

HUMAN TRAFFICKING SERIES

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The Sex Trafficking of Youth in America

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Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking

Human sex trafficking is a multi-faceted problem that affects countries across the globe as well as the United States. Academics, policy makers, advocates, health care workers, legal system personnel, and non-governmental organizations (NGO) have recently turned their attention toward the commercial sexual exploitation of minors in the United States. The current volume of this special series on human trafficking synthesizes the most up-to-date information from empirical analyses, ethnographic research, observational assessments, and interview data on the sex trafficking of youth in America and presents a brief overview of effective responses to domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) victims.

The involvement of youth in the sex trade, or DMST, is a significant problem in the United States. The invisible nature of DMST, however, makes establishing its prevalence difficult. To be sure, a recently released report funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and the Institute of Medicine (IOM) has estimated that between 1,400 and 2.4 million youth are currently being commercially sexually exploited in the U.S. (Clayton, Krugman, & Simon, 2013). The substantial disparity in these numbers reiterates significant challenges that researchers and government entities face in establishing valid empirical counts of those who are sex trafficked.

According to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA, 2000), any individual under the age of 18 who is involved in commercial sexual activity, where sex is traded for something of value (e.g., money, food, shelter), is considered a victim of sex trafficking and is eligible for legal protection and services as outlined by federal law. Despite the development of legislation, youth survivors of sex trafficking continue to face considerable obstacles to exiting the sex trade and developing prosocial lifestyles. Perhaps the most significant barrier is the stigma and



blame attributed to victims by family, peers, law enforcement, and society members for victims' involvement in "sex work" or "prostitution" that has traditionally been viewed as immoral and illegal. Blame toward DMST victims reflects a profound lack of public awareness about pathways into the sex trade, which are commonly characterized by extensive abuse and neglect both during crucial developmental stages in the family-of-origin and by exploiters and buyers once victims are immersed in "the life" (Menaker and Franklin, 2015).

Pathways into the Sex Trade

In the U.S., the average age of entry into prostitution is between 13- and 16-years-old for both males and females (Dank, 2011). Youth involvement in the sex trade is often the result of adverse home environments, abuse experiences, and poverty, coupled with the underdeveloped decision-making capacity of adolescence. Families of prostituted youth are more likely to be characterized by parental criminality, substance abuse, domestic violence, and neglect (Curtis et al., 2008; Williams & Frederick, 2009). In addition, between 38 to 73 percent of DMST victims report multiple and diverse experiences of physical and sexual abuse, often by family members, which contributes to low feelings of self-worth, school failure, and eventually, running away from home (Friedman, 2005; Nadon et al., 1998; Williams and Frederick, 2009).

Indeed, running away from home is perhaps the most significant predictor of sex trade involvement among youth, with 50 to 100 percent of samples reporting a history of running away (Bell & Todd, 1998, Nadon et al., 1998). Youth who have run away from home often live temporarily with antisocial peers, exposing them to delinquency, drug use, or prostitution (Curtis et al., 2008; Lemmey & Tice, 2000). On the streets, youth have few resources, and may engage in survival strategies to cope with past trauma and present adversity, including substance

use and commercial sex (Williams, 2010). Youth who exchange sex for basic needs in order to survive have been labeled “compliant” or “willing,” and therefore culpable, though these individuals are clearly defined by the TVPA as *victims*. These early victimization experiences make youth vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers or “pimps”—individuals, typically male, who coerce and force others into commercial sex activity (Norton-Hawk, 2004; Williamson & Cluse-Tolar, 2002).

Pimps, Sex Buyers, and Survival Sex

In samples of prostituted women and girls, approximately 40 to 80 percent report having been controlled by an exploiter or “pimp” at one time (Norton-Hawk, 2004; Williamson & Cluse-Tolar, 2002). Pimps often seek out youth with whom their recruitment and control strategies will be most effective. Specifically, they target youth with exceptionally dysfunctional backgrounds and few legitimate options for survival or financial gain (Norton-Hawk, 2004). Although pimps have used violence to prevent individuals from leaving the sex trade, violence is not usually present during recruitment (Kennedy et al., 2007). To the contrary, initial recruitment tactics have often involved love or debt accrual, where youth are told to reimburse pimps for gifts, trips, and meals. A common strategy is seduction, during which pimps take advantage of the insecurities and vulnerabilities of youth with histories of abuse and neglect (Kennedy et al., 2007). It is these youth who may be unable to differentiate healthy from abusive or exploitive intimacy. Pimps who employ this technique will act as an intimate partner, showering youth with gifts and compliments until the youth is emotionally attached and has feelings of love for his or her soon-to-be pimp—a process lasting from days to months (Kennedy et al., 2007; Williamson & Cluse-Tolar, 2002). Pimps may initiate youth into the sex trade by suggesting they trade sex once to help financially (e.g., to pay the rent) and soon escalate the frequency of prostitution through threats and severe psychological and physical violence. As a result, many youth perceive their pimp as a boyfriend whom they love, making it difficult for them to leave the “relationship” (Williamson & Cluse-Tolar, 2002). In contrast, “some pimps” may subject youth to a rash of violence, including sexual assault and gang rape as a way to create feelings of extreme worthlessness and relentless self-loathing, thus inculcating youth into “the life.” It is important to note, however, that not all DMST victims have run away or met pimps on the street. A number of youth are introduced to the sex trade by peers and family members (Curtis et al., 2008).

