

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: A Fact Sheet

What is the **Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children**?

The **commercial sexual exploitation of children** is a global problem that could be happening right in your neighborhood. The commercial sex industry victimizes girls, boys, and transgendered youth.

Commercial sexual exploitation of children occurs when individuals buy, trade, or sell sexual acts with a child. **Sex trafficking** is “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purposes of a commercial sex act.”¹ Children who are involved in the commercial sex industry are viewed as victims of **severe forms of trafficking in persons**, which is sex trafficking “in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age.”² A **commercial sex act** is “any sex act on account of which anything of value is given to or received by any person.”³

How does a **child** become a **victim**?

Pimps and traffickers target vulnerable children and lure them into prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation using psychological manipulation, drugs, and/or violence. Any child may be vulnerable to such a person who promises to meet his or her emotional and physical needs. A trafficker/pimp’s main purpose is to exploit the child for monetary gain. Often traffickers/pimps will create a seemingly loving and caring relationship with their victim in order to establish trust and allegiance. This manipulative relationship tries to ensure the youth will remain loyal to the exploiter even in the face of severe victimization. These relationships may begin online before progressing to a real-life encounter.

Victims are

Targeted – Pimps are predators who seek out vulnerable victims, particularly runaways or children experiencing trouble at home. They know these children have emotional and physical needs they perceive are not being met and use this to their advantage. Pimps find victims at a variety of venues such as in social-networking websites, shopping malls, and schools; on local streets; or at bus stations. While pimps often target children outside of their family, a family member may also prostitute a child.

Tricked – Pimps are willing to invest a great deal of time and effort in their victim to break down a victim’s natural resistance and suspicion – buying them gifts, providing a place to stay, promising a loving relationship – before revealing their true intent. Frequently victims do not realize the deceptive nature of their trafficker’s interest in them, viewing their pimp as a caretaker and/or boyfriend.

Traumatized – A pimp’s use of psychological manipulation (causing the child to truly believe the pimp loves and cares for his or her well-being) coupled with physical control (threats, violence, or drug addiction) can make a victim feel trapped and powerless. This “trauma bond” is difficult to break and long-term treatment and counseling for victims is required.

Despite the seriousness of the problem, the incidence of commercial child sexual exploitation is difficult to measure. Empirical research has not conclusively defined the scope of the problem today. Below, however, are some significant findings from past studies.

Statistics

- Pimps prey on victims as young as 12 to 14 years old.⁴
- One study estimates as many as 325,000 children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico are at risk each year for becoming victims of sexual exploitation.⁵
- A history of physical and sexual abuse is often common among victims.⁶
- One study estimates 30% of shelter youth and 70% of street youth are victims of commercial sexual exploitation. They may engage or be coerced into prostitution for “survival sex” to meet daily needs for food, shelter, or drugs.⁷

¹Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 [United States of America]. Public Law 106-386 [H.R. 3244]. 28 October 2000. Section 103(9).

²Ibid., Section 103(8).

³Ibid., Section 103(3).

⁴National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: America’s Prostituted Children. Washington, D.C.: Shared Hope International, 2009, page 30.

⁵R. Estes and N. Weiner. *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico*. University of Pennsylvania, 2001, page 144.

⁶National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking, op. cit., n. 4., page 31.

⁷Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, op. cit., n. 4, page 131. See also J. Greene, S. Ennett, and C. Ringwalt. (1999) “Prevalence and correlates of survival sex among runaway and homeless youth.” *American Journal of Public Health*. 89(9) page 1406.

Barriers for victims

- **Psychology of Victimization** – Pimps may use force, fraud, or coercion to virtually enslave their victims. Juvenile victims have been controlled by threats of violence to their family; pornographic images taken and used for blackmail or stigmatization; physical, verbal, and sexual abuse. Child victims may be gang-raped to desensitize them to sexual activity prior to victimizing them in prostitution. Victims are taught to not trust law enforcement and may have experienced negative encounters with law-enforcement officers. Victims often remain with pimps out of fear of being physically harmed, having another victim endure physical harm, or a threat to their family members. Pimps have been convicted of plotting to murder cooperative victim witnesses and for the homicide of victims, further instilling fear.
- **“Trauma Bonding”** – This is also common among child victims exploited for commercial sex. The child experiences a strong link to the pimp/exploiter based in what the child perceives as an incredibly intense or important relationship, but one in which there has been an exploitation of trust or power. Emotional bonding is a learned tactic for survival and can be common between exploited children and the exploiter. Advocacy groups working directly with this population note reframing the trauma bond with a pimp/exploiter can take months of therapy and/or residential treatment for the child. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is very common among children exposed to sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation and may be characterized by such symptoms as anxiety, depression, insomnia, irritability, flashbacks, emotional numbing, and hyper-alertness.⁶ Victims of commercial child sexual exploitation often have unique needs given the frequent nature of multiple acts of sexual exploitation or violence, by multiple offenders, over potentially a sustained period of time.

