRNA mutants (Mann et al., 2012). Only 3 of these sRNAs met our criteria for further investigation (Figure 2a). The others overlap with known *cis*-regulatory elements (F20 and F44), transfer-messenger RNA (F32), or were removed following conservation analysis (F41, F48). F41 is one of the sRNAs found in <12 strains, and F48 was deemed a repetitive sequence. Among the three remaining candidates, one (M1) is a csRNA with known function and targets associated with virulence. The other two, M45 and M23, are not well characterized. M45 is predicted to target type IV teichoic acid flippase TacF that is responsible for transporting choline across the cytoplasmic membrane, a nutritional requirement of *S. pneumoniae* (Damjanovic et al., 2007). M23 is predicted to target a transposase (SP_RS13320) (Table 3). We can confirm M1 is involved in pathogenesis as we know that the CiaRH TCS controls processes like natural competence and virulence (Patenge et al., 2012). We can only speculate that M45 and M23 are involved in pathogenesis without validating their targets, however the predicted target (*tacF*) of M45 is suggestive of a role in pathogenesis.

Mann study ID	In-house ID	Mann Putative Target	In-house Consensus Target
F7	M1, csRNA5		SP_RS06250
F20	T-box leader		
F22	M45		SP_RS06235
F25	M23	SP_RS08340-50	SP_RS13320
F32	tmRNA		
F41		SP_RS08340-50	
F44	PyrR binding site	SP_RS08340-50	
F48			

Table 2: A comparison of the in-house target predictions and the putative targets identified by microarray analysis. The putative targets SP_RS08340-50 are three neighboring loci involved in carbohydrate transport and proposed to be collectively regulated by three of the sRNAs.

To further assess whether specific sRNAs are potentially regulating multiple targets in a previously recognized regulatory response, we investigated whether the predicted targets belong to established operons or regulons in TIGR4. The regulons that appeared the most often are PyrR, CodY, and CcpA and we noticed the targets belonging to established operons are always the first or last gene in the operon with the first gene being more common. This suggests that the sRNAs are inhibiting, typically corresponding to blocking the ribosome binding site (e.g. start of an operon) or stabilizing, binding to the 3' end of the mRNA, depending on the relative location of interaction (Papenfort and Vanderpool, 2015). Most notably one sRNA, M63 (Figure 4a), is

predicted to target four different genes in the CcpA regulon (Table 4) which encodes the catabolite control protein A (CcpA), an essential transcription factor in Gram-positive bacteria that is responsible for mediating carbon catabolite repression and activation. In *S. pneumoniae*, mutations in CcpA reduces virulence in mouse models (Giammarinaro & Paton, 2002; Iyer et al., 2005). We also see that M63 interacts with the different targets in various regions of the sRNA with unique base-pairing (Figure 4b). Lastly, M63 is unique in that it is the only sRNA candidate with every reported target to have a probability ≥0.7 and this is true for all 6 *S. pneumoniae* strains that were tested. The observation that M63 has multiple probable targets acting on a regulon associated with virulence (Iyer et al. 2005) makes this sRNA a high priority candidate for further validation.

sRNA	Target gene	Regulon	Position in operon	Target annotation
M63	*adhE*/SP_2026	CcpA	1 of 1	bifunctional acetaldehyde-CoA/alcohol dehydrogenase
M63	*adhE*/SP_2026	Rex	1 of 1	bifunctional acetaldehyde-CoA/alcohol dehydrogenase
M63	*hexA*/SP_0498	CcpA	1 of 1	bacterial Ig-like domain-containing protein
M63	*hexB*/SP_0057	CcpA	1 of 1	LPXTG-anchored beta-N-acetylhexosaminidase StrH
M63	*oppA2*/SP_1891	CodY	1 of 5	peptide ABC transporter substrate-binding protein
M63	*glgB*/SP_1121	CcpA	1 of 4	1,4-alpha-glucan branching protein GlgB
M63	*ileS*/SP_1658	T-box(Ile)	1 of 1	isoleucine--tRNA ligase
M63	*carB*/SP_1275	PyrR	1 of 1	carbamoyl-phosphate synthase large subunit

Table 3: The regulons, according to the RegPrecise database, in which all targets of M63 are involved. Predictions made by TargetRNA3 in TIGR4.

