

CALIFORNIA CHILD WELFARE COUNCIL

CSEC Work Group



Prevalence of Commercially Sexually Exploited Children

Human trafficking is a \$32 billion dollar global industry, involving over 100,000 children in the United States. After drug trafficking and counterfeiting, it is the world's most profitable criminal activity. It is estimated that an exploiter may earn as much as \$650,000 in a year by exploiting as few as four children. The commercial sexual exploitation of children ("CSEC") is defined as the sexual abuse of a minor "entirely, or at least primarily, for financial or other economic reasons. The economic exchanges involved may be either monetary or non-monetary (i.e., for food, shelter, drugs)."¹ Although previously believed to be an international problem, current statistics show that human trafficking is increasingly a domestic issue. In the past two years, California's nine human trafficking task forces identified 1,277 victims, seventy-two percent of whom were from the United States. Over the past decade, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), the Department of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Investigations, Congress, and countless community based organizations have recognized and exposed human trafficking as a major problem within the United States. And yet, despite current national, state, and local efforts, the number of children who are exploited is increasing.

Forms of Child Sexual Exploitation

Child sex trafficking, child pornography, and child sex tourism are all forms of CSEC. Other forms of sexual abuse, including enticement of children for sexual acts and statutory rape, often lead to CSE. Frequently, victims are exploited through more than one form of abuse. For example, the child sexual exploiter might use the Internet to lure a young person into a situation where he creates pornographic images, and then uses those images to advertise the child for sexual services.

Within the United States, California has emerged as a magnet for sex trafficking of children. **Three of the nation's thirteen High Intensity Child Prostitution areas as identified by the FBI are located in California: the San Francisco; Los Angeles; and San Diego metropolitan areas.** No community escapes exploitation's reach. Exploited youth come from urban, rural and suburban areas, and exploiters frequently move CSEC between trafficking hubs to further isolate and control them.

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Child Welfare Involvement

The children who fall prey to exploiters frequently have prior involvement with the child welfare system, through child protective service investigations or placement in foster care. Several studies indicate that between seventy and ninety percent of exploited children have experienced child sexual abuse before they are first commercially exploited. The following statistics demonstrate the prevalence of child welfare involvement among exploited children.

Los Angeles

The STAR (Succeeding Through Achievement and Resilience) Court in Los Angeles County, which works with youth who have been commercial sexually exploited, is currently supervising seventy-two girls:

- Of the 72 girls, 56 have had prior contact with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS);
- 42 were formally supervised by the dependency court;
- 4 had voluntary family maintenance; and
- 5 had several child abuse referrals, but no agency services were provided.³

San Diego

In San Diego, several local agencies, led by a local school district, analyzed CSEC identified youths' files. They reviewed school, mental health, child welfare, and probation documents and found that:

- Between 80-95% of CSEC were known to the child welfare system; and
- Many had multiple child welfare referrals, and in most cases, the initial referrals for these youth took place prior to the age of seven.

Children who experienced sexual abuse are **"28 times more likely to be arrested for prostitution at some point in their lives than children who [did] not."**²

San Francisco Bay Area

- Over 75% of the 113 youth studied by WestCoast Children's Clinic, described experiencing child abuse and neglect prior to their commercial sexual exploitation.

Sex traffickers and exploiters are known to target foster youth because of their unique vulnerabilities and accessibility. Advocates in California have found a similar trend in the youth they have served. It should be noted that boys and youth who identify as LGBTQ are also at high risk of exploitation, however little research has focused specifically on these populations in relation to CSEC.

Challenges Unique to the CSEC Population

- Actively pursued and controlled by criminals
- Experience extreme levels of trauma that result in strong bonds with their exploiters. This strong bond makes it difficult to engage youth, and is similar to the bond created in domestic and intimate partner violence relationships
- Face stigma and shame associated with prostitution

¹ Richard J. Estes & Neil Alan Weiner, Univ. of Pa., The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children In the U.S., Canada and Mexico 10 (rev. Feb. 20, 2002), available at http://www.sp2.upenn.edu/restes/CSEC_Files/Complete_CSEC_020220.pdf.

² FRANCINE T. SHERMAN & LISA GOLDBLATT GRACE, THE SYSTEM RESPONSE TO THE COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF GIRLS, IN JUVENILE JUSTICE: ADVANCING RESEARCH, POLICY, AND PRACTICE, 337 (Francine T. Sherman & Francine H. Jacobs eds., 2011); C. Widom, National Institute of Justice, Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse: Later Criminal Consequences (NIJ, 1995, NCJ 151525)

³ Email from Catherine Pratt, Commissioner, Los Angeles County Superior Court, to author (Nov. 1, 2012 14:58 PST) (on file with the author).

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