More Statistics

- Sex trafficking need not involve actual movement of the victim.⁷
- Pimps may earn hundreds of thousands of dollars every year from selling minors.⁸
- 75% of child victims engaged in prostitution are under the control of a pimp.⁹

What are potential indicators of trafficking and exploitation?

- History of emotional, sexual, or other physical abuse
- Signs of current physical abuse and/or sexually transmitted diseases
- History of running away or current status as a runaway
- Inexplicable appearance of expensive gifts, clothing, or other costly items
- Presence of an older boy-/girlfriend
- Drug addiction
- Withdrawal or lack of interest in previous activities
- Gang involvement

⁶M. Farley. “Bad for the Body, Bad for the Heart: Prostitution Harms Women Even if Legalized or Decriminalized.” *Violence Against Women*. 2004(10), page 1104.

⁷Fact Sheet: *Distinctions Between Human Smuggling and Human Trafficking*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of State, Human Smuggling and Trafficking Center. January 2005, page 4.

⁸D. Hughes. *The Demand for Victims of Sex Trafficking*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State. 2005, page 20. Hughes notes the Polaris Project, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization working with victims of human trafficking conducted an informal analysis in 2005 of a pimp’s wages, based on client’s direct accounts. One teenage girl was forced to meet quotas of \$500 a night, seven days a week and gave the money to her trafficker each night. This particular pimp controlled three other women. Based on these numbers, Polaris Project estimates the pimp made \$632,000 in one year from four young women and girls.

⁹*Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico*, op. cit., n. 5, page 60.

If you suspect a case of commercial child sexual exploitation or sex trafficking of children, contact the **National Center for Missing & Exploited Children®** at **1-800-843-5678** or visit **www.cybertipline.com**

or

the **National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC)** at **1-888-373-7888**.

For additional information and resources about Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Human Trafficking, please visit the **Innocence Lost National Initiative** at **http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/vc_majorthefts/cac/innocencelost**

- UNDERSTANDING AND TREATING TRAUMA BONDS

Abuse and Trauma Bonding

Domestic violence and sexual abuse transcend cultural, socioeconomic, and age distinctions. The World Report on Violence against Children published by the United Nations in 2006 confirms this fact. It is a global problem of enormous proportions from which no country is immune. Progress has been made in efforts to understand these things better and develop effective ways to treat their victims and to break the cycle from one generation to the next.

The Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) Study confirmed earlier research showing a highly significant relationship between adverse childhood experiences and depression, suicide attempts, domestic violence, cigarette smoking, obesity and sexually transmitted diseases. In addition, the more adverse the childhood experiences, the more likely a person was to develop heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, fractures and liver disease.

A unique difficulty in the identification and treatment of domestic violence and sexual abuse victims arises from the victim's attachment to the abuser. For many years the observation has been made that many women who were beaten would return to their abusive spouses. They would often drop charges against their spouses once the crisis was over [Dutton & Painter, 1981]. Children who had been sexually abused by a parent would come forward reluctantly, and then were unwilling to discuss the details of the abuse because of strong emotional ties held with the abuser [deYoung & Lowry, 1992]. Women and children who demonstrated the above behaviors were viewed as having pathology that somehow created the abuse they were receiving. Women in abusive relationships were believed to be masochistic and children who had been sexually abused were viewed as somehow enticing the parent to commit the sexual abuse [Dutton & Painter, 1993; deYoung & Lowry, 1992, Graham, et al, 1988].

In recent years, however, a different observation and perspective has been offered. First, post-traumatic stress disorder has been more fully recognized and defined and victims of abuse frequently met the criteria for PTSD and complex PTSD [Herman, 1997]. Compelling information is now appearing in the literature that describes the effects of trauma on our brain chemistry. This information gives further insight as to the behavior of many abuse victims towards their perpetrators. This information will be summarized later in this article.

