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Center for Research on School Safety, School Climate and Classroom Management

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The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC)

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Introduction

The commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is a multibillion dollar commercial industry enslaving and victimizing over one million children around the globe. Researchers, law enforcement officials, human service providers, and community leaders have established that CSEC is a major problem in the United States (Barnitz, 2001). CSEC refers to illegal behavior that includes child prostitution, child pornography, sex tourism, and trafficking for sexual purposes (Flores, 2002). While child prostitution, child pornography, and sex tourism are terms that the general public likely is familiar with, trafficking may be less generally understood. Trafficking refers to the recruitment and transportation of an individual for the purposes of sexual exploitation (Melrose & Barrett, 2006). While the term child prostitution is included under the category of CSEC it is important to note that the use of this term may be a misnomer. To refer to the victims of CSEC as “child prostitutes” implies that the children involved in CSEC have the capacity to consent to this activity. The fact that nearly all nations and each of the United States (US) have legal ages for consensual sex provides evidence to the contrary (Avert, 2007). In addition victims of CSEC are typically coerced or forced to engage in the activity and thus cannot be considered consenting (Priebe & Suhr, 2005).

Many Americans view commercial sexual exploitation as an international problem, most prevalent in countries other than the United States. However, CSEC is also widespread in the US and has been labeled a “silent emergency” (Ives, 2001). In 2001, Estes and Weiner completed the first comprehensive study of CSEC in North America

and found that 200,000- 300,000 children in the US are at risk for sexual exploitation. An even more recent study conducted in the Atlanta area by Priebe and Suhr (2005) indicated that Atlanta is one of the top 14 US locations for CSEC activity. CSEC is particularly problematic in cities where sporting events, tourism, and business activities such as conventions generate millions of dollars per year (Priebe & Suhr, 2005).

In an effort to understand the mechanisms that are involved in CSEC, it is important to put the problem into context. A convergence of factors within a community provides a context that supports and maintains the CSEC industry. These include: (a) the presence of traffickers, pimps, and recruiters, (b) an availability of susceptible children, (c) the availability of a consumer base, and (d) a supportive infrastructure within the community. All of these contextual variables are present in many major metropolitan areas, which make them fertile ground for the growth of this criminal activity. Recruiters lure susceptible victims in by making them feel wanted or needed, often gaining their trust by posing as boyfriends. The industry is maintained by pimps who use drug addiction, abuse, fear, and isolation as forms of control over the victim. Through organized methods, such as the internet and print advertising, the pimps access the consumer base and profit from the exploitation of these children (Azaola, 2006; Estes & Weiner, 2001; Priebe & Suhr, 2005).

Impacts of Victimization

The 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey conducted by the CDC indicated that 7.5 % of the children surveyed reported being victims of sexual abuse (CDC, 2006). Many of these victims of abuse and maltreatment are highly motivated to leave their home environments even if they risk homelessness. Without adequate support systems and a safe place to live, these children risk re-victimization through other forms of abuse and exploitation (NCMEC, 2002, Widom & Ames, 1994). Homeless youth or runaways are extremely vulnerable to becoming victims of CSEC for a number of reasons (Azaola, 2006; Priebe & Suhr, 2005). At times, runaways will turn to prostitution in an attempt to have basic survival needs met, i.e. sex in return for money, a place to stay, or food (Greene, Ennett & Ringwalt, 1999). In addition, being homeless places children on the streets, making them more visible and in closer proximity to dangerous people and environments (Tyler, Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Cauce, 2004). Other factors that have been

found to put children at risk for CSEC include poverty and unstable housing, failure of attachment, poor parenting, parental drug abuse and/or alcoholism, hostile family environments and/or conflict laden homes, and early sexual behavior (Azaola, 2006; Brannigan & Gibbs Van Brunschot, 1997; Priebe & Suhr, 2005).