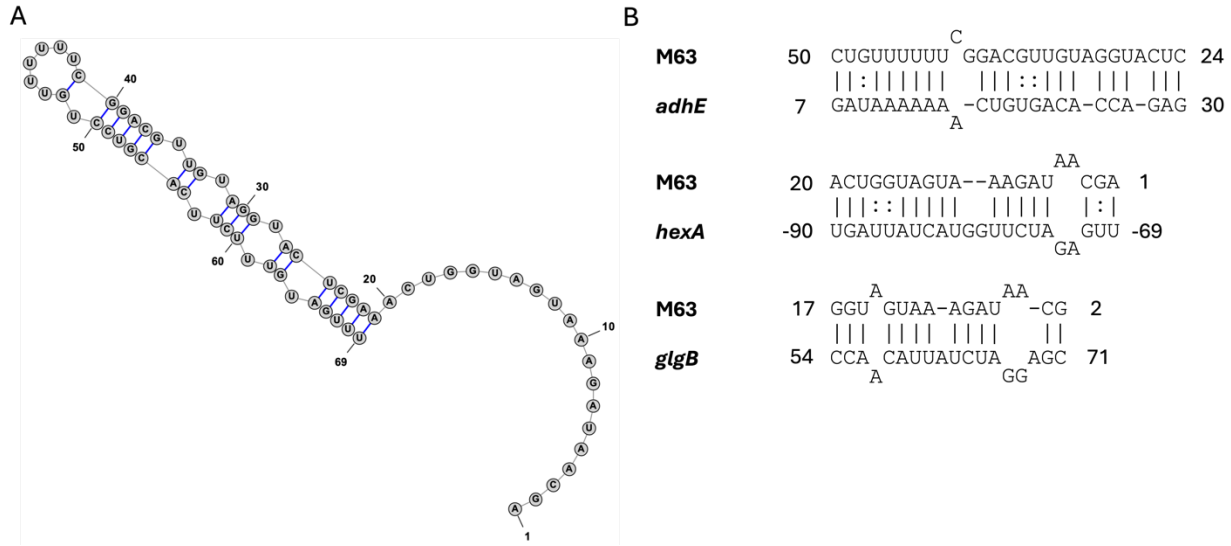

Figure 3: **a)** The most favorable secondary structure of M63 predicted by RNAfold. **b)** Three of the M63 interactions predicted by TargetRNA3 in TIGR4. The gene names are predicted targets of M63 in the CcpA regulon. The numbers on either end are relative positions of the interacting sequences within the full RNA sequence. A negative number indicates the sequence is upstream of the mRNA start codon. A ":" indicates a G-U pair.

Transposase associated sRNAs are frequent

Among the TargetRNA3 predictions, we noticed a large number of transposase targets. Candidates targeting transposases include M10, M47, M62, and M69. These sRNAs are all encoded antisense to an annotated transposase (IL3 or IL30 family), overlapping with the 5'-UTR or first few amino acids of the gene. A subset of these, M10, M47 and M62, show

