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## Boys in the Basement: Male Victims of Commercial Sexual Exploitation

by Taya Moxley-Goldsmith<sup>1</sup>

*"The male sex trade is the basement of this underground business. There are lots of boys out there [working in the sex trade], but we don't know that much about them... They are abused and exploited."*

— Susan Breault, former assistant director of the Paul and Lisa Program

**B**oys in the underground business of child sexual exploitation<sup>2</sup> are caught in a cycle of homelessness, violence, and fear. These boys are part of a broad and deep network of commercially sexually exploited (CSE)<sup>3</sup> children who do not go to baseball practice, try out for the debate team or worry about what to wear. Instead, they worry about surviving each night on the streets, negotiating a harsh set of street rules for food and shelter, often exchanging sex for those basic necessities.

### How many children are trapped underground?

ECPAT-USA (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes-USA), an international advocacy agency seeking to protect children from exploitation, estimates the number of commercially sexually exploited children in the U.S. to be from 100,000–300,000.<sup>4</sup> The true number of children involved in CSE is widely under-reported and therefore, largely unknown.<sup>5</sup> Of the untold numbers of children involved in CSE, how many are boys?

Adolescent males comprise a significant segment of the population at risk for involvement in CSE. Estes and Weiner, principal investigators of a large study in 2001, report that the numbers of victimized boys and girls involved in CSE are about the same.<sup>6</sup> Their assertion is supported with the following facts: (1) in 1999, over a million and a half youth had a runaway or throwaway episode;<sup>7</sup> (2) this population is reported to be at the highest risk for involvement in CSE;<sup>8</sup> and (3) half of these at-risk youth are boys.<sup>9</sup>

Identifying girls within this clandestine world can be a challenge; recognizing and addressing the needs of their often-invisible male counterparts is even more formidable. To develop appropriate community and institutional responses, professionals must first learn to identify these children, both those at-risk and those currently being exploited.

### What are the risk factors?

- **Leaving Home.** This is the primary marker of children, male or female, at risk of being sexually exploited. Therefore, it is important to recognize the factors that lead children to leave their homes. Many are abused, which leads them to run away or be thrown out of their homes. Several other significant factors in runaway/throwaway episodes include whether the child is substance-dependant, if the child is 13 years old or younger, whether he is in the company of someone known to abuse drugs, or if the child is using severe narcotics himself.<sup>10</sup>
- **Sexual Orientation.** The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that 26% of gay and lesbian youth are *forced* to leave home because of

conflicts over their sexual orientation.<sup>11</sup> The Seattle Commission on Children and Youth found that 40% of homeless youth identified as gay, lesbian, or bi-sexual.<sup>12</sup> Once homeless, gay youth are at a higher risk for sexual abuse, substance abuse, and mental health problems than their heterosexual peers.<sup>13</sup> These risk factors contribute to their vulnerability to CSE victimization. In fact, a disproportionate number of boys involved in CSE (25–35%) self-identify as gay, bisexual, or transgender/transsexual.<sup>14</sup>

- **Peer Introduction.** Although peer introduction is common for both males and females, it is especially so for males who by and large operate without a pimp.<sup>15</sup> "A typical peer introduction occurs when a boy complains that he needs money and an older friend suggests that the youth can make quick money by prostitution."<sup>16</sup> These peers haunt bus stations, malls, homeless shelters, or any place where they might find other vulnerable youth in need of shelter and money. The necessity to survive on the street is a strong motivating factor leading to a boy's involvement in CSE.
- **The Role of Adults.** Even though his peers are important to a boy on the street, the role of adults in CSE cannot be understated. As observed by Estes and Weiner:

Children do not just "wander" into prostitution or pornography. Rather, the process is a complex one and *invariably requires the involvement of adults* [emphasis added]—as initiators of sex with children, as recruiters into pornography, and prostitution and in time, as pimps, traffickers and sexual "customers."<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, a significant number of boys are lured into CSE after having been initially solicited by customers,<sup>18</sup> the majority of whom are adult men.<sup>19</sup> Vulnerable boys who are substance-dependant, homeless, or victims of abuse make obvious targets for these adults who prey on children. Thus, home life, peer interactions, sexual identity development, and abuse allegations can be crucial markers for identifying how a child becomes susceptible to sexual solicitation. Other markers also differentiate a boy's experience in CSE from a girl's experience.

