

ADDRESSING MISCONCEPTIONS: Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children

Movies, television shows, and other media generally portray individuals involved in prostitution as consenting adults. However, a large percentage of the individuals involved in prostitution in this country and around the world are minors or entered the sex trade as minors. These children are not criminals or juvenile delinquents but victims of sexual exploitation and rape.

Misconception:

All individuals in prostitution are consenting adults.

REALITY:

The overwhelming majority of those involved in the sex trade are children, teens, and adults who entered the trade before they turned 18. UNICEF estimates that 1 million children worldwide are exploited every year in the commercial sex trade, which includes prostitution and pornography.¹ Field research completed by Shared Hope International found that underage girls are the majority of victims in all commercial sex markets in the United States, including pornography, stripping, escort services and prostitution.²

Misconception:

The prostitution of children only happens overseas, where sex tourism flourishes.

REALITY:

Though sexual exploitation abroad is a travesty, we in the United States should not believe that we are immune. Sexual exploitation of children happens on a large scale here as well. The U.S. State Department has found that many victims of sex trafficking within the United States are girls under the age of 18,³ and the U.S. Department of Justice states that the average age of entry into prostitution in the United States is 12-14 years old.⁴ A 2001 University of Pennsylvania study found that 300,000 youth in the United States alone are at risk of commercial sexual exploitation at any time.⁵

Additionally, the rise of the internet and increased use of technology has made it easier to sexually exploit children everywhere. Pimps use the internet, text messaging, digital and web cameras to set up "dates" for their "girls." The girl never has to leave the van she is sitting in or the hotel room where she has been placed to be exploited.⁶

¹ UNICEF (2006). *Convention on the rights of the child: Optional protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography*. Retrieved May 10, 2010, from http://www.unicef.org/crc/index_30204.html

² Shared Hope International (July 2007). *DEMAND: A comparative examination of sex tourism and trafficking in Jamaica, Japan, The Netherlands, and the United States* [Electronic version]. Retrieved on July 22, 2009, from <http://www.sharedhope.org/files/DEMAND.pdf>

³ U.S. Department of State Human Smuggling and Trafficking Center (December 2008). *Domestic human trafficking: An internal issue* [Electronic version]. Retrieved July 22, 2009, from <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/113612.pdf>

⁴ U.S. Department of Justice, Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section (November 2007). *Domestic sex trafficking of minors*. Retrieved July 22, 2009, from <http://www.usdoj.gov/criminal/ceos/prostitution.htm>

⁵ Fang, B. (2005, October 16). Young lives for sale: Why more kids are getting into the sex trade -- and how the feds are fighting back [Electronic version]. *U.S. News & World Report*. Retrieved on July 15, 2009, from <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/news/articles/051024/24sextraffickers.htm>

⁶ Brantley, N. (June 2009). *Presentation on victims of commercial sexual exploitation*. Motivating, Inspiring, Supporting & Serving Sexually Exploited Youth (MISSEY).

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Misconception:

Teenagers involved in prostitution are delinquent criminals who deserve to be arrested.

REALITY:

According to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), any child under the age of 18 who is used for the purpose of exploitation through sexual servitude (prostitution), regardless of the absence of economic leverage, manipulation, fraud, coercion, threats, force or violence, is considered a victim of a severe form of human trafficking.⁷ Tragically, in the U.S., these children are routinely arrested and charged with prostitution rather than being given the protection of the TVPA and the social services they deserve.⁸ Every act of “prostitution” where a child is involved and a pimp, parent, or other person receives money is actually an act of child rape, human trafficking, and commercial sexual exploitation. Every minor who is involved in “prostitution” is a victim of child abuse.

Misconception:

Kids these days are more sexually aware and should be allowed to choose prostitution as an expression of their sexuality.

REALITY:

Free choice implies free consent. However, when discussing the concept of personal choice and consenting parties, we cannot ignore that these children are not legally old enough in the United States to consent to sex. Therefore, when men “purchase” sex from youth, they commit statutory rape and commercial sexual exploitation of a child.⁹

Moreover, many children in the commercial sex trade became involved precisely because they lack choices. Research has found that many prostituted girls in the United States have run away from abusive living situations or have been thrown out of their own homes.¹⁰ Most runaway, homeless, abused, and at-risk children are approached by pimps and drug dealers within 48 hours of landing on the streets.¹¹ Additionally, a 1994 National Institute of Justice report found that sexually-abused children are 28 times more likely to be arrested for prostitution at some point in their lives than peers who did not suffer abuse.¹² Once involved in prostitution, these minors have even fewer choices, facing venereal disease and suicide attempts as their greatest health risks.¹³ The average life expectancy of only seven years after their entry into prostitution, with homicide and HIV/AIDS as the main causes of death.¹⁴

Regardless of how they became involved in prostitution, children can never consent to being exploited and abused. As stated by ECPAT International, “It is adults who create ‘child prostitution’ through their demand for children as sexual objects, their misuse of power and their desire for profit.”¹⁵

⁷ *Trafficking Victim Protection Act of 2000*, H.R. 3244, 106th Cong., 2nd Sess. (2000).

⁸ Brantley, N. (June 2009). *Framing the issues of commercial sexual exploitation of children*. Motivating, Inspiring, Supporting & Serving Sexually Exploited Youth (MISSEY).

⁹ ECPAT International (2001). *Questions and answers about the commercial sexual exploitation of children* [Electronic version]. Retrieved May 10, 2010, from http://www.ecpat.net/EI/Publications/About_CSEC/FAQ_ENG_2008.pdf

¹⁰ Friedman, S.A. (2005). *Who is there to help us? How the system fails sexually exploited girls in the United States: Examples from four American cities*. Brooklyn, NY: ECPAT/USA.

¹¹ Project to End Human Trafficking, Prostitution Research and Education Center, Breaking Free, and The National Center on Missing and Exploited Children. *Buying sex stops here*.

¹² As quoted in Friedman, S.A. (2005). *Who is there to help us? How the system fails sexually exploited girls in the United States: Examples from four American cities*. Brooklyn, NY: ECPAT/USA.

¹³ Schetky, D.H. (1988). Child pornography and prostitution. In D.H. Schetky and A.H. Green (Eds.), *Child sexual abuse: A handbook for health care and legal professionals*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

¹⁴ Fang, B. (2005, October 16). Young lives for sale: Why more kids are getting into the sex trade—and how the feds are fighting back [Electronic version]. *U.S. News & World Report*. Retrieved on July 15, 2009, at <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/news/articles/051024/24sextraffickers.htm>

¹⁵ ECPAT International (n.d.). *CSEC Terminology: Prostitution of Children*. Retrieved May 10, 2010, from http://www.ecpat.net/EI/Csec_prostitution.asp