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Child sex exploitation study probes extent of victimization in Illinois

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The commercial sexual exploitation of children in the United States, often referred to as “modern day slavery,” is a multi-million dollar industry supported by revenue from prostitution and pornography. Due to the attention that commercial sexual exploitation of children has received, and its priority among federal, state, and local law enforcement officials, it is an important issue for Illinois to explore.

The U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) calls the commercial sexual exploitation of children one of the most overlooked and egregious forms of child abuse. OJJDP defines the commercial sexual exploitation of children as “a constellation of crimes of a sexual na-

ture, committed against youthful victims younger than 18 years old, primarily or entirely for financial or other economic reasons.”

Child exploitation crimes include trafficking for sexual purposes, prostitution, sex tourism, pornography, stripping, and sexual performances, and includes schemes involving mail order brides and early marriages. Law enforcement and child protection groups label commercial sexual exploitation of children in the United States a “critical problem,” with increasing numbers of children and youth sexually exploited through prostitution and pornography, according to OJJDP.

Due to the secretive and hidden nature of the commercial sexual exploitation of children, this crime is difficult to study and quantify. In the fall of 2006 the Authority was awarded a research grant by OJJDP to study the child sex trade. The study used three research methods: arrest statistics, focus groups with individuals who were prostituted as juveniles, and interviews with law enforcement officers.

The goal of the research was to gain a better understanding of the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth. Collectively, the research methods addressed the following:

- What is the incidence and prevalence of victimization?
- What are characteristics of victims?
- What are pathways to victimization?
- What are the needs of exploited youth exiting exploitative situations?
- What are the responses of law enforcement?

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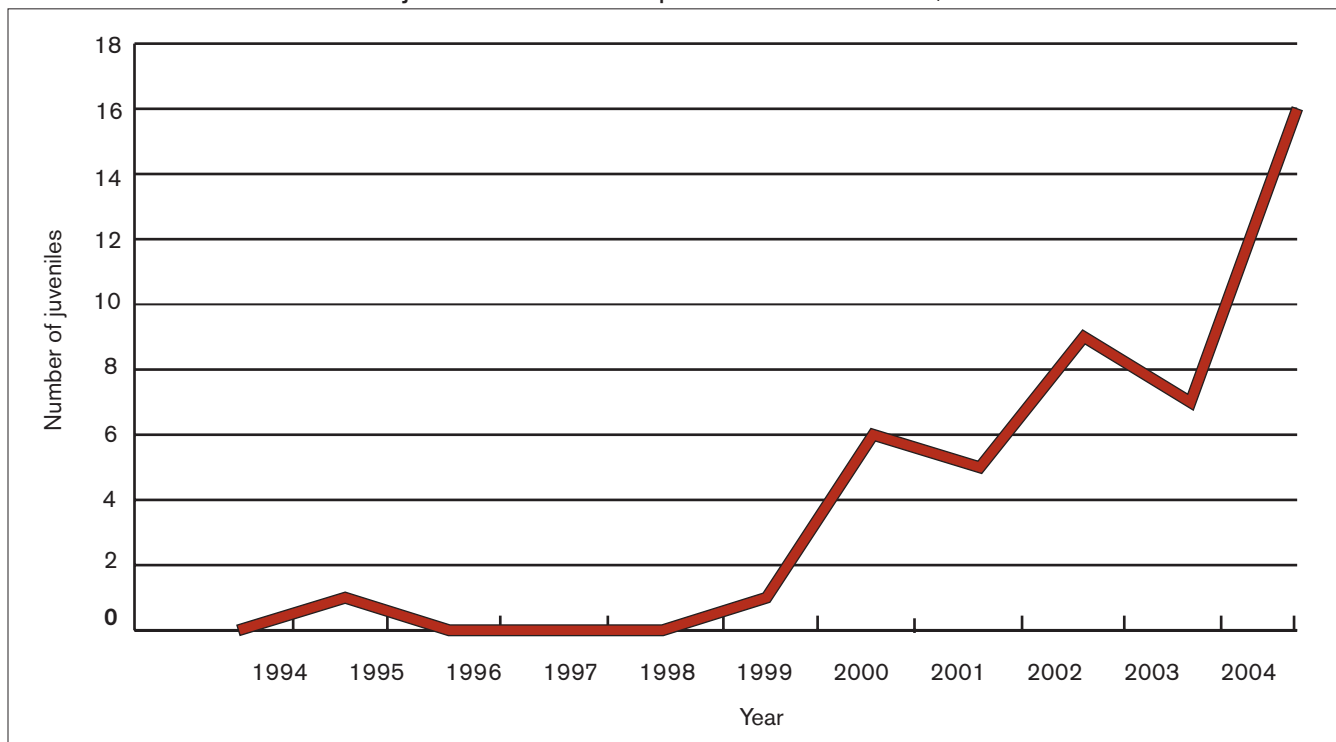
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Figure 1
Number of juvenile arrests for prostitution in Illinois, 1994-2004



