

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Girls in the United States

Megan McNaul

Elizabethtown College

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“The second they posted me the phone would not stop vibrating,” Natalie recalled, “at least forty guys called in the first fifteen minutes” (Green, 2010, ¶ 4). Natalie is a pseudonym for a 16-year-old girl who Seattle police took into custody for prostitution. Although Natalie and her family are now receiving counseling, she believes that she will never completely recover from the traumas she experienced as a child who was prostituted.

Natalie’s story illustrates a seemingly hidden but very real problem in the United States: the commercial sexual exploitation of children. Despite the misconception that sex trafficking is an international problem that does not occur in the United States, American girls are at risk of being recruited into a life of prostitution. Although boys are prostituted, this paper focuses on the exploitation of girls because there is very little research about male victims of commercial sexual exploitation. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) defines severe forms of trafficking as inducing an adult to commit a sexual act by the use of “force, fraud, or coercion,” or the “recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining” of a person to use them for sexual acts (Kotrola, 2010; Rand, 2009). However, this force, fraud, or coercion standard does not apply to children. According to the TVPA, any child who is exploited for sexual acts is a victim of trafficking. American girls are being sold for sex; therefore, federal and state governments are modifying laws while working with NGOs to provide victims with services and promote awareness about the horrors of commercial sexual exploitation.

Commercial sexual exploitation is an extremely disturbing form of violence against girls because not only are these girls victims of sexual abuse, they are also exploited for economic gain. A variety of crimes fall under the umbrella of commercial sexual exploitation of girls

including juvenile prostitution, sale and production of child pornography, participation of youth in strip clubs, the mail order-bride trade, and early forced marriages (Mitchell, Jones, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2011). It violates Article 34 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children have the right to be protected from all forms of sexual exploitation, including abuse, pornography, and child prostitution. Although the CRC addresses child sexual exploitation, at the time of ratification the United Nations did not realize the severity of this problem. Therefore, the UN added the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography to the CRC in 2002. The United States has yet to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child, but it did ratify the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography in 2002.

The use of the internet by sex traffickers is changing the way law enforcement officials have traditionally viewed commercial sexual exploitation of children. Pimps use the internet to attract both clients and victims. In the United States, there are two main categories of internet-facilitated commercial sexual exploitation of children (IF-CSEC): purchasing or engaging in sex with a victim and/or purchase of child pornography that offenders possess but did not produce (Mitchell et al., 2011). In Natalie's case, clients who attempted to purchase her services online engaged in the first type of IF-CSEC because they were purchasing sex with a minor. As Natalie stated in an interview referring to her pimp, "Everything he ever did was on the internet. It was all Backpage. I think he was scared to have me walk the 'track,'" (Green, 2011, ¶ 17).

Traffickers who operate like Natalie's pimp are more difficult for law enforcement to catch because the internet offers them a place to hide when selling sexual services by a minor.

A history of sexual abuse is the predominant risk factor for girls to become victims of commercial sexual exploitation. Not only does abuse cause emotional and psychological

disorders, but it also teaches children lessons, like a girl's body is only valuable for sex (Rand, 2009). In addition, children who are abused may develop the belief that they do not have the ability to protect themselves, so they easily fall prey to recruiters in the streets. Children who are abused often develop psychological disorders, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which can prevent them from developing normal self-protective reactions (Reid, 2010).

Abuse is not the only factor that puts American children at risk for being sex-trafficked. Runaway children who try to escape abuse are especially vulnerable because they may experience the aforementioned psychological disorders, and they do not have a safe place to call home (Kotrola, 2010; Rand, 2009). Poverty also increases the risk of falling prey to traffickers because impoverished girls face desperate circumstances. These girls may see prostitution as their only option for survival. Also, girls who experience family neglect have a higher risk of turning to a pimp for "love" and "care." Lack of education or poor performance in school can also cause children to turn to the streets in hope of a better life (Rand, 2009).