substantial sequence identity to each other, with M10 having a 3'-extention compared to M47 and M62 (Supplemental Figure S2). Notable, M10, M47, and M62 all have a large number of BLAST hits in the genome, but these sequences did not exceed our threshold of >15 hits in the genome to be considered repetitive sequences. M47 and M62 have consensus targets present across several *S. pneumoniae* strains, with both IntaRNA and TargetRNA3 predicting transposase targets. The collected targets for this set of sRNAs (M10, M47, and M62) includes over 18 different transposases, with all but two interactions showing high probability ≥0.92. This large number of targets results from the duplicated nature of the sequence immediately surrounding the transposase (Figure 3). However, we note that all but one of the transposase targets of M62 have a predicted probability below our threshold of 0.7 and is likely the result of the differences between the M62 sequence and the M10 and M47 sequences (region accessibility is a factor in target prediction). There are several well-characterized examples of transposon antisense encoded RNAs including RNA-OUT, inhibiting IS10 (Simons and Kleckner, 1983), art200, inhibiting IS200 (Ellis et al., 2015), and RNA-C inhibiting IS30 (Arini et al., 1997). Transposon associated antisense RNAs that overlap the transposon coding sequence proximal to the start codon typically act in trans, blocking the translation of the transposase (Simons and Kleckner 1983, Ellis, 2015), but RNA-C, which is antisense to the transposase but not directly at the start codon, only appears to act in cis (Arini, 1997). Thus, based on the position of these sRNAs proximal and overlapping the ribosome-binding site, it is likely that they are *trans*-acting across the many transposon copies present in the genome. The sequence of M69 is distinct from that of M10, M47, and M62, however its placement upstream and antisense to an annotated transposase suggests a similar functionality.

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                                                  A
M10                 39  UUCGCUGUUUUGUUGAGUAAUCUUUCU AGUAUACCUUG  1
                        ||||||||||||||||||||||||||| |||||||||||
SP_RS06190         -32  AAGCGACAAAACAACUCAUUAGAAAGA UCAUAUGGAAC  7
                                                  A

M10                 39  UUCGCUGUUUUGUUGAGUAAUCUUUCUAAGUAUACCUUG  1
                        ||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||
SP_ RS12420        -32  AAGCGACAAAACAACUCAUUAGAAAGAUUCAUAUGGAAC  7

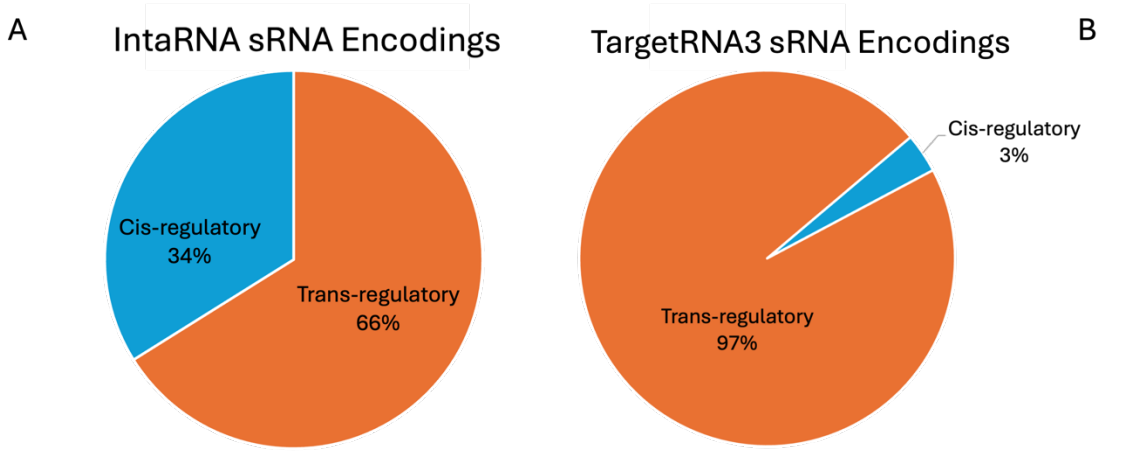
                              U U                    UA  U
M10                 39  UUCGC G UUUGUUGAGUAAUCUUUC  AG AUACCUUG  1
                        ||||| |||||||||||||||||||  || ||||||||
SP_ RS02270        -32  AAGCG C AAACAACUCAUUAGAAAG  UC UAUGGAAC  7
                              C U                    UA  U
```

Figure 4: Three of the M10 interactions predicted by TargetRNA3 in TIGR4. The numbers on either end are relative positions of the interacting sequences within the full RNA sequence. A negative number indicates the sequence is upstream of the mRNA start codon. SP_RS### is the TIGR4 target locus.

To identify other *cis*-encoded sRNA candidates we compared the genomic coordinates of the candidates and MPTs. Candidates suspected to be *cis*-encoded must have genomic coordinates overlapping with the target coordinates. IntaRNA shows 20 candidates may be *cis*-encoded, three of which exhibit probable interaction (Figure 5a). In contrast, TargetRNA3 suggests only two

candidates are *cis*-encoded, both of which are probable and in common with IntaRNA's results (Figure 5b).

The two possible *cis*-encoded sRNAs predicted by TargetRNA3 are M12, and M66 (Figure 5c). The M12 interaction is antisense and extends across 40 nucleotides. M12 targets *mntE*, the gene coding for the CDF family manganese efflux transporter MntE. This protein is an active transporter that removes intracellular manganese ions to maintain metal ion homeostasis, and a knockout reduces fitness and virulence in *S. mutans* (O'Brien et al., 2020). Like the M12 interaction, M66 is antisense to the target with perfect binding across 40 nucleotides. M66 targets *ruvB* that codes for the Holliday junction branch migration DNA helicase RuvB, a subunit in the RuvABC complex. The complex processes Holliday junctions, nucleic acid structures that contain four joined double-stranded arms, during genetic recombination and DNA repair. The individual RuvB subunit is a hexameric ring helicase that acts like a motor to draw the DNA through the complex (Sharples et al., 1999). We believe that the overlap in predictions made by TargetRNA3 and IntaRNA strongly suggest that these targets are valid. 5' end-Seq data in TIGR4 indicates that transcription is initiating and terminating at the coordinates in which M12 is found (Warrier et al. 2018 Table S1) suggesting that M12 is likely to be expressed.



C