As far as abuse in of itself creating a bond with a perpetrator, Carnes, 1997, wrote: "Logic would say that using fear and threat is not a good way to gain cooperation and loyalty. The irony is that in a perverse way it is. Fear immobilizes and deepens attachment." In addition to these recognitions and new perspectives, the important concept of "Trauma bonding" has been identified and defined.

One comprehensive description of the mechanisms of trauma and how they relate to Trauma bonding is contained in van der Kolk's article, *The Compulsion to Repeat the Trauma*, 1989. In this article he explains "...how the trauma is repeated on behavioral, emotional, physiologic, and endocrinologic levels, whose confluence explains the diversity of repetition phenomena." [p. 389]

In 1992, de Young and Lowry defined traumatic bonding as: "the evolution of emotional dependency between two persons of unequal power, adult and a child, within a relationship characterized by periodic sexual abuse. Feelings of intense attachment, cognitive distortions, and behavioral strategies of both individuals distinguish the nature of this bond that paradoxically strengthen and maintain the bond." [p. 167]

With regards to children, James [1994] makes the distinction between attachment and traumata bonds: "An evaluator may confuse attachment and trauma-bond relationships. There is a tendency to see attachment and trauma-bonding as extremes of an attachment continuum rather than as the two distinct processes they really are, each with its own specific etiology and outcomes."

Trauma bonding is far more complex and severe for children, given their factual dependency on the person with whom they share a trauma bond. That coupled with their lack of cognitive abilities, depending on their developmental stages, results in far more damage being done through a traumatic bond [Carnes, 1997]. This subject requires extensive study, as the literature is sparse in this area.

Dutton and Painter [1993] define Trauma bonding as the situation in which "... powerful emotional attachments are seen to develop from two specific features of abusive relationships: power imbalances and intermittent good-bad treatment." [p. 105]

While this article will continue to utilize the phrase "power imbalance", it might be said that the problem in a family abuse situation isn't about power and control so much as it is about oppression and control. Power in and of itself is not a negative quality. The word comes from the Latin posse, which means, "to be able" [World Book Dictionary, 1977; p. 1633]. From observation, truly powerful people are indeed able and secure and generally empower others. Those who abuse power more than likely do so as a result of a reaction formation to their own basic insecurity and inadequacy which is reinforced by social permission for violence. Oppression would be a better term to utilize in these cases as its definition includes "cruel or unjust treatment" which more aptly describes violent relationships [World Book Dictionary, 1977; p. 1459].

While the basic power differential can be seen as the physical strength that the abuser holds over the victim, this differential can also manifest in financial matters, as in many cases the abuser is in control of the finances. Emotional abuse can also contribute to a power differential, as the abuser can convince the victim that she is useless, no good, and can't live without him.

Under the heading of a power differential is the situation wherein the abused person experiences social isolation. Allen, [1993], observes that "the continually overpowered person feels increasingly incompetent and helpless, ever more reliant on the person with power. Moreover, the abused individual is held captive, secluded from other potential sources of support." [p. 4].

The power imbalance can reverse at times when the abused person tries to leave the relationship. The roles can reverse and the abuser loses power. One possible explanation of this phenomenon is the concept of "identification with the aggressor," wherein the victim now assumes the role of the abuser [Freud, 1937]. While Graham, et al., 1988, views this identification as a defense mechanism wherein "...the victim incorporates the world view of the aggressor", it is suggested here that this reversal of the power structure is part of what keeps victims hooked into the relationship. In domestic violence, this reversal is seen when the abused threatens to leave and the abuser implores the victim to stay. Blizard and Blume [1994] see identification with the aggressor in abuse victims as "...a defense used to preserve the self by taking the power of the abuser at a time when the victim is totally powerless." [p. 387]

Understanding that victims can identify with their aggressor also offers another possible reason as to why victims are often so resistive to those who try to help them. However, it is noteworthy that not all victims identify with the aggressor, and many times the apparent power of the victim is only a passing phase in the cycle of violence.

Another important aspect needed for a traumatic bond to form is intermittent good-bad treatment. Intermittent reinforcement forms one of the strongest behavioral patterns. And so it is with abusive relationships - abuse or good times occur intermittently. In either event, a strong attachment to the cycle of behavior can form.

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