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Sex Trafficking of Minors: How Many Juveniles Are Being Prostituted in the US?

Michelle Stransky & David Finkelhor

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There have been many attempts to estimate the number of juveniles who are being prostituted (or trafficked) within the United States. These estimates range from 1,400 to 2.4 million, although most fall between 300,000 and 600,000. **BUT PLEASE DO NOT CITE THESE NUMBERS. READ ON.** A close look at these diverse estimates reveals that none are based on a strong scientific foundation. They are mostly educated guesses or extrapolations based on questionable assumptions. They do not have the substance of typically reported crime statistics, like the number of robberies or the number of child sexual abuse victims. The reality is that we do not currently know how many juveniles are being prostituted. Scientifically credible estimates do not exist.

The most often cited estimates on the prostitution of juveniles (also known as domestic minor sex trafficking) will be described here and their source, along with the major problems with their validity.

Estes and Weiner

Perhaps the most commonly used estimate of juveniles being prostituted comes from Estes and Weiner (2001). These authors concluded in a large, publicized report that about 326,000 children were "at risk for commercial sexual exploitation." However, there are several problems with treating this number as an estimate of juveniles who are subjected to prostitution. First, although this is often cited as an estimate of prostituted minors, even the authors call it something much more nebulous: youth "at risk" of commercial sexual exploitation. "At risk" means it is compilation of youth in various categories (14 in total) – like runaway kids, female gang members – who could become or be involved in commercial sexual exploitation. But the authors had no evidence of how many or what proportion of these youth actually were involved.

Secondly, the numbers that form the basis of their various "at risk" categories are themselves highly speculative. One large portion of the estimate is simply a crude guess that 35% of a national estimate of runaway youth out of their home a week or longer were "at risk."

Another large portion was a guess that one quarter of 1% of the general population of youth 10-17 were "at risk." Together these two groups constitute nearly 200,000 of the at risk youth. But it is essentially a "guesstimate" and not a scientific estimate.

A third problem is that no one has any idea how much duplication there is among the 14 at risk groups. Some of the run-aways are also gang members and living in public housing, etc., so one cannot simply add together estimates from these various sources. A scientific estimate would have to "unduplicate" the numbers from the various categories. In sum, no one should cite the 326,000 number from Estes and Weiner as a scientifically based estimate of the number of prostituted juveniles.

AddHealth Survey

Another estimate with some research credibility is from a recent study by Edwards, Iritani, and Hallfors (2005), which found that 3.5% of an AddHealth sample endorsed an item asking if they had "ever exchanged sex for drugs or money." The nationally representative sample was comprised of 13,294 youth in grades 8-12 during the year 1996 who completed an in-school questionnaire. The majority (67.9%) of those saying they had participated in a sex exchange were males.

A first caveat about this estimate is that it is not clear that what the respondents were endorsing really constituted prostitution. For example, could a juvenile who had paid a prostitute for sex consider that to have been an "exchange of sex for money" and thus said yes to the question? Could a sexual encounter that involved sharing drugs with a partner as part of consensual sex have prompted someone to say yes to the question, even though the drugs were not necessarily a *sine qua non* of the sexual encounter? The similarity between being prostituted and exchanging sex for goods needs to be clarified if this estimate is to be accepted as an estimate of prostituted juveniles.

In addition, the fact that the majority of those endorsing the question were boys raises an important validity question about this estimate. Virtually no analyst of the problem thinks that there are truly so many more boys than girls who are subjected to prostitution; because the survey found more boys, there may be some misunderstanding of the question at work.

It may be possible to obtain an incidence estimate for prostituted minors through a general population survey, but the questions and details will have to be more specific to confirm that what is being counted is truly sexual exploitation by prostitution.

General Accounting Office Report

In 1982, the General Accounting Office attempted to determine the basis of existing estimates of prostituted juveniles. The General Accounting Office (1982) found that the "general perception" estimates ranged from "tens of thousands to 2.4 million." One set of estimates from 1982 seemed to trace back to the "gut hunches" of Robin Lloyd, the author of the 1976 book, "For Love or Money: Boy Prostitution in America," who used a working figure of 300,000 male juveniles prostituted. The President of the Odyssey Institute adopted this figure, then doubled it to cover prostituted female juveniles, increasing the estimate to 600,000. Because the Odyssey Institute president believed that only half of prostituted juveniles were known, the 600,000 figure was doubled; the estimate was doubled once more to 2.4 million because the president believed that the estimate did not include 16 and 17 year old youth who were prostituted. These were all just hunches without scientific basis.

The General Accounting Office (1982) report also located an estimate by the Criminal Justice Institute Inc., which stated that 20 to 25 percent of all prostitutes were minors. The Criminal Justice Institute, Inc. estimated that there were 450,000 prostitutes of all ages, leading to an estimate of 90,000 to 112,500 prostituted juveniles in the U.S. However, these Criminal Justice Institute Inc. estimates are not linked to any citation for methodological verification or explanation. Finally, a New York City shelter president estimated that there were "tens of thousands" of prostituted juveniles across the nation.

These "gut hunch" statistics assembled by the General Accounting Office may have been the basis for some rough consensus among advocates about the magnitude of prostitution of juveniles. But there were no hard statistics. Moreover, whatever the rates were in the 1970s and 1980s, they almost certainly no longer apply. That was an era when the juvenile runaway problem was considerably larger than at present. There is indication that since the 1970s and '80s, running away has declined (Finkelhor & Jones, 2006) and, in the era of AIDS,

casual sexual behavior among the young has also become less frequent (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2005). So it is likely that estimates from 20 or 30 years ago have little applicability to the U.S. at the present time.