Combatting commercial sexual exploitation of children

The U.S. government has become increasingly concerned about young victims who are exploited for commercial sex. According to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, the definition of sex trafficking is the recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing, or obtaining a person for the purposes of a sex act. The definition does not include the requirement that a victim has to be transported anywhere. Victims of trafficking can be born in the United States or foreign born.

Most trafficked youth engage in survival sex and are runaways who have experienced childhood abuse. Female prostitutes may be controlled, intimidated, socially isolated, and economically dependent on their pimp, who may be a boyfriend or relative, making it difficult to leave a life of prostitution. Customers and pimps threaten and physically abuse prostitutes by sexual assaulting, kidnapping, stabbing, and beating them. Victims can suffer physical health problems as well as mental health problems, such as post traumatic stress disorder, depression, and low self-esteem.

A 2001 University of Pennsylvania study estimated there are as many as 300,000 children at risk for exploi-

tation through prostitution in the United States, but there is a lack of consensus on the estimated number of prostituted youth. One study estimated that a minimum of 16,000 women and girls are regularly engaged in prostitution in the Chicago metropolitan area, but another study estimated that total at between 1,800 to 4,000. Official statistics offer much lower estimates of the problem. The Department of Justice estimates that only 1,300 juveniles were arrested for prostitution in the United States in 1995, a figure that is less than one percent of all juvenile arrests.

State government response

Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich signed the Illinois Trafficking of Persons and Involuntary Servitude Act in June 2005. The Act established penalties for the offenses of involuntary servitude, sexual servitude of a minor, and trafficking of persons for forced labor. The Illinois Department of Human Services' Rescue and Restore public awareness campaign, launched in late 2005, offers outreach services and trains law enforcement and other relevant professionals on human trafficking.

Arrest statistics

Overall in Illinois there have been few arrests related to the commercial sexual exploitation of children, but

Table 1
Total number of commercial child sexual exploitation arrests from 1994 to 2004

Offense	Number of arrests
Child pornography	258
Exploitation of a child	166
Juvenile pimping	80
Keeping a place of juvenile prostitution	3
Patronizing a juvenile prostitute	29
Soliciting for a juvenile prostitute	162
Total	698

arrest data is limited primarily because some juvenile offenses, such as misdemeanors, are not required to be reported. Under-reporting of juvenile arrests also seems to be occurring. Over a 10-year period, 1994 to 2004, only 45 arrests of juveniles for prostitution were reported (*Figure 1*).

Also during that period 162 arrests were made for soliciting a juvenile prostitute, and police arrested 258 individuals for child pornography. *Table 1* depicts the total number of adult commercial sexual exploitation of children-related arrests from calendar year 1994 to calendar year 2004.

Female focus group

Young Women’s Empowerment Project, a Chicago non-profit agency, received a sub-contract to recruit focus group participants and moderate groups for the study. One group had 19 adult female participants over 18 years of age who were involved in the sex trade industry as juveniles (under the age of 18).

The average age of entry into the sex trade for focus group participants was 12 years old. The girls indicated they became involved in prostitution for basic survival needs such as food, clothing, and shelter, or to acquire expensive material goods. They often were runaways or throwaways who left home due to family dysfunction and abuse. Some were forced to perform sex acts against their will, and some sought money and expensive clothing as a way to feel accepted, taken care of, and loved. Many participants agreed that social services were not helpful to them and sometimes made things worse.

Transgender focus group

Five transgender individuals living in Chicago participated in a focus group to discuss their experiences in the sex trade as juveniles. The participants were recruited through collaboration with the Broadway Youth Center, a division of the nonprofit Howard Brown, Inc.