The future prognosis for the victims of CSEC is unclear, as it has not been widely explored through research. Much research however, has been done to explore the impact of sexual abuse on children and the outcomes are bleak. Violence within the home, poverty, parental criminality, sexual abuse in the extended family, and child maltreatment were all found to be correlated with child sexual abuse (Pithers & Gray, 1998; Shrier & Crosby, 2003). Victims of general sexual abuse are more likely to initiate sex or get pregnant at early ages and use illegal drugs (Nagy, et al., 1995; Silverman Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001). Accordingly, victims of sexual abuse are at a much higher risk of depression and suicidal ideation and the use of unhealthy weight control habits such as vomiting or laxatives (Nagy, et al., 1995; Silverman, et al., 2002). Research specifically investigating the outcomes of victims of CSEC provides further evidence of this bleak outcome. Many of the victims of CSEC are diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). They experience even higher rates of STIs and HIV infection, increased incidences of teenage pregnancy, increased experiences of physical abuse and emotional trauma, court involvement and juvenile arrest records (CDC, 2005; Estes & Weiner, 2001; Priebe & Suhr, 2005; United Nations, 2002). If these children are able to escape their enslavement and victimization, they are often stigmatized and frequently unable to return home either from shame, fear of returning to the abusive circumstances from which they initially fled, or in some cases because they may have been prostituted by or sold by their own family members into prostitution (Melrose & Barrett, 2006; Patterson, 2007; Priebe & Suhr, 2005).

Prevention and Intervention

Due to the increased risk for child victimization in urban areas, there is a great need for prevention and intervention programs that will reduce the risk of victimization and lower the number of children whose lives have been touched by CSEC. In addition, because of the tendency of any form of child abuse to affect many facets of a child's life, including learning and academic achievement, the implementation of prevention and

intervention programs, especially in school and community settings, may be critical in achieving the goals of those who wish to effectively reduce child victimization.

School-based programs, especially programs dealing with sensitive topics such as sexual health and sexual exploitation, face many barriers to implementation. Efforts to implement programs related to these topics are often limited by federal, state, and local policies, which restrict the discussion of these issues in schools. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) recommends that all individuals with access to children in schools receive the proper training on CSEC and background screening. Schools should also develop policies for reporting child sexual exploitation and handling disclosures from children. Furthermore, the NCMEC urges that schools develop protocols and screening procedures for computer use and training for students and teachers regarding acceptable use of computers. In addition, it is recommended that schools choose or develop child-safety programs that are (a) based on accepted educational theories, (b) are developmentally-appropriate, (c) are designed to offer concepts that will enhance children's self-confidence in order to better handle and protect themselves in all types of situations, (d) use multiple program components repeated several years in a row, and (e) use qualified presenters who include role-playing, behavioral rehearsal, feedback, and active participation in presentations. School officials are also urged to assess their environmental structure and take every possible step to make it safer for children, make certain children are properly supervised both in the classroom and around the campus, and ensure that campus security is in place so all visitors are screened through the office and unusual incidents or visitors are handled. Finally, the NCMEC recommends that schools provide programs and roles for parents and guardians to make them part of their children's safety and security at school and while going to and from school.

Community-based programs have attempted to reach schools in an effort to educate teachers, administrators, parents, support staff, and students about CSEC. For example, The Paul and Lisa Education Program is an intervention program that, as one of its goals, attempts to establish partnerships with schools by sending schools program information and making direct personal contact with schools (NCMEC, 2002). Established in 1980, the Paul & Lisa Program is a small, all-volunteer street outreach

program designed to assist young women who are victims of sexual exploitation and help them find solutions to their health, financial, educational, legal, and emotional problems; empower youth to take control of their lives and leave the streets; educate and inform the public about the sexual exploitation of young people and its consequences; and cooperate with other individuals, groups, and organizations that share similar objectives.

In addition, Shirley Franklin, Mayor of Atlanta, launched the “Dear John” campaign, a public education campaign to end the commercial sexual exploitation of children in Atlanta in November of 2006. The purpose of the campaign is to educate audiences and prompt new activist efforts in the fight against CSEC. Law enforcement, judicial services, human service providers and community leaders are collaborating to stop child prostitution and trafficking in the Atlanta area specifically, statewide and nationally in general.

The body of prevention literature as a whole supports that multifaceted approaches to intervention generally have proven the most successful in addressing complex social problems (Nation et al., 2003). It is important to note that there is very little published data about the efficacy of prevention and intervention programs implemented specifically to prevent CSEC. More research is needed to shed light on this complex societal dilemma and assist prevention efforts by systematically evaluating existing activities and whether they actually have measurable effects.

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