Unpacking the Media Spectacle of Sex Trafficking

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Bad “Researches” Lead to Bad Policies.

Many claims made by anti-trafficking organizations are not based on valid research. They often come from:

- misinterpretation of actual researches.
- tortured research method designed to produce politically convenient result.
- out of nowhere.
Common False Claims

- “Average age of entry into prostitution in the United States is around 13.”
- “300,000 children are trafficked and forced into prostitution.”
- “Third of the 1.6 million run away youth are recruited into prostitution within the first 48 hours.”
- “40,000 women and children are trafficked to service sports fans during World Cup or Super Bowl.”
- “Trafficking of minors on Craigslist and other online boards increased by 65% in just six months.” (Leading up to the closure of Craigslist’s adult services section.)
Sex Trafficking

Sex trafficking within the U.S. is legally defined as commercial sex acts induced by force, fraud, or coercion or commercial sex acts in which the individual induced to perform commercial sex has not attained 18 years of age. The average age of entry into the commercial sex industry in the U.S. is between 12 to 14 years old. The following documents summarize the framework of various sex trafficking networks, review the complex methods of control imposed by traffickers, and illustrate the challenges victims face in seeking assistance.
Christians ‘Living Differently’

Human trafficking is often thought of as something that doesn’t exist in our backyard. We often hear about international cases of human trafficking, people brought to the United States under forced and coercive conditions, in popular media and news reports. The devastating truth is that the United States has a major problem with domestic sex trafficking of minors.

According to the Department of Justice (DOJ) the “average age at which girls first become victims of prostitution is 12-14.” Often overlooked within US law, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) states that minors are in fact trafficking victims. The existence of such children revolves around continuous physical abuse, forced drug use and constant threats.

Unfortunately we currently lack research documenting the number of children in the commercial sex industry, but according to the DOJ it is believed that approximately 293,000 American children are at risk of becoming victims of sex trafficking.
Thanks for your interest in this important issue. The Research & Resources section is designed to aid you in your research and provide answers to most of the frequently asked questions we receive related to projects and papers on commercial sexual exploitation and domestic trafficking.

Facts about CSEC & Domestic Trafficking

- CSEC is sexual activity involving a child in exchange for something of value, or promise thereof, to the child or another person or persons. The child is treated as a commercial and sexual object. CSEC is a form of violence against children.
- In New York City alone there are an estimated 2,200 children victimized by commercial sexual exploitation annually (OCFS 2007 Prevalence Study).
- The Department of Justice estimates the most frequent age of entry into the commercial sex industry in the United States is 12-14 years old (www.usdoj.gov).
- 100,000 – 300,000 children are at risk for commercial sexual exploitation each year in the United States (Estes & Weiner, 2001).
- An estimated 1.6 million children run away from home each year in the US. The average time it takes before a runaway is approached by a trafficker or solicitor is 48 hours (National Runaway Switchboard).
- 70-90% of commercially sexually exploited children have a history of child sexual abuse (Murphy, 1993).
CHILD TRAFFICKING STATISTICS

- Child/Human Trafficking is one of the fastest growing crimes in the world. Child/human trafficking is the world’s second largest criminal enterprise, after drugs. U.S. State Department

- The global market of child trafficking at over $12 billion a year with over 1.2 million child victims. UNICEF

- As many as 2.8 million children run away each year in the US. Within 48 hours of hitting the streets, one-third of these children are lured or recruited into the underground world of prostitution and pornography. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

- The average age of entry for children victimized by the sex trade industry is 12 years. U.S. Department of Justice

- 300,000 children in the U.S. are at risk every year for commercial sexual exploitation. U.S. Department of Justice
“Average Age” Myth

Claim: “Average age of entry into prostitution in the United States is around 13.”

- Research on minors is inherently limiting.
- Cumulative bias deflates the “average.”
- Inconsistent with other studies that report higher “average age.”
Imagine a hypothetical town in which one person each from ages 12-17 enter prostitution.