### The Professional Response to Male Victims

Estes and Weiner report that once youth are recruited into commercial sexual exploitation, girls and boys go through a process of acculturation. Nearly all girls involved in CSE have been approached by a pimp (male or female) who promises material and emotional support in exchange for prostituting the girls.<sup>20</sup> Boys, on the other hand, often build on the peer relationships that ushered them into the system.

This tendency for boys to rely on peers rather than on pimps or parent-equivalent adults can be problematic in viewing sexually-solicited boys as victims of CSE: "[P]resumably, when juveniles are pimped by adults they will tend to be seen as victims, and when they take a more active role in soliciting sexual activities, they will tend to be seen as offenders."<sup>21</sup> In fact, in an effort to exert some sense of con-

trol, boys often re-cast themselves as hustlers or escorts, entrepreneurs of sorts.<sup>22</sup> Child abuse professionals should recognize this posture as symptomatic of the societal pressure on male children to be masters of their own destinies instead of victims. Prosecutors must help juries to understand these dynamics and recognize these boys as the victims they are.

Research suggests there is appreciable difference in how child abuse professionals are seeing and responding to male and female CSE victims. Consider the following differences reported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP):

- Police report more contacts with sexually-solicited juvenile males than with their female counterparts, due in part, perhaps, to the fact that the males tend to be older than their female counterparts, and more likely to operate outdoors.
- Police are less likely to arrest sexually-solicited juveniles than adult prostitutes, but are more likely to arrest male juveniles than female juveniles and more likely to refer female juveniles to other authorities, such as social service agencies.
- Police are more likely to categorize juveniles involved in prostitution as offenders rather than as crime victims, but those categorized as victims are more likely to be female and young.<sup>23</sup>

Juvenile arrest rates from 2002 also reflect this differential treatment. Of the 1,500 juveniles arrested for “prostitution and commercialized vice,” 67% were girls. An additional 19,400 youth were arrested for “other types of sex crimes” (which excluded prostitution and forcible rape); the vast majority of these arrests (91%) were boys.<sup>24</sup> Seventy-seven percent of youth arrested for vagrancy and 69% of youth arrested for curfew and loitering violations were boys. These statistics suggest that law enforcement sees at-risk boys or boys involved in CSE, but perhaps not in the context expected. These boys are entering the system for reasons other than prostitution. For this reason, youth who are cited or arrested for loitering, pan-handling, being in a park after hours, curfew violations, indecent exposure or other non-rape sex crimes should be recognized as potential targets for CSE. By identifying these boys as they come into the system, child protection professionals can begin to change the culture that treats them as offenders instead of victims in need of services.

## Conclusion

Identifying these desperate children allows us to address their needs more appropriately. If we continue to look for the same markers for sexually exploited children irrespective of gender, we will miss a large portion of the at-risk population. We can identify these boys by ascertaining (1) whether they are in the home, and if not where they are living; (2) how they are providing for their basic needs; and (3) whether they are chemically dependent, and how they are managing that dependence. It is critical to ask them about sexual-solicitation even if they are not entering the system for that reason. As so many have observed, these boys are victims of abuse and exploitation. By identifying them, child abuse professionals take the first step in bringing these hidden victims out of the basement and into the light.

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<sup>2</sup> While Commercial Sexual Exploitation includes child pornography, child prostitution, child sexual trafficking and tourism, among other things, this article will focus specifically on boys victimized by sexual solicitation and prostitution.

<sup>3</sup> Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) is defined as: “The sexual exploitation of children (SEC) entirely, or at least primarily, for financial or other economic reasons. The economic exchange involved may be either *monetary* or *non-monetary* (i.e., for food, shelter, drugs) but, in every case, involves maximum benefits to the exploiter and an abrogation of the basic rights, dignity, autonomy, physical and mental well-being of the children involved.” Richard J. Estes and Mark Alan Weiner, *The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Mexico, and Canada* (last updated on Feb. 20, 2002.) at [http://caster.ssw.upenn.edu/~restes/CSEC\\_Files/Complete\\_CSEC\\_020220.pdf](http://caster.ssw.upenn.edu/~restes/CSEC_Files/Complete_CSEC_020220.pdf) (hereinafter Estes/Weiner study.)

