Youth vs. the Social Service Industrial Complex:
How Anti-Trafficking Hysteria Is Dismantling Harm Reduction Movement

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Anti-Trafficking Hysteria


- 2008: Ascent of domestic minor sex trafficking (also called “commercial sexual exploitation of children”) as the dominant topic in media and public policy.

- The issue has been often misconstrued as innocent (white, middle-class) young girls being “taken” by evil (black and brown, gang-affiliated) men.
Things to Remember

- Under TVPA, all minors who engage in sex trade are automatically considered victims of sex trafficking (though they can still be arrested as well).

- Studies have shown that less than 10% of the youth have “pimps” or traffickers who control their activity; survival sex—trading sex for survival needs such as cash, food, shelter, drugs, etc.—is far more common.

- Street youth are under constant surveillance and harassment from the law enforcement; many distrust police officers, for a good reason.
“Pornland, USA”

- In 2010, Dan Rather used his cable program to label Portland “Pornland, USA,” suggesting that it was one of the worst “hubs” of domestic minor sex trafficking.
- Humiliated, City of Portland and Multnomah County escalated its effort to combat the problem—by increasing the police surveillance of people in the sex trade, street youth, and others.
- Already scarce funding from social services are diverted to nonprofits specifically promising to “help victims” of domestic minor sex trafficking.
“March to Reclaim the 82nd Avenue,” an anti-prostitution demonstration
Desperate for funding in an economic downturn, local nonprofit service providers rushed to capitalize on the latest moral panic.
Youth are sometimes arrested, sometimes not, but they are all detained.

Youth either agrees to stay at the specified shelter, returns home, or else he or she must be institutionalized at a psychiatric hospital.
Panelists include a trafficking survivor (and anti-prostitution activist) along with the Program Director of a youth service, a Christian lobbyist, and the Police.

Because “sex” sells, ya know.

Obligatory picture of young white “victims” sitting on the floor covering their faces in distress.
Leading [Portland’s] efforts to halt child trafficking is a network of dedicated Christians. Just don’t go advertising it.”

Pictured from left to right: police officer, youth service director, fundamentalist pastor, and Christian lobbyist.
Question: How has the incorporation of the anti-trafficking framework, which centers around police surveillance and prosecution, into social service programs changed the nature of the relationship between the agencies and the youth who constantly experience police surveillance, abuse, harassment, and criminalization?
## “Rescues”

<table>
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<th>“Pimp”</th>
<th>All Arrests</th>
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<td>3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Source: Compiled from news reports about nationwide sweep to “rescue” minor victims of sex trafficking that took place in June 2012. Contact emi@eminism.org for specific citations.
“The FBI has rescued 79 teens held against their will and forced into prostitution from hotels, truck stops and stores during a three-day swoop on sex-trafficking rings across the country. [...] The teenagers, who are all U.S. citizens, were handcuffed and held in police custody until they could be placed with child welfare organisations.”

The Daily Mail, June 26, 2012
Problems with “Rescue”

- When youth are “rescued,” they are actually arrested and detained. They are often sent back to the foster system that failed them in the first place, and/or are subjected to involuntary “treatment.”

- Social service workers doing “ride-along” with the law enforcement as they conduct prostitution sweeps undermines the youth’s trust in the social service systems.

- Many people arrested as “pimps” may also be youth and young adults.
I attended a November 2011 workshop titled “CSEC: A Collaborative Approach to Addressing Sexual Exploitation of Children in Your Community,” which was presented by program directors at Janus Youth and Sexual Assault Resource Center along with an FBI agent specializing in investigating CSEC.

Their comments confirmed what I have suspected for a couple of years: social service agencies are making explicit, conscious choice to align with the law enforcement, at the detriment of the youth they are serving.
Janus Youth:

Janus director told the audience that his agency did not have a good relationship when he came into the position. Street youth often complained to Janus workers about police abuse; staff believed them and assisted them file formal complaints if they desired, which police officers detested.

The director instructed all of his staff to “treat police officers like your best friends.” Police has become much more friendly toward Janus Youth (but not Janus youth, obviously).
SARC director also spoke highly about the friendly relationship with the police, and criticized “other feminist anti-violence programs” because they remained “hostile” toward the law enforcement.

The director explained the benefit of SARC interviewing youth: because SARC is not a mandatory reporter, it is easier to get the youth to start talking. Once they start talking, they become “better witnesses for the prosecution.” Collaboration with the police turned the clients (youth) into witnesses for the state.
The FBI agent stated that the law enforcement specifically recruited Janus Youth and SARC to work with them because of their “pro-police stance,” unlike other anti-violence organizations.

Portland Women’s Crisis Line, which provides services similar to Sexual Assault Resource Center (which is in the affluent suburb of Beaverton), is rarely invited by the City or the County to any conversations regarding sex trafficking or prostitution. PWCL uses harm reduction principles to reach out to people in the sex trade.
Janus Youth (again):

- In the fall of 2011, Portland Police Bureau approached Janus Youth to help them locate a former Janus client who was camping out in Occupy Portland. Janus worker went to the Occupy encampment, and helped the police apprehend the youth they were looking for.

- During Occupy Portland, many young people in Janus’ shelters abandoned the service, opting to sleep in Occupy tents with their peers. Portland’s youth shelters lost a significant number of residents.
[...] When Yellow Brick Road teams went through Occupy Portland during the early afternoon on Monday October 17th, they were greeted by large numbers of homeless youth who had voluntarily exited Homeless Youth Continuum (HYC) services to take part in the event. Outreach staff spoke to at least 5 unaccompanied minors that they had never previously encountered and who appeared to be street-entrenched (and not in school) based on their general hygiene and demeanor. [...] Yellow Brick Road has also observed a noticeable increase in escalated behavior bordering on hostility mostly from youth we recognized from HYC services (or street outreach), including some young people with serious mental illnesses who are intermittently serving as “peace-keeping” volunteers or security. While we are very supportive of young people having both meaningful voice and purpose, our years of experience with vulnerable street-affected youth tell us that this requires a great deal of structure and expertise or it is a recipe for disaster. [...]
“Police said the sites have been plagued by a series of problems, including multiple assaults and two fatal drug overdoses. [...] When I have homeless and homeless youth advocates telling me that this is a very unsafe situation, you know, I listen to that.”

— Portland Mayor Sam Adams, in an interview with PBS
What has happened?

- Social service workers siding with the police when youth complain about mistreatment.
- Social service workers functioning as conduits for the police surveillance of youth.
- Social service workers regarding youth as “witnesses for the prosecution” rather than clients deserving help.
- Social service agency lobbying to evict youth from communities they have created for themselves.
- Social service agencies that share same goals divided and fighting against each other instead of working together.
Conclusions

- Police encroachment of social service programs under the guise of “protecting children and youth from sex trafficking” is dismantling client-centered services and the harm reduction movement.

- Misguided anti-trafficking movement does not only harm sex workers; youth, people of color, immigrants, women, queer and trans people, people with disabilities, drug users, and all others that depend on respectful, non-judgmental services suffer as the result of the anti-trafficking hysteria.
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