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- entered this year
- last year
- year before

False average: 13.6; Actual average: 14.5
“300,000 children” Myth

Claim: “300,000 children are trafficked and forced into prostitution.”

- Commonly cited source: Center for Missing and Exploited Children; Actual source: Estes & Weiner.
- 300,000 figure is the (very) rough estimate of all youth considered “at risk.” Most are not actually trafficked or in the sex trade.
- “At risk” youth may be counted multiple times because categories are not mutually exclusive.
“48 Hour” Myth

Claim: “Third of the 1.6 million run away youth are recruited into prostitution within the first 48 hours.”


- Survey of youth receiving services from one youth shelter in Ohio, not all runaway youth.

- Third of girls (or 14% of total) in the survey encounter pimps, but most are not actually trafficked or in the sex trade.
“Super Bowl” Myth

Claim: “40,000 women and children are trafficked to service sports fans during World Cup or Super Bowl.”

- Source: Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, an anti-prostitution feminist group.
- Studies by International Organization for Migration, Council of European Union, International Labor Organization, UN Population Fund, and others found no evidence for the supposed increase in human trafficking at World Cup 2006 in Germany, World Cup 2010 in South Africa, and Winter Olympics 2010 in Vancouver.
“Craigslist” Myth

Claim: “Trafficking of minors on Craigslist and other online boards increased by 65% in just six months.”

- **Source**: Women's Funding Network, NoVo Foundation.
- **Researchers** hired participants to look at pictures posted on Craigslist and other forums and “guess” what age they were.
- **Led to** the closure of Craigslist’s adult services section, depriving advertising venue for sex workers.
Why do we believe this?

- Reality is messy. Myths give us a simpler picture. With a simpler picture, we can invoke simpler solutions: more police, more prisons, etc.

- More comforting to think that people engage in prostitution because bad people force them to, rather than addressing issues such as poverty, racism, sexism, etc.

- Sensationalism is profitable for media, and politically convenient for politicians and anti-trafficking groups.
Consequences

- Perception that sex trafficking is inevitable and near-universal within the sex industry, that very young (white middle-class) girls are being targeted by evil men (of color).

- Increased policing and surveillance of communities of color, immigrants, etc. actually make individuals more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

- Effective measures to combat actual labor and sex trafficking are not prioritized because of the myths.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Assumption</th>
<th>Media Spectacle</th>
<th>Reality-Based</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youth in the Sex Trade</td>
<td>Young people are “taken away” by bad people and brutally forced into prostitution</td>
<td>People are doing what they need to do to survive when resources and support are lacking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Entry into the Sex Trade</td>
<td>Any child, but emphasis on white middle-class girls with good homes; getting younger</td>
<td>Mostly affect youth who are runaways and throwaways; race, class, and sexuality matter</td>
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<td>Mode of Intervention</td>
<td>Very young children recruited or kidnapped from schools and shopping malls</td>
<td>Mostly late teens and adults who enter as a result of poverty and other socioeconomic factors</td>
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<td>Measurement of Success</td>
<td>More policing, curfews, rescue, and prosecution; court-mandated services for “victims”</td>
<td>Voluntary services that provide resources, support, and opportunities</td>
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<td>Number of convictions and “rescues”; reduction of prostitution</td>
<td>Autonomy, long-term health and safety of the individual, economic and social justice</td>
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Shout-Outs to:
Streetwise & Safe (New York)
http://www.streetwiseandsafe.org/
Young Women’s Empowerment Project (Chicago)
http://www.youarepriceless.org/
Different Avenues (Washington, D.C.)
http://www.differentavenues.org/
Native Youth Sexual Health Network (North America)
http://www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com/
Women With A Vision (New Orleans)
http://wwav-no.org/
FUSE (North America)
http://www.lightafuse.org/
Please check out my booklets and article in Bitch magazine (Winter 2011)