Boys in the Basement: Male Victims of Commercial Sexual Exploitation

by Taya Morley-Goldsmith

“The male sex trade is the basement of this underground business. There are lots of boys out there [working in the sex trade], but their story is much shorter. They are abused and exploited.”
— Susan Breault, former assistant director of the Paul and Liza Program

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The true number of children involved in CSE is widely under-reported and therefore, largely unknown. 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.7 Their assertion is supported by the following facts: (1) in 1999, over a million and a half youth had a history of sexual abuse and prostitution; (2) half of these at-risk youth are boys.4 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.11 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 contribute to the vulnerability to CSE. These factors are (1) 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; (2) the majority of whom are adult men.

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 young men are recruited into commercial sexual exploitation, boys and girls go through a process of acculturation. Nearly all girls involved in CSE have been approached by a pimp who promises material and emotional support in exchange for prostituting the girls.13 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 other parent-equivalent adults can be problematic in viewing sexually-solicited boys as victims of CSE.14

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SAFETY NET: MULTI-DISCIPLINARY INVESTIGATION AND PROSECUTION OF COMPUTER-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

BURLINGTON, VERMONT

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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 100,000–300,000.5 The true number of children involved in CSE is widely under-reported and therefore, largely unknown. 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.7 Their assertion is supported by the following facts: (1) in 1999, over a million and a half youth had a history of sexual abuse and prostitution; (2) half of these at-risk youth are boys.4 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.11 To develop appropriate community and institutional responses, professionals must first learn to identify these children, both those at-risk and those currently being exploited.

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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 contribute to the vulnerability to CSE. These factors are (1) 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; (2) the majority of whom are adult men. 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.

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Estes and Weiner report that once young men are recruited into commercial sexual exploitation, boys and girls 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.13 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 other parent-equivalent adults can be problematic in viewing sexually-solicited boys as victims of CSE.14

“I’m going to say it like it is. You are so for males who by and large operate without a pimp.15 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.16 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—not only as initiators of sex with children, as recruiters into pornography, and traffickers and pimps, and when they take a more active role in soliciting sexual activities, they will tend to be seen as offenders.”17

Indeed, a significant number of boys are lured into CSE, many of whom are lured by and into pornography. Rather, the process is a complex one and invariably requires the involvement of adults—not only as initiators of sex with children, as recruiters into pornography, and traffickers and pimps, and when they take a more active role in soliciting sexual activities, they will tend to be seen as offenders.”17

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 other parent-equivalent adults can be problematic in viewing sexually-solicited boys as victims of CSE.14

“I Presumably, 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.”17

In fact, in an effort to exert some sense of con-
3 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 voluntary or involuntary (hereinafter Estes/Weiner study.)”


5 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.

6 For example, despite these juvenile arrest rates, we know 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.”

7 “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 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.”

8 Estes/Weiner study supra note 3.

9 Id.

10 NISMART-2 supra note 7.


14 Estes/Weiner study supra note 3.

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

16 Id.

17 Estes/Weiner study supra note 3.

18 James found that 40% of gay men were first asked to prostitute by customers and 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 heterosexual learn about it from customers.” WESBERG supra note 15 at 156.

19 Estes/Weiner study supra note 3.

20 WESBERG supra note 15.

21 David Finkelhor & Richard Ormrod, Prosititution of Juveniles: Patterns from NIBRS, OJJDP JUVENILE JUSTICE BULLETIN (June 2014) 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.”

22 Estes/Weiner study supra note 3.