Although there are various risk factors, age is not one of them. While the average age girls enter into prostitution is between 12 and 14, pimps recruit children of all ages (Reid, 2010). Some studies even show 10 and 11 year-old girls are being recruited into prostitution because demand for younger children is increasing in the United States. Clients want young "virgins" out of fear of contracting a sexually transmitted disease (Reid, 2010).

Traffickers recognize these vulnerabilities and lure girls into a life of prostitution so they can make profit. Demand for sex services allows the industry of child sex trafficking to flourish (Kotrola, 2010). While clients are driven by sexual desires, traffickers are driven by greed. Recent estimates show that the sex trafficking industry is currently worth 32 billion dollars

annually (Kotrola, 2010). It is estimated that pimps control 50 to 90 percent of child prostitutes, and they are certainly out to make a profit (Reid, 2010).

Children who fall prey to these pimps face horrendous living and working conditions. Sexual and physical abuse is a common reality for all children who are prostituted, whether it is at the hand of customers or the pimps (Rand, 2009). Because social media reflects pimping and prostitution as acceptable or even “cool,” many Americans do not realize the degradation, physical abuse, and humiliation children who are prostituted suffer (Kotrola, 2010). Children who were lured into prostitution are at risk of being kidnapped, tortured, sodomized, beaten, raped, and addicted to drugs. In addition, they may face unwanted pregnancies, malnutrition, and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV-AIDS (Sager, 2012).

The aforementioned traumas often leave these children emotionally and psychologically scarred. Many children who are sold as prostitutes suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder after suffering repeated abuse. This can cause nightmares, flashbacks, and even disassociation during intercourse (Reid, 2010). In addition to PTSD, many victims of commercial sexual exploitation develop Stockholm syndrome, a severe love addiction to their pimp. Stockholm syndrome is similar to battered-wife syndrome because even in the face of rescue, many victims remain loyal to their pimp (Rand, 2009).

Children whose minds and perceptions of reality are warped by pimps and traffickers need a variety of services to recover from the physical, psychological, and emotional traumas of commercial sexual exploitation. However, it is extremely difficult for them to receive these services due to insufficient state laws, poorly trained law enforcement officials, and lack of coordination between government agencies (Rand, 2009; Sager 2012).

Although the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) equates children involved in prostitution to trafficking victims, many state laws still allow law enforcement to charge minors with prostitution (Sager, 2012). In many states persons under the age of 18 cannot even legally consent to sex, yet they can be charged with selling their body (Rand, 2009). The federal government can make federal statutes and recommendations, but in many cases states governments must prosecute traffickers. In cases where traffickers do not use technology or cross state borders, it is the states' responsibility to prosecute traffickers, not the federal government (Halter, 2012).

It is often police who rescue trafficking victims who determine whether the child is a victim or a criminal to be charged with prostitution. A study using case files of 126 youth involved in prostitution from six major U.S. cities, found that police viewed 40 percent of the of the children as offenders and 60 percent as victims. If children are defiant and disrespectful to law enforcement, they are more likely to be sanctioned by police. Children with criminal records were also likely to be prosecuted (Halter, 2012), and African American girls are disproportionately arrested for prostitution (Rand, 2009). Because of these inconsistencies, many state governments are changing their laws to protect victims and crack down on clients and traffickers.

In 2008, New York became one of the first states to develop safe harbor laws to help victims of child sex trafficking. Safe harbor laws are policies that ensure that children involved in prostitution are treated as victims and prohibit law enforcement officials from charging minors with prostitution. The Safe Harbor for Exploited Youth Act provides counseling and treatment services to child victims of sex trafficking as long as they agree to help aid law enforcement in the prosecution of their pimp (Confessore, 2008; Rand, 2009). Massachusetts recently passed the

Safe Harbor for Exploited Children Act. This act modifies the original law that allowed children who were prostituted to be arrested and charged with prostitution. It requires that minors who are victims of sex trafficking and prostitution be treated as victims. It also provides access to services, like medical care and counseling. In order to help victims receive these services, this law requires a team of professions be appointed to each case of child sexual exploitation (“An act relative,” 2011).