Despite the fact that the General Accounting Office estimates are obsolete, current groups concerned with child welfare still use this estimate. For example, Children of the Night (<http://www.childrenofthenight.org/faq.html>) cites the 1982 General Accounting Office estimate of 600,000 prostituted juveniles under the age of 16. This organization also cites UNICEF estimates of 300,000 prostituted juveniles. (In a 2004 textbook entitled "Child Labour: A Textbook for University Students," the International Labour Organization cites the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as estimating 300,000 prostituted minors. When asked to verify this, U.S. DHHS could not locate this estimate.) When asked about the estimates on the Children of the Night website, founder and President Lois Lee responded:

"I am always pressured for statistics and I have said, there is no way to know for sure because there is no counting mechanism, no quantitative analysis on the subject. Several years ago, I suggested to a lot of [government] agencies and NGO's that about 1/3rd of all runaways have some kind of "brush" with a pimp or prostitution. All the professionals agreed that was a good estimate. UNICEF published it as their own."
L. Lee (personal communication, September 29, 2007).

A considerable number of the estimates of prostituted juveniles do start with more scientifically based survey statistics on running away (for example, Hammer, Finkelhor & Sedlak, 2002), which suggest that hundreds of thousands of youth run away every year. It might seem plausible that a significant percentage of runaway street youths are prostituted in survival sex or by third party exploiters such as pimps. But it is important to remember that most of the youth identified as runaways in survey samples are not truly on the streets (Hammer et al., 2002). Most runaways run to the homes of friends and family. Thus, it is not accurate to simply think about the experience of street runaways and generalize from that experience to the experience of all runaways.

Other Estimates

Other organizations do not cite sources that have reliable methodologies. The Coalition against Trafficking in Women (http://www.catwinternational.org/factbook/usa2_prost.php) estimates that there are between 300,000 and 600,000 prostituted minors in the U.S., citing a Beacon Journal news article from 1997. The article, entitled "Danger for Prostitutes Increasing, Most Starting Younger," cited Gary Costello of the Exploited Child Unit of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, but did not include a discussion of the way that the estimate was calculated.

The 1995 Progress of Nations report by UNICEF (<http://www.unicef.org/pong95/progtoc.html>) offers a “guesstimate” of 300,000 prostituted youth in the U.S. under the age of 18. The UNICEF report cited a U.S. National Center for Missing and Exploited Children estimate used in UNICEF’s “Breaking the Walls of Silence: A UNICEF Background Paper on the Sexual Exploitation of Children” report from 1994. Again, there was no discussion as to how this number was derived in the Progress of Nations report. Similarly, the Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section (CEOS) of the U.S. Department of Justice (<http://www.usdoj.gov/criminal/ceos/prostitution.html>) reports that 293,000 juveniles are at risk for commercial sexual exploitation. This estimate was made based on the Estes and Weiner (2001) article discussed previously.

Some figures for “sex trafficking of children” are also available, but once again with a speculative methodology — a “computer simulation.” Clawson, Layne, and Small (2006) estimated in a statistically very complicated report that over 800,000 females, including over 100,000 under age 19, were “at risk” of being trafficked to the US from eight nations: Columbia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Mexico. These include trafficking for all purposes, including for employment. Of those at risk, the authors estimate that roughly 15,000 females under nineteen were being trafficked for sex from those nations. However, the authors concede that these estimates are not informed by any real statistics or research about the true rates of adult or child sex trafficking, but rather that the estimates are “probabilit[ies] based on a mathematical equation, not a reality” (M. Layne 2/4/2008).

Police Data

Complicating this subject is the dual status of victim and offender that juveniles who are prostituted often have in the criminal justice system. There are also national estimates from law enforcement sources about the number of juveniles taken into custody because of prostitution and related crimes. For example, the FBI’s Uniform Crime Report data analyzed by Snyder and Sickmund (2006) shows that 1,400 juveniles were arrested nationally in 2003 for prostitution and commercialized vice. These data come from aggregating data from most of the local law enforcement agencies in the U.S., and are the same data used to estimate year-to-year estimates in violent and property crime.

This is a plausible estimate of the number of youth arrested for prostitution and commercialized vice because, in truth, not many law enforcement agencies are actively arresting youth in regard to this problem, as CCRC has shown (<http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/CV186.pdf>).

But there is undoubtedly more prostitution of youth; law enforcement officials believe many prostituted minors are arrested for other crimes (e.g., drug possession, curfew violation, etc.) but not prostitution per se. Most observers believe also that there are also many prostituted youth who are never arrested by police. So, while this UCR estimate is plausible, no one believes this estimate fully characterizes the problem. It is rarely cited, even as part of a spectrum of estimates, perhaps because it would so lower the range as to make the higher estimates seem more extreme.

Conclusion

As this critique of estimates suggest, there is currently no reliable estimate of juveniles who are prostituted in the US. Some current estimates are based upon “gut hunches” and “guesstimates” from almost thirty years ago. Others offer definitions of sexual exchanges that may not actually constitute prostitution. Also, the methods used to create these estimates are often difficult to find, making them methodologically suspect. Organizations may recognize these problems but continue to cite such poorly calculated estimates.

People concerned about the problem very much want there to be a number that they can cite. Because other people have cited numbers, