

**Protecting Our Children:  
Working Together To End Child Prostitution**

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The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

## **Overview**

There is growing concern about the problem of commercial sexual exploitation of children in the United States and abroad. On December 13–14, 2002, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), Office of Justice Programs, hosted a national summit to begin to address, in a comprehensive and coordinated manner, the problem of prostituted children and youth. This national summit, titled *Protecting Our Children: Working Together To End Child Prostitution*, was held in Washington, DC, at the Omni Shoreham Hotel. The conference brought together participants from around the country who work with exploited children and youth to share their knowledge, experiences, and observations about the problem and the solutions. Approximately 130 individuals, representing a range of disciplines and perspectives on child and youth prostitution, attended this first national summit.

## **Summit Goals**

The goals of the summit were the following:

- Create a forum for networking and information sharing.
- Raise national awareness about prostituted children.
- Build a base of knowledge about good practices.
- Assess the needs and strengths of the field.
- Develop consensus for action.

The summit's anticipated outcome was a set of recommended policy considerations and action steps for federal, state, and local levels. This report contains a summary of the summit proceedings, a discussion of the major issues raised, and recommendations for addressing these issues.

## **Summit Design**

The summit was structured to give participants an opportunity to discuss issues relating to five themes: prevention, treatment, research, investigation and prosecution, and provision of public and private services. These discussions took place in both small and large group sessions, facilitated roundtable discussions, and a townhall meeting. Based on the five themes, participants were organized into five working groups to identify what works, what is needed, and what action steps should be taken to address needs and gaps in the country's response to child prostitution.

## **Findings and Recommendations**

A major portion of the summit was devoted to discussions about the problem of the commercial sexual exploitation of children and the need to develop recommendations for action and policy considerations. Participants recommended using terminology such as "commercial sexual exploitation of children" or "prostitution of children" to accurately describe this crime and to place the onus unequivocally on perpetrators, rather than using language that may suggest that

victims are partly at fault. Greater coordination, communication, and collaboration among federal, state, and local agencies and organizations were identified as critical steps in defining the problem and reaching effective solutions.

Participants in the five working groups discussed what is known about prostituted children and youth; associated issues, concerns, and problems; and potential solutions. A number of central questions and concerns were common among the working groups; many of the questions are addressed later in this report. Unanswered questions included the following:

- What is the cost of prostitution for children and for society, and what is the cost of getting children off the street?
- How can we change public opinion and attitudes about the commercial sexual exploitation of children and about at-risk children? This includes how to motivate people to do more, how to change professional attitudes about prostituted children and youth, and how to encourage the development of enhanced services and treatment options.
- What is the extent of the problem, and how is prostitution defined? How many children are on the streets; of this number, how many are in the custody of family services?
- Why does the problem continue despite aggressive strategies in some jurisdictions? How can the demand side of the problem be addressed in an effective manner?
- What is the impact of the media on the problem of prostituted children and youth, particularly as it relates to the effects of a permissive society, the effects of music videos, etc.?
- What model legislation currently exists to target this issue? How can this legislation be replicated across the country?
- What are best practices?
- What services are needed by victims of the commercial sexual exploitation of children? What is the best way to deal with the diversity of this population?
- How do demographics and economic issues affect the problem?

The discussion and recommendations regarding how best to address these and other issues are categorized into the following five areas:

- Leadership and public awareness.
- Service delivery.
- Capacity building.
- Legislation and policy change.
- Research.

A number of critical and central themes guided all of the discussions and working group sessions. These themes form the basis for the recommendations contained in this report.

- Theme 1: Prostituted children should be treated as victims, not offenders, using the same victim-sensitive interview techniques as those used in child abuse cases. Prostituted children should be treated with respect and concern and should be encouraged to talk about their experiences. A holistic approach should be used when working with these children.
- Theme 2: Youth need greater access to services—in particular, services that are victim sensitive (e.g., private court hearings rather than open courts with others present) and shelter-based crisis, intermediate, and long-term care.
- Theme 3: Programs should be peer driven, victim focused, gender sensitive, and culturally appropriate. Victims need to be included in the process of identifying and developing solutions.
- Theme 4: Consistent language needs to be adopted nationwide. This includes the use of the terms and phrases “commercial sexual exploitation of children” rather than “child prostitution”; “victims” or “prostituted children and youth” rather than “prostitutes”; and “perpetrators” rather than “johns.” The commercial sexual exploitation of children needs to be explained to the public as part of the overall problem of child exploitation and not as a separate issue.
- Theme 5: Professionals need to make a concerted effort, through information sharing and communication, to identify children who are at risk and to apply more effective prevention strategies and support.
- Theme 6: Offenders must be held accountable for their actions. The term “offender” includes all involved in the chain of commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth—those who recruit and sell (pimps), traffic, and abuse. Stiffer penalties must be provided for all types of offenders.

- Theme 7: What we do not know outweighs what we do know. A systematic effort must be made to collect and analyze information about all aspects of the commercial sexual exploitation of children.
- Theme 8: All stakeholders must be involved in developing, implementing, and/or overseeing strategies to prevent and address prostituted children and youth. The commercial sexual exploitation of children cannot be solved by any one agency, system, or jurisdiction; all stakeholders must play a part (e.g., child welfare, law enforcement, prosecutors, courts, juvenile justice system representatives, child protection services, nonprofit organizations, service providers, child and youth advocates, housing, schools, survivors, legislators, faith and business communities, labor, and health).

### **Leadership and Public Awareness**

It was generally believed that one of the primary reasons why the commercial sexual exploitation of children historically has been a low priority is the lack of effective and ongoing leadership at the federal, state, and local levels. Furthermore, a sense of urgency does not exist and a national blueprint for action has not been established. Moreover, the current economic downturn has increased the number of runaway and homeless children and the recent focus of federal, state, and local resources on fighting terrorism has adversely affected the resources available for victims of child abuse.

Awareness, interest, and commitment are key to highlighting the issue. Participants called on DOJ to play a major role in seeking support and commitment from the public at large and recommended that a national agenda be developed to ensure continued focus on the issue through a national strategy to support innovation, strategic planning, and funding at the state and local levels.

Perception plays a major role in how victims of the commercial sexual exploitation of children are handled and treated. The public has a false perception about the problem, mostly because of media portrayals and the stereotypes that emerge. For example, the public does not think of a 16-year-old who looks like a 20-year-old as a child and does not view prostituting children and youth as abuse and exploitation. Youth do not choose to be prostituted. Other forces or events, such as abuse and running away, make these children vulnerable and put them at risk. The problem of prostituted children and youth spans all economic and social strata. In addition, public perception is often affected by factors such as race and economic class.

Responsible and comprehensive public education is an effective tool for combating such false perceptions. These education campaigns need to target offenders, traffickers, and all others who are involved in soliciting children for sexual gratification.

## ***Recommendations***

1. Elevate the issue of the commercial sexual exploitation of children at the federal level.
2. Establish regional, state, and/or local task forces to provide continued emphasis on the commercial sexual exploitation of children; to support action at the local level; and to improve coordination, service delivery, and information sharing.
3. Consider using townhall meetings to create greater awareness locally.
4. Adopt zero-tolerance prosecution policies and approaches at the federal, state, and local levels.
5. Focus greater attention on the commercial sexual exploitation of children through existing entities such as the Federal Agency Task Force on Missing and Exploited Children, the Board of Pediatrics, the National Transportation Board, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and Administration for Children and Families.
6. Expand the scope of effective interagency approaches, such as the Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) task forces, to include prostituted children and youth as part of their overall focus and strategy.
7. Develop partnerships with the media to promote responsible news coverage and entertainment programming and to develop more effective media campaigns to educate and inform citizens about prostituted children and youth.
8. Explore innovative efforts to reach youth in their preferred media venues (e.g., hip-hop stations, teen newspapers and media outlets, schools, the Internet) and consult with children and survivors to determine in which media to place public education ads to best reach youth.
9. Increase the availability of funds for programs, services, and research relating to the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

## **Service Delivery**

The vast majority of jurisdictions have no “system” for addressing the commercial sexual exploitation of children. Agencies that interact with prostituted children do not typically share information or coordinate with each other. Interactions are reactive, not proactive, and few services are available to victims of the commercial sexual exploitation of children or to at-risk children and youth.