While these laws provide an excellent start to preventing commercial sexual exploitation and identifying children working as prostitutes as victims, governments and NGO’s must work together to provide victims the services they need to recover from the traumas they experienced. The Teen Prostitution Prevention Project (TPPP) is an excellent example. The TPPP uses a multi-disciplinary approach to connect over 40 different agencies to provide victims with services and promote community awareness. This project works with social service providers, doctors and health clinics, victim witness advocates, probation departments, and community health and wellness centers (Rand, 2009).

It is important to understand that victims of commercial exploitation need a wide variety of services to recover. First, victims need a safe and secure shelter, whether it is permanent or temporary until they can contact family members. Girls who return home or are placed in non-secure shelters are at risk of running away and coming in contact with the trafficker (Kotrola, 2010). These shelters must meet the psychological, emotional, and physical needs of the victims while keeping them off the streets (Reid, 2010).

Although victims may need long-term counseling even after leaving their protective shelter to ensure good mental health, they need immediate medical attention. These shelters must be prepared to provide medical assistance to girls suffering from STDs, drug addiction, and self-

destructive behaviors (Rand, 2009; Reid 2010). Because many of these physical ailments can be life-threatening, children who have been rescued from prostitution must receive medical care as soon as possible.

In addition to poor physical health, victims of commercial sexual exploitation need services to help improve their mental health. Many victims struggle with Stockholm syndrome, PTSD, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. For this reason, victims may need a comprehensive array of counseling services to regain self confidence, self respect and the ability to trust others (Rand, 2009).

While providing services is critical, state governments are working to prevent commercial sexual exploitation from ever occurring. The Polaris Project is helping to end human trafficking by tracking progress of state anti-trafficking laws. It began in 2007 when only 28 states had laws to punish trafficking as a criminal offense. Now 49 states have laws making sex trafficking a criminal offense. The website for the Polaris Project posts the ratings of each state so Americans can tell which states are leading the way in preventing and combating human trafficking (Polaris Project, 2012)

The media also plays a huge role in promoting awareness of sexual exploitation. Instead of glamorizing “pimps” and “hos,” some media outlets are preventing trafficking by focusing on victims and their suffering. When the media educates the public about the dangers of trafficking, it often deters customers and increases reports of sex trafficking (Reid, 2010). MTV Exit (End Exploitation and Trafficking) is an organization that uses the media to promote trafficking awareness through benefit concerts, music videos, and other events. This organization works with famous artists, including Jason Mraz, the Killers, Simple Plan, and many more to draw attention to the horrors women and girls suffer as victims of human trafficking. For example,

Jason Mraz recently visited a shelter for women who have survived human trafficking in the Philippines and performed a benefit concert to help raise money for victims while spreading awareness. Popular artists are speaking out against trafficking, and it is beginning to change society's view of victims as "hos" and traffickers as "pimps" (MTV Exit, 2012).

In addition to educating the public, it is extremely important to educate the girls at risk of becoming victims of commercial sexual exploitation. Although schools are beginning to teach young students about the dangers of cybercrime and sexual abuse, there are very few programs that focus on the dangers of recruitment into prostitution (Reid, 2010). While these programs should not scare the child, a child is less likely to become a victim of sex trafficking if they are aware of the ways that pimps lie and deceive before forcing girls to sell their bodies. Also, organizations can reach out to girls in places where they are most at risk. For example, if prevention programs advertise safe shelters for runaway girls at a bus stop, it may prevent runaway girls from falling prey to a trafficker (Reid, 2010). Because most victims are lured, not abducted, educating potential victims of the signs and risk factors of sex trafficking can save girls from experiencing commercial sexual exploitation (Sager, 2012).

Although commercial sexual exploitation of girls in the United States is a relatively hidden issue, government agencies and nonprofit organizations are starting to take action to help victims and promote awareness. Girls like Natalie are suffering every day at the hands of vicious pimps and clients, yet there is hope for them. Although the media still tends to glamorize prostitution, it is beginning to display sex trafficking and the dangers involved in a negative light. Society's attitude and awareness regarding commercial exploitation is changing, and with more policy reform and services to promote awareness, Americans can keep their girls safe from a gruesome life working as a prostitute.

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