Transgender refers to a range of individuals with atypical gender characteristics or identities that differ from their anatomic sex. Being transgender may make it difficult to find legitimate employment, so the sex trade is seen as an economic choice to survive and make money. The average age of entry of these participants was about 15 years old. They characterized prostitution as a “game” or “competition” and as a way to feel included as part of a family. Dangers inherent in the sex trade were exposed as participants indicated they were victims of robberies, sexual assault, and batteries. Although some services are available for the transgender population in Chicago that is involved in trading sex, more help is needed, they said, especially in employment training and assistance.

Law enforcement officer interviews

Ten federal, state, and local law enforcement officials based in the Chicago metropolitan area were interviewed for this study from the following agencies: Federal Bureau of Investigation, Office of the Illinois Attorney General, Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office, Cook County Sheriff’s Department, Chicago Police Department, and police departments in suburban Chicago. Participants were interviewed about arrests and investigations of cases regarding the commercial sexual exploitation of children, about social service agencies, and about child exploitation victims, and they were asked for recommendations to combat exploitation.

Police officers indicated they often receive tips and leads on domestic cases of commercial sexual exploitation of children from many sources, including anonymous callers, parents, other police departments, and during the course of other investigations. None of the officers had encountered an international trafficking case. They said prostituted juveniles did not aid in investigations because prostitution was their means of survival, or out of love or fear of their pimp.

Evidence collected in police investigations included computers, cell phones, cameras, video equipment, and

other electronic devices, photographs, and records, such as credit card bills and hotel reservations. Officers mentioned that pimps routinely transport victims from city to city. Victims are also moved between the neighboring states of Wisconsin and Indiana.

The Internet is often used as a tool to find clients and advertise services, such as the popular Web site Craigslist.com. Child pornographers use the Internet to exchange pictures, videos, and Web sites.

While officers work with the Department of Children and Family Services and with hospitals, there are no appropriate secure placement options for young victims who often leave non-secure facilities, such as hospitals.

Recommendations from law enforcement officers included:

- Provide more resources and training to officers.
- Recognize children are victims, not offenders of commercial sexual exploitation.
- Develop more appropriate secure placement for victims.
- Increase public awareness for parents, especially on the Internet.
- Provide harsher penalties for offenders.

Final recommendations

Based on the study's findings, researchers made the following recommendations were developed.

- 1) Develop strategies to prevent commercial sexual exploitation of children. Runaway youths, who cannot or should not be returned to their homes due to abuse or other factors, should be assisted with finding safe and long-term housing placement and with receiving job training and placement assistance. Other suggestions are making prevention videos and discussions available to schools and the public, and encouraging parents and other adults to dialogue with children on issues of sexual exploitation.
- 2) Develop programs to reduce family violence. Youth from abusive homes are at greater risk to run away and become victims of exploitation. To break the cycle of family violence, programs are needed to stop child maltreatment and prevent its recurrence, and build nurturing parent skills.
- 3) Identify and provide assistance for exploited youth. Better screening by law enforcement, hospitals, schools, and social services can help assist current victims or those at risk for victimization. Social service providers need training on how to assist and treat exploited youth, because they have unique problems and specific needs. If runaways are escaping abusive homes and turning to the street and prostitution, family reunification may not be appropriate. Assistance can include holistic family therapy, employment assistance (especially for transgender individuals), and shelter.
- 4) Train law enforcement officers. New tactics are needed to apprehend offenders and solicit victim cooperation. Officers need to work with community-based agencies that aid victims of commercial sexual exploitation, and offer exploited children the same respect and assistance given to other child crime victims. Officers need to better identify and investigate commercial sexual exploitation of children, and work with prosecutors to convict exploiters, abusers, and patrons.
- 5) Build community capacity and collaboration. Social service and harm reduction agencies, hospitals, and law enforcement need to collaborate and be aware of mutual purposes and goals. Along with communities, they need to pool resources to help prevent victimization, aid victims, and identify and investigate crimes involving the sexual exploitation of children. Community task forces should engage the public to help combat child sex trafficking. State and federal grants should support these efforts.
- 6) Keep current with trends and technology. Technology is constantly changing and youth are its primary users. Sexual predators use the Internet and online chat rooms as tools to find young victims, so police, parents, and educators must keep current on changing technology to stay one step ahead of perpetrators.
- 7) Enact legislation. Discourage prosecution of *minors* for being commercially sexually exploited and prescribe stiffer penalties for *perpetrators* of these crimes.
- 8) Conduct more research. This crime's secretive nature has so far been able to hide its extent and leave its victims uncounted. Further research is needed to quantify the commercial sexual exploitation of children, target its activities, and reduce its prevalence.