Studies have consistently demonstrated that sexual and physical violence is pervasive to the commercial sex industry, often at the hands of sex buyers and traffickers (Gragg et al., 2007; Schissel & Fedec, 1999). Youth have reported extreme violence from pimps, including forced drug use, daily beatings, broken bones, and assaults with weapons (Gragg et al., 2007). DMST victims have also described high rates of violence from sex buyers, including stabbings, sexual assaults, beatings with objects, strangulations, and torture (Gragg et al., 2007; Lloyd, 2012). Among youth with histories of victimization, it is likely that traumatic experiences endured while in the sex trade exacerbate psychological symptoms such as posttraumatic stress dis-

order (PTSD), depression, dissociation, and self-esteem deficits, prolonging mental health disorders and limiting their ability to exit the sex trade.

Barriers to Exiting the Sex Trade

Many youth wish to exit the sex trade and have made several unsuccessful attempts to leave (Dank, 2011). Victimization experiences prior to and during involvement result in a number of deleterious mental and physical health outcomes for youth, which often impede their ability to successfully escape the sex trade. Traumatic experiences among prostituted youth have resulted in symptoms of posttraumatic stress and substance abuse, as well as feelings of low self-esteem, worthlessness, fear, and shame, which contribute to suicidal ideation and intent (Kennedy et al., 2009; Lloyd, 2012; Nixon et al., 2002). In addition to mental health problems, DMST victims are at particular risk for physical health issues, including sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, chronic illnesses, and severe physical injury (Willis & Levy, 2002). Physical and psychological barriers are compounded by practical concerns, such as the danger of escaping a pimp, lack of state-issued identification, lack of transportation and money, difficulty accessing shelter and services, and limited education and prosocial support (Williams, 2007). Many prostituted youth are precluded access to legitimate employment due to their age, potential criminal history, limited education, lack of identification or appropriate clothes, and their history of involvement in the sex trade.

Collectively, the extensive psychological and physical health problems associated with involvement in the sex trade limit youths’ ability to identify legitimate alternatives to prostitution. Substance dependence and symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression may decrease motivation to change and impair cognitive reasoning, making it difficult to develop strategies for leaving the sex trade or to recognize individuals who attempt to provide legitimate assistance as trustworthy. In addition, the myriad physical health problems related to prostitution is a significant public health concern and an important consideration for rehabilitation and treatment services targeting youth in the sex trade. Certainly, many victims are in need of acute, coordinated care. State legislation including the provision of services to domestic sex trafficking victims, including counseling, housing, educational and vocational training, and medical and legal assistance, is the optimal method for ensuring the widespread availability of services, funding for services, high standards of practice, and coordinated delivery.

Legal Remedies: Safe Harbor Laws

Inconsistencies among federal, state, and local legislation with regard to prostitution and trafficking has resulted in misapplied laws and conflicting practices (Sherman & Grace, 2011). In many states, commercially sexually exploited youth continue to be labeled as delinquents and put in the custody of the juvenile justice system (Kennedy et al., 2007; Reid & Jones, 2011). Fifteen states (Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Utah, Vermont, and

Washington), however, have developed legislation, termed “Safe Harbor” laws, which appropriately identify prostituted youth as victims in need of services (Polaris Project, 2014). Safe Harbor laws ensure that minor victims are protected from prosecution and are diverted from juvenile delinquency to child protection proceedings. In line with the TVPA (2000), these laws are designed so that evidence of force or coercion is not required to prosecute the sex trafficking of children, and that purchasers of commercial sex acts with youth are recognized as sexual predators and punished accordingly. Finally, Safe Harbor laws address the myriad needs of prostituted youth through appropriate mental health care, life skills training, housing, and education. Additional provisions may include mentorship by sex trafficking survivors and protocols that ensure immediate placement of victims in safe houses. The importance of enacting Safe Harbor laws nationwide cannot be understated. These laws are critical to bridging the gap between federal and state legislation and are essential to decriminalizing the commercial sexual exploitation of minors, providing appropriate social support and services, and prosecuting traffickers and sex buyers.

Discussion

While Safe Harbor laws offer legal protection to prostituted youth, their reach extends only to individuals under 18 years of age. To date, federal and state legislation is limited in the protection of adults forced into prostitution, many of whom qualified for Safe Harbor protection until their most recent birthday. There is no significant distinction between 18- and 19-year-olds in prostitution and their 17-year-old counterparts in terms of victimization history and subjugation by pimps. This raises important policy-related questions about the exclusion of adult men and women from current legislation and the impact of this exclusion on the perceptions and treatment of prostituted individuals in the criminal justice system and public realm. While significant advances have been achieved in recognizing DMST and targeting traffickers, there is a continued need for public awareness campaigns, comprehensive legislation, and specialized services for this disenfranchised and invisible population.

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Resources

UNICEF United States Fund – Child Protection Programs

End Trafficking Project - www.unicefusa.org

Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention OJJDP– Institute of Medicine - www.iom.edu

Confronting Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Minors in the U.S.

Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) – www.ovc.ncjrs.gov/findvictimservices/

Girls and Mentoring Education Services (GEMS) - www.gems-girls.org

End It Movement - www.enditmovement.com

Relevant Readings

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