```
M12      1,461,188  CUCAAGGGAGUAGCUGGCAGAAACCUGUGAUAGUGUCGU  1,461,150
                    |||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||
mntE     1,461,188  GAGUUCCCUCAUCGACCGUCUUUGGACACUAUCACAGCA  1,461,150

M66        232,034  ACACUGCUACACCGCCUACGAAAGGAGGUGAGAUAGCCC    231,996
                    |||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||
ruvB       232,034  UGUGACGAUGUGGCGGAUGCUUUCCUCCACUCUAUCGGG    231,996
```

Figure 5: **a)** The distribution of sRNA locations relative to its targets predicted by IntaRNA. **b)** The distribution of sRNA locations relative to its targets predicted by TargetRNA3. **c)** The M12 and M66 interactions are predicted by TargetRNA3 and in both cases the sRNA is found on the complement strand and the target on the top strand. The numbers on either end of the are exact positions of the interacting sequences. A ":" indicates a G-U pair.

Eight notable sRNAs for future experimental validation

Across the 59 sRNAs, 8 stood out for reasons that we believe warrant future work to experimentally validate this study's results. Each sRNA is highly conserved and targets a gene with high probability. 5 of the notable sRNA candidates share a consensus target between at least two RIP programs (M12, M18, M47, M62, M66) and one (M12) shares a consensus target across IntaRNA, CopraRNA, and TargetRNA3 (Table 5). We believe a consensus target, a gene predicted to be the MPT for an sRNA in at least four of the six *S. pneumoniae* strains, is indicative of a highly likely true sRNA-target pair. Four of the notable candidates target multiple transposases (M10, M18, M47, M69). However, there are also sRNA candidates with potential metabolic targets. M63 has 13 probable targets and four of them are in the CcpA regulon. For the above reasons, we suspect these 8 sRNAs are the most likely to lead to future validation of true sRNA-target pairs that may inform us about how sRNAs relate to *S. pneumoniae* metabolism and virulence.

In-house sRNA ID	Other IDs	Same consensus target across multiple RIP programs	Predicted target(s)	Regulatory mechanism
M10	srn266/Spd_sr55		transposases	trans
M12	SN44/srn351/R21/Spd_sr78	✓	*mntE*	cis
M18	srn503/F67/Spd_sr111	✓	SP_RS05710	trans
M47	F31	✓	transposases	trans
M62	Spd_sr6/srf-03	✓	transposases	trans
M63	Spd_sr37/srf-04		CcpA regulon	trans
M66	Spd_sr24	✓	*ruvB*	cis
M69	Spd_sr47		transposases	trans

Table 4: Notable sRNAs a high degree of conservation and interesting predicted targets. The other IDs are the labels assigned in the data source studies. The "Regulatory mechanism" column refers to whether the sRNA is suspected to be *cis*-acting or *trans*-acting.

Conclusion

This study compiled a list of sRNAs in *S. pneumoniae*, then analyzed the conservation in the pangenome and predicted mRNA targets of the widely conserved sRNAs. BLAST indicates 59 sRNAs exhibit strong conservation across 385 strains. Four RNA-RNA interaction prediction programs made thousands of predictions for the 59 sRNAs. Ultimately, only the probable targets predicted by IntaRNA and TargetRNA3 were the focus of this study's target examination. It appears that there are a handful of reported transposon associated sRNAs that target transposases, likely based on position acting in trans. However, we also identified high probability targets for other sRNA candidates. For example, M63, may be highly involved in carbon metabolism within the CcpA regulon. Through this work, we have identified a list of 8 sRNAs for which biological function can be hypothesized, and future work will strive to experimentally validate these hypotheses to reveal more regarding the nature of sRNAs and their targets in *S. pneumoniae*.

Methods

Compiling sRNA data sources

Previous studies identified putative sRNAs by high-throughput sequencing in *S. pneumoniae* strains TIGR4 (NC_003028.3) and D39W (CP000410.1). The putative sRNAs in TIGR4 (Acebo et al., 2012, Mann et al., 2012) and D39W (Sinha et al., 2019) were narrowed down to a new list

of candidates for further analysis of conservation and target prediction (see Results and Discussion).

Creating the in-house list of putative sRNAs

A list of in-house putative sRNAs was created from the candidates. Previous TIGR4 studies identified different coordinates for transcription initiation and termination sites, so new in-house coordinates were created by combining the smallest initiation and largest termination site coordinates (Supplemental Figure S1a). In-house Python scripts retrieved the sRNA sequences from the TIGR4 and D39W genomes using the new coordinates. sRNAs identified in multiple studies under different names were assigned an in-house ID and sequence using the new coordinates (e.g. csRNA5/SN35/srn061/F7/CcnE becomes M1). Differences between the TIGR4 and D39W genomes forced the need to compare sequences rather than coordinates. VectorBuilder (https://en.vectorbuilder.com/tool/sequence-alignment.html) aligned sRNAs to confirm the sequences overlap. The largest possible sequence became the new in-house sRNA by joining the overlapping subsequence and trailing sequences on either end (Supplemental Figure S1b). After forming the list of in-house sRNAs, sequences with length <50 nucleotides were removed.

