

**The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children
In the U. S., Canada and Mexico**

Abstract

(of the U.S. National Study)

Richard J. Estes

and

Neil Alan Weiner

University of Pennsylvania
School of Social Work
Center for the Study of Youth Policy
4200 Pine Street, 3rd floor
Philadelphia, PA 19104-4090
Telephone: 215-898-5531
Fax: 215-573-2099
E-Mail: restes@ssw.upenn.edu



September 18, 2001
(Amended April, 2002)

The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada and Mexico

Abstract

Introduction

The benefits of economic globalization, internationalization, and free trade have brought with them an unanticipated set of social problems. Among them is what appears to be a dramatic increase worldwide in the incidence of child sexual exploitation (hereafter “CSE”)—including the *commercial* sexual exploitation of children (hereafter “CSEC”). Child pornography, juvenile prostitution and trafficking in children for sexual purposes have emerged as significant problems on the international stage as well. So, too, has child sex tourism. The extent of these problems in the U.S., Canada and Mexico has been unknown, albeit most experts dealing with the CSEC regard the problem to a serious one in the North American region as well.

Project Goals and Objectives

The research summarized in this report represents an innovative approach to the systematic collection of *first-generation* data concerning the nature, extent and seriousness of child sexual exploitation in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. The project was organized around the following objectives: 1) identification of the nature, extent, and underlying causes of CSE and the CSEC occurring in the three countries of the North American Free Trade region (hereafter “NAFTA”)—the U.S., Canada, and Mexico; 2) identification of those subgroups of children that are at the greatest risk of being sexually exploited; 3) identification of subgroups of adult perpetrators of sex crimes against children—including pimps, traffickers, and adult “customers” of children for sex; 4) identification of the extent to which organized criminal units are involved in the CSEC; 5) identification of the modes of operation and other methods used by organized criminal units to recruit children into sexually exploitative activities; 6) identification of local, state and national laws relating to CSE and the CSEC; 7) identification of international agreements, covenants and declarations pertaining to CSE and the CSEC; 8) identification of the strengths and weakness of the country’s current capacity for preventing CSE, or at least protecting children from its commercial manifestations; and, 9) with governmental and nongovernmental leaders, frame recommendations designed to strengthen the nation’s capacity to prevent and protect the nation’s and region’s children from sexual exploitation.

Research Methods

The project used a combination of field research (e.g., interviews, focus group meetings, conferences) and statistical surveys to collect the bulk of its data. In all, some 1,000 key informants (including sexually exploited children and representatives of law enforcement and human service agencies) located in 17 cities in the U.S. were interviewed. Statistical surveys were analyzed for some 288 local, state, and Federal agencies serving sexually exploited children and their families.

Major Findings

Patterns of child sexual exploitation are fueled by: 1) the use of prostitution by runaway and throwaway children to provide for their subsistence needs; 2) the presence of pre-existing adult prostitution markets in the communities where large numbers of street youth are concentrated; 3) prior history of child sexual abuse and child sexual assault; 4) poverty; 5) the presence of large numbers of unattached and transient males in communities--including military personnel, truckers, conventioners, sex tourists, among others; 6) for some girls, membership in gangs; 7) the promotion of juvenile prostitution by parents, older siblings and boy friends; 8) the recruitment of children by organized crime units for prostitution; and, increasingly, 9) illegal trafficking of children for sexual purposes to the U.S. from developing countries located in Asia, Africa, Central and South America, and Central and Eastern Europe.

Further, the investigators confirmed that:

- 1) Between 244,000 and 325,000 American children and youth are “at risk” each year of becoming victims of sexual exploitation, including as victims of *commercial* sexual exploitation (e.g., child pornography, juvenile prostitution, and trafficking in children for sexual purposes);
- 2) as a group, sexually exploited children are quite heterogeneous and include children living in their own homes as well as children who are runaways and throwaways;
- 3) sexual exploiters consist mostly of men, but some women and juveniles (including older siblings) also sexually exploit children;
- 4) the major groups of sexual exploiters of children include: a) family members and acquaintances; b) strangers; c) pedophiles; d) transient males including military personnel, truck drivers, seasonal workers, conventioners and sex tourists, among others; e) “opportunistic” exploiters, i.e., persons who will sexually abuse whoever is available for sex including children, but who may subsequently focus on children; f) pimps; g) traffickers; and h) other juveniles;
- 5) criminal networks are actively involved in the sexual exploitation of children and profit significantly from that exploitation;
- 6) substantial numbers of foreign children are trafficked into the U.S. for sexual purposes; and
- 7) significant numbers of American youth also are trafficked for sexual purposes across the U.S. and, in some cases, to other economically advanced countries.

The report concludes with 11 recommendations that are designed to strengthen the nation’s (and region’s) capacity for protecting vulnerable youth from both CSE and the CSEC.