



YOUTH ADVOCATE PROGRAM INTERNATIONAL REPORT

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CHILDREN FOR SALE: YOUTH INVOLVED IN PROSTITUTION, PORNOGRAPHY AND SEX TRAFFICKING

Throughout the world, thousands if not millions of children suffer from commercial sexual exploitation. The sex trade businesses of prostitution, pornography and trafficking for sexual purposes have impacted practically every country's children, including the children of the United States.

How many children are prostituted in the United States today?

"Somewhere between 100,000 and 3 million," said Marsha Liss, an attorney with the U.S. Justice Department's Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section. "We just don't know." The numbers of children involved in pornography and sex trafficking also are uncertain. Liss reported that the number of child pornography cases being investigated by the Justice Department has jumped from around 90 to 300 cases per year. There are few international sex trafficking cases involving children currently under investigation, but a lot of cases of interstate trafficking. Liss noted that Midwest states are particularly popular places for the recruitment of girls for the sex trade on both coasts.

Girls are the vast majority of victims of commercial sexual exploitation in most countries. In the United States, however, the number of sexually exploited boys is believed to be very high, perhaps nearly equal to the number of sexually exploited girls.

"The male sex trade is the basement of this underground business," said Susan Breault, assistant director of the Paul & Lisa Program, which provides public education and prevention programs and outreach to prostituted children in New York and other east coast cities. "There are lots of boys out there [working as prostitutes], but we don't know that much about them. They get together and create their own groups for protection. There's not so much reli-

ance on pimps. But there are boys being prostituted by their families, and there are boys being drawn into pedophile sex rings. They are abused and exploited."

Reliable estimates of the number of children involved in the sex trade are very hard to come by because of the underground nature of the businesses and because of national embarrassment over the issue. Also, many professionals identify the problem differently based on their experience and occupations.

PERSPECTIVES ON COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN THE UNITED STATES

In interviews with several different professionals who have worked with sexually exploited children, it became apparent that there are at least three major perspectives about how the commercial sexual exploitation of children occurs in the United States. The problem tends to be viewed as either 1) common to runaway children who use sex as a means of survival; 2) the results of drug addiction and the effect of drugs on families; or 3) organized businesses that take several forms but are based on an adult's control and manipulation of a child for the adult's profit.

For example, Valerie Douglas of YouthCare in Seattle, Washington, is an outreach supervisor for a drop-in center serving homeless and needy youth. She has worked with several youth who have been involved in informal prostitution. "I'd say almost all the kids I see have been sexually exploited," Douglas said "They're involved in exchanging sex for shelter, for drugs. But they wouldn't call it prostitution. When you see a young girl having sex with a member of her "gang" so that she has his protection on the street, what do you call it? Sex is being exchanged for something, even if she wants to think otherwise."

Douglas noted that there are plenty of adult men ready to prey on the 13 and 14 year olds on the street. She said that she was aware of street children traveling to and from Canadian clubs and that street children were being "rounded up" for special events, such as Mardi Gras in New Orleans and Sea Fair in Seattle.

CHILDREN INVOLVED IN THE SEX TRADE

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The perspective from a law enforcement officer in the Midwest was a little different.

“I guess we don’t see what you’d call real child prostitution,” said Sergeant Mike Duke, of the Indianapolis Police Department’s Sex Offense Unit. “But there are kids out there being sexually exploited for money.” Duke described working on a case where a 12-year-old girl was prostituted by her mother, who was a crack addict. He said that was not an isolated case, although sexual molestation charges were the most frequent kind of cases coming to his unit’s attention.

When told about the Justice Department’s identification of Midwest cities as prime recruitment grounds for pimps, Duke responded, “I am not surprised. Reporting on molestation charges have gone right through the roof in the last few years. There are plenty of kids out here who are ripe for the picking.”

Then, there is the perspective of those who see the business in its more traditional forms. Less than a dozen U.S. organizations work exclusively with prostituted children, but the staff of those groups serve these children every day. They say that it’s not hard to find children walking the streets of most large U.S. cities, and the children come from all 50 states. They say that if mainstream society doesn’t believe the problem exists, it is only because mainstream society doesn’t want to look for it.

WHOSE CHILDREN ARE VULNERABLE?

In the United States, children who have experienced physical or sexual abuse at home are very vulnerable to entering the sex trade. Runaway and “throwaway” children (children kicked out of their homes) also are at high risk of becoming involved no matter what the reason for their leaving home.

“Most prostituted children are abused or neglected children,” said Breault. “They might even come from upper middle class families, but they do not have adults who care about them. They lack self esteem and pimps can spot that so easily. Children who are abused or neglected are set up for the manipulations of the pimp. They respond to unrealistic lures—lines like ‘Oh, you’re so pretty. I’m sure you could be a model if you came with me to the city.’”

Outreach workers note that pimps are working in suburban malls, recreation areas, and around high schools and colleges, as well as in internet chat rooms.

THE SEX TRADE HURTS CHILDREN

Children engaging in sexual activities are vulnerable to the same sexually transmitted

diseases (STDs) as adults, including herpes, gonorrhea, syphilis, HIV infection and AIDS. Girls are at risk of pregnancy and additional abuse as a result of pregnancy.

Tragically, the worldwide fear of AIDS appears to be one of the factors explaining why adults are sexually exploiting children as well as one of the consequences. Some adults are seeking younger commercial sex partners in the belief that this practice will protect them from exposure to AIDS. People reason that a young prostitute is less likely to be infected with disease than an older prostitute.

Sexually active children actually are at greater risk of being infected by STDs and the HIV virus than a mature adult because their body tissues are more easily damaged. The United Nations estimates that more than 50 percent of new HIV infections currently are occurring in people between the ages of 15 and 24. An additional 10 percent of new infections are occurring in children under age 15.¹

The immediate danger posed by prostitution is the physical, mental and emotional violence of pimps and madams and customers. Prostituted children have been raped, sodomized, beaten, emotionally abused, tortured and killed by the adults that control them or by the people who use them. They all suffer from damaged self esteem.

“You must understand that these children believe what people have told them,” said Breault. “Most of these girls do not believe they are worthy of rescue. One girl told us that no matter what happened to her she knew what her pimp and the customers expected her to do. She said she had no idea of what to expect from people who were not involved in prostitution.”

Children who experience inappropriate sexual activity are psychologically impacted by a combination of the assault itself with the distorted information abusers use to justify their sexual behavior.² As a result, prostituted children experience stigmatization, betrayal and powerlessness. In cases of severe trauma, prostituted children may suffer depression, disassociation and posttraumatic shock.

To cope with the pain of their reality, many use drugs, although outreach workers note that most pimps don’t want their prostituted children to become addicted because they start spending the pimp’s money to buy drugs. Prostituted children may exhibit promiscuous behavior, or they may internalize feelings of guilt for their participation. They often fear trusting and talking to adults about their experiences. The powerlessness of sexually exploited children to stop abuse may make them believe that telling anyone about it is pointless.

WHO USES AND PROFITS FROM THE COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN?

Adult men, both heterosexual and homosexual, make up 90 percent of the customers³ buying sexual services from children. They also buy the most child pornography.

"Do you know what most johns are looking for?" asked Norma Hotaling, executive director of SAGE, a nonprofit organization assisting prostitutes in San Francisco. "White, young, blue-eyed blondes. Someone who will listen to them and smile and be nice to them. They are not ready to deal with women as complete human beings." Hotaling should know. She worked as a prostitute for several years herself.

SAGE provides a unique program for arrested "johns" through the San Francisco District Attorney's Office. The men have the choice of participating in SAGE's program or paying a high fine. So far, over 2,000 men have learned from former prostitutes specifically how prostitution ruins lives. Hotaling reported that only a few participants have reoffended.

"We have to remember that these prostitutes are children," said Hotaling. "It's the same wherever you go in the world. People see a girl with too much makeup, too little clothes, and they say 'That is a bad girl.' What happens is that these girls know that betrayal, sexual abuse, their means of surviving—it's going to equal jail time if someone finds out. That has to stop. It's time we figured out who the real perpetrators are—and they're not children."

Adults are the primary beneficiaries of the commercial sexual exploitation of children. Adults, not children, run the bars where customers meet prostitutes. Adults run brothels and escort services. Adults make and distribute pornography. Adults advertise sex tours and buy children like slaves.

HELPING PROSTITUTED CHILDREN

Hotaling emphasized that prostituted children need appropriate schools to complete their education and prepare for life without prostitution dependency. They also need counseling to help correct self-destructive and negative behaviors. But more than anything else, prosti-

tuted children need appropriate treatment for the core issue of sexual abuse.

The Paul & Lisa program ran a transitional housing program for six girls who were former prostitutes. They provided counseling and transitional housing for 18 months. Contact with the girls was maintained for three years. The girls' reintegration was successful, according to Breault, but there was no funding available to continue or expand the program. "It's expensive, time-consuming work," said Breault.

Recently, Hotaling battled the San Francisco city government to get services for prosti-



tuted girls who have been arrested. The city promised to pay for services but did not want to continue funding after the girls were out on probation. Hotaling exclaimed, "I said 'What the %\$@# do you want us to do? Put them back in jail to get the help they need?'"

As a result of its success working with women, SAGE is implementing a comprehensive program for girls who want to leave prostitution. The program will include 1) crisis intervention and stabilization; 2) skills-building toward self-protection and self-sufficiency; 3) individualized counseling; 4) mentorship activities; and 5) sustained growth and reintegration activities. The program is being supported by the National Institute of Justice and Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

The SAGE program is a step in the right direction. However, recognizing the commercial sexual exploitation of children and providing them effective assistance remains a national issue that has been neglected for far too long.©

ENDNOTES

1. Miriam Lyons, "The Impact of HIV and AIDS on Children, Families and Communities: Risks and Realities of Childhood during the HIV Epidemic," UN Development Programme, HIV and Development Programme, Issues Paper 30, (New York, May 1998, photocopy), 1.
2. Liz Kelly, Rachel Wingfield, Sheila Burton, Linda Regan, *Splintered Lives: Sexual exploitation of children in the context of children's rights and child protection* (Ilford, Essex, UK: Barnardo's, 1995), 52-53.
3. Ninety percent is considered a reasonable estimate by the international, nongovernmental organization End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and the Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT).

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