<sup>4</sup> End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography, and the Trafficking of Children for Sexual Exploitation (ECPAT) *Europe and North America Regional Profile* (issued by the World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, held in Stockholm, Sweden, August 1996) at 70.

<sup>5</sup> “Reliable estimates of the number of commercially exploited children in the United States do not exist. This is due to: 1) the highly secretive and illegal nature of the CSEC; 2) gross under-reporting of known cases of the CSEC by law enforcement and human service authorities; 3) the absence of national or local registries of confirmed cases of CSEC; 4) the absence of national and local prevalence studies of the CSEC; and 5) widespread disbelief concerning the nature, extent and severity of CSEC within the United States.” Estes/Weiner study *supra* note 3.

<sup>6</sup> They report, “despite these juvenile arrest rates, we knew from our beginning interviews with street youth that: 1) the majority of these youth engaged (ranging from 40%-70%), at least occasionally in prostitution to meet their basic needs; and 2) the population of street youth engaging in prostitution was almost equally divided between boys and girls.” *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> A *runaway* child is a child who leaves home without permission and stays away overnight; a child who is 14 years old or younger (or older and mentally incompetent) who is away from home and chooses not to come home when expected to and stays away overnight; or a child who is 15 years old or older who, is away from home, and stays away for two nights. A *thrown-away* child is a child who is asked or told to leave home by a parent or other household adult, no adequate alternative care is arranged for the child by a household adult, and the child is out of the household overnight; a child who is away from home and is prevented from returning home by a parent or other household adult, no adequate alternative care is arranged for the child by a household adult, and the child is out of the household overnight. Heather Hammer, David Finkelhor, and Andrea J. Sedlak, *Runaway/Thrown-away Children: National Estimates and Characteristic*, NISMART (OJJDP), Oct., 2002. (hereinafter, NISMART-2).

<sup>8</sup> Estes/Weiner study, *supra* note 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> NISMART-2 *supra* note 7.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Report of the Secretary’s Task Force on Youth Suicide: Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide* (1989). See also, R. Garafalo, R. Wolf, S. Kessel, J. Palfrey, R. DuRant, *The Association Between Health Risk Behaviors and Sexual Orientation Among a School-based Sample of Adolescents*, 101 (5) PEDIATRICS 895-902 (1998); G. Kruks, *Gay and Lesbian Homeless/Street Youth: Special Issues and Concerns*, 12 JOURNAL OF ADOLESCENT HEALTH 515-518 (1991).

<sup>12</sup> Seattle Commission on Children and Youth, “Survey of Street Youth.” Seattle, WA: Orion Center (1986).

<sup>13</sup> “Street Life Ups Drug, Sex Abuse for Gay Youth,” from Routers.com, May 13, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Estes/Weiner study *supra* note 3.

<sup>15</sup> D. Kelly Weisberg, CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT, 155 (1984) (Many of the studies cited by Weisberg are from the late 1970’s and 1980’s and should not be taken as representative of all communities.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> Estes/Weiner study *supra* note 3.

<sup>18</sup> “James found that 40.4% of young men were first asked to prostitute by customers and that this method is especially common for male prostitutes who identify as heterosexual. Whereas most homosexual prostitutes learn about it from their peers or other prostitutes, most heteros learn about it from customers.” WEISBERG *supra* note 15 at 156.

<sup>19</sup> Estes/Weiner study *supra* note 3.

<sup>20</sup> WEISBERG *supra* note 15.

<sup>21</sup> David Finkelhor & Richard Ormrod, *Prostitution of Juveniles: Patterns from NIBRS*, OJJDP, JUVENILE JUSTICE BULLETIN (June 2004) at 4. “But some of the categorizations may reflect arbitrary features such as the demeanor of the juveniles, the sympathy that police officers may have for them, or the policies of the jurisdiction in which the incident occurred.”

<sup>22</sup> Estes/Weiner study *supra* note 3.

<sup>23</sup> Finkelhor and Ormrod, *Prostitution supra note 21*, at 1-2. The authors give this caveat, however, “patterns from the analysis of the NIBRS data in the Bulletin should be regarded with caution. They are based on a small number of cases from an unrepresentative sample of jurisdictions.” *Id.* at 4.

<sup>24</sup> Howard N. Snyder, *Juvenile Arrests 2002*, OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin (Sept. 2004) at 3.

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