There is a lack of safe, secure housing and services for victims. This includes specialized foster care, long-term treatment options, safe houses, crisis care, 24-hour treatment options, aftercare,

regional transitional housing services, medical and mental health services, transitional housing, and other programs to protect victims, ensure their appearance in court, and ensure that they receive the necessary services and support. Resources are needed both in communities and in locations that are frequented by prostituted children and youth (e.g., on the streets, in bus stations, in abandoned housing, in juvenile detention centers, in sexually oriented businesses).

Some existing services for victims of child abuse could be made available to victims of prostitution if agencies expanded their thinking and perspective. The prevailing “tunnel vision” may exist because of an inconsistent view or understanding of the problem. There is a lack of consistent language or terminology across disciplines and the approach to dealing with the commercial sexual exploitation of children differs from state to state and locality to locality. Laws (e.g., child labor, liquor, zoning, health, building inspection) are also inconsistent.

### ***Recommendations***

1. Develop a coordinated and comprehensive systems approach to providing services and support for this population.
2. Develop a continuum of safe and secure care, treatment, housing, and other services that are accessible, peer driven, victim focused, gender sensitive, and culturally appropriate.
3. Develop short- and long-term treatment options that are easily accessible and that address the specific needs of this population.
4. Disseminate information about housing, shelter care, and other services available to prostituted children and youth so they have a greater awareness of and access to services.
5. Consider Internet-based help and referral services, national and regional toll-free hotlines, and a national inventory of resources.
6. Allocate more resources to address this problem within the United States and to work in collaboration with other countries.
7. Encourage existing resources, such as the faith-based community, community-based organizations, and local businesses, to assist with support and services (e.g., housing, education, counseling).

### **Capacity Building**

The lack of training for all professionals involved with issues regarding the commercial sexual exploitation of children was cited as a stumbling block that thwarts effective interventions and services. This lack of training leads to the following:

- Inadequate service provision.
- Insensitivity to victim needs.
- Lack of collaboration.
- False assumptions and negative views about the population.
- Lack of skills and expertise.

These factors bring about inconsistencies in treatment, system response, and service delivery, which are compounded by the fact that law enforcement agencies and other child services professionals do not report on the number of cases involving the sexual exploitation of children.

### ***Recommendations***

1. Develop mandatory training programs for all agencies and organizations that are involved with the commercial sexual exploitation of children. These programs should include the following:
  - General training for law enforcement, social services, schools, nonprofit organizations, prosecutors, courts, mental health and medical personnel, government and private agencies, and neighborhood-based and other service providers at all levels to sensitize professionals and staff to victims' needs and the realities of the commercial sexual exploitation of children. Training should be multidisciplinary and should include victimology issues and dynamics, layers of abuse and posttraumatic stress disorder, legal issues, information sharing and collaboration (both inter- and intrajurisdictional), adolescent behavior, offender typology, and resources.
  - Specialized training for health care professionals on how to identify prostituted children and youth's medical, mental health, and other needs.
  - Specialized training for law enforcement on investigative techniques to focus on offenders and traffickers (i.e., how to corroborate cases, interviewing skills, warrants, cell phone records, date books, surveillance, etc.).
2. Promote and provide venues for regular information sharing and communication among law enforcement; child welfare, juvenile justice, and health agencies; schools; and runaway and homeless youth and other youth service providers in larger cities and metropolitan areas to share information about victims and offenders and to discuss effective strategies and best practices for addressing the issue.
3. Create mechanisms for documenting instances of commercial sexual exploitation of children at the federal, state, and local levels and educate law enforcement and child services professionals on their role as mandated reporters of child abuse.



## **Legislation and Policy Change**

Legislation and policy often adversely affect the handling of child prostitution cases because a number of inequities exist in how the system deals with child victims and offenders. There is a lack of consistency and a lack of comprehensive policies and strategies with respect to child labor laws; liquor law enforcement; and adult prostitution and health, zoning, and building code enforcement, as well as arrest and prosecution.

Prosecutors, including U.S. Attorneys, tend to *nol pros* cases against offenders. Evidentiary problems, an absence of victim testimony, a lack of coordination between civil and criminal attorneys, and inequities and inconsistencies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction play a part in the legal struggle for balance. Typically, offenders testify as part of a plea agreement and receive limited punishment. Furthermore, offenders and traffickers tend to manipulate the system's response because they know how the system and jurisdiction function and where they can operate "invisibly" in the community.

### ***Recommendations***

1. Develop model policies, laws and statutes, and enforcement strategies, including asset forfeiture, felony-level penalties, and treatment and support for victims.
2. Enforce existing laws and find new approaches for addressing domestic violence, child abuse, and other forms of violence in the home, including the following:
  - Expand child abuse reporting laws to include all cases involving the commercial sexual exploitation of children.
  - Expand the pool of mandated reporters to include service providers.
3. Encourage prosecutors to take a more proactive approach with these cases, even if the child does not testify.
4. Establish victim-focused and victim-sensitive protocols for investigation and prosecution.
5. Use vertical prosecution strategies where appropriate. These strategies encourage the use of the same prosecutor throughout the process and improve coordination of civil and criminal prosecution to provide case consistency and informed decisions, and to cause less trauma to the victim.
6. Provide children with full witness protection services whenever they participate in prosecutions to ensure that they can safely speak out about the abuse.

## Research

To date, little research has focused on this population. General statistical information is lacking and there are minimal hard data on precipitating factors and causes. Although some information about the victims exists, few studies have focused on how a history of abuse and neglect, economic background, self-esteem and self-worth issues, family background, and parenting issues relate to the commercial sexual exploitation of children. In addition, limited data exist on how community factors and norms affect prostitution, including demand issues, the presence of the military, tourism, the presence of casinos, public awareness, and police perception. Finally, research to identify system successes and failures has been lacking.

## *Recommendations*

Establish and carry out an aggressive, comprehensive research agenda nationwide, to include the following:

- Conduct research on the *impact of legislative changes* (i.e., structural changes, changes in civil versus criminal handling, etc.). This research should also examine why some jurisdictions that have made a concerted effort to address the issue (e.g., Atlanta and Dallas) continue to have a major problem with the commercial sexual exploitation of children.
- Collect information about gender, race, ethnicity, regionality, age, sexual preference (gay, lesbian, transsexual), history of abuse, family dynamics, domestic violence, and substance abuse. This will allow researchers to better understand the *nature of the problem*, particularly as it relates to the number and characteristics of children who are victims of commercial sexual exploitation and their path to being commercially exploited. Research needs to help bring about a better understanding of why children and youth become susceptible or subjected to exploitation in order to develop effective strategies for prevention and earlier intervention.
- Conduct research on *best practices* relating to short- and long-term prevention, intervention, treatment, and followup services. This includes identifying what works, whether these programs or approaches can be replicated, and training needs. This research should not be limited to programs and services in the United States, but should consider what other countries are doing successfully to affect the problem.
- Conduct *offender-based research* to determine the relationship between viewing and consuming pornography and offending, to identify factors that precipitate escalation, and to identify effective methods for holding perpetrators (pimps, traffickers, and persons who buy children for sexual purposes) accountable for their actions. Information is needed about who comprises the offender and

perpetrator population (recruiters, traffickers, pimps, “johns,” and abusers), their typologies or motivations, their involvement in organized crime, and other relevant facts.

- Conduct research on the how *the media* affects public perception of the commercial sexual exploitation of children.