Assessing conservation of sRNAs

The in-house sRNAs were aligned to the genomes of 385 *S. pneumoniae* strains (Cremers et al., 2015, Rosconi et al., 2022), *S. pyogenes* (NZ_LS483338.1), *S. mutans* (NZ_CP044221.1), and *S. suis* (NC_012926.1). Raw reads and the mapping results for 350 *S. pneumoniae* strains (Cremers et al., 2015) available in BAM format were converted to consensus files in FASTA format with the samtools consensus mode (Danecek et al., 2021). Then, a database, created with makeblastdb, containing the sRNA sequences was aligned to each genome using blastn with the task parameter set to megablast. An in-house Python script retrieved the average number of alignments, best sequence identity, and number of genomes with an alignment for each sRNA. In-house sRNAs with an average number of alignments per strain ≥15 were classified as potentially highly repetitive sequences and removed from the in-house list. sRNAs not appearing in the majority of the 385 strains were also removed. A database containing the *S. pyogenes*, *S. mutans*, and *S. suis* genomes, created with makeblastdb, was used to search for sRNA sequence alignments using blastn with the task parameter set to blastn. Synteny of the sRNAs was evaluated by comparing the 1000 nt upstream and downstream of the sequences to those in TIGR4. Then, the 1000 nt on either end of the sRNA sequences for the other 384 strains were compared base-wise to obtain sequence identities. The average sequence identities, both up and downstream, were averaged across all 384 strains, and if either average sequence identity, up or downstream, is ≥75% then it was concluded that the synteny of the sRNA is preserved.

sRNA target prediction

IntaRNA version 3.3.2, sRNARFTarget, and TargetRNA3 were used to predict targets for the 59 sRNA candidates. CopraRNA version 2.1.4 was only used to predict targets for six sRNAs with significant alignments in *S. suis*, *S. pyogenes*, and *S. mutans*. Predictions for each sRNA were made in six different *S. pneumoniae* strains consisting of TIGR4 (NC_003028.3), D39 (NC_008533.2), TVO_Taiwan19F-14, TVO_1901920, TVO_1901934, TVO_1902277 (Rosconi et al., 2022). IntaRNA was run with the IntaRNAsTar personality, the number of predictions set to 5, and otherwise default parameters. sRNARFTarget was run with the provided Docker

container. sRNARFTarget requires a user input transcriptome, so an in-house Python script created two transcriptome files for each of the six *S. pneumoniae* strains using the coordinates from the respective GenBank files and retrieving the sequences from the genome. The two transcriptomes are defined by the exact gene coordinates and coordinates adjusted to include 100 nucleotides upstream of the start codon and 300 nucleotides downstream of the stop codon or until the next gene's start codon, whichever comes first. TargetRNA3 was run with the probability threshold lowered to 0.25 and otherwise default parameters. Note, the six genomes were first added to the local user database by providing the accession identifier. CopraRNA was run with default parameters in *S. pneumoniae*, *S. suis*, *S. pyogenes*, and *S. mutans*.

sRNA target analysis

An in-house Python script retrieved the sequences including 25 nucleotides upstream and downstream of the mRNA interacting sequence. The structures of these sequences were predicted using RNAfold version 2.6.4 with default parameters. If the sRNA interacting sequence overlaps with a structured region of the mRNA, then the interaction was labeled as interacting with a structured region. Only the MPTs of each sRNA in the six strains predicted by IntaRNA were analyzed. The RNA structure illustrated in Figure 4b used RNAfold version 2.6.4 with default parameters to predict the structure and the image was made with StructureEditor. To determine if the sRNAs are acting in regulons we searched the target loci against the RegPrecise database (https://regprecise.lbl.gov/index.jsp). Only the MPTs and probable targets predicted by TargetRNA3 in TIGR4 were searched seeing as TIGR4 is the only *S. pneumoniae* strain for which the database contains information. The expression of sRNA sequences was confirmed by checking if the transcription initiation and termination sites were present in 5' and 3' RNA-end sequencing data (Warrier et al., 2018).

Additional Data Files

Additional_Data_1_source-sRNAs.xlsx – initial list of putative sRNAs from three studies.
Additional_Data_2_In-house-sRNAs.xlsx – final in-house list after deduplication (Fig. 1c)
Additional_Data_3_CorprRNA.xlsx – CopraRNA target predictions
Additional_Data_4_IntaRNA.xlsx –IntaRNA target predictions
Additional_Data_5_sRNARFTarget-Transcriptome-Exact.xlsx –sRNARFT target predictions (coding sequences only)
Additional_Data_6_sRNARFTarget-Transcriptome-100-300.xlsx sRNARFT target predictions (coding sequences and flanking regions)
Additional_Data_7_TargetRNA3.xlsx – TargetRNA3 target predictions

Supplemental Files

Eichelman_SupplementalFigs.pdf
Eichelman_SuppleementalFile2_python_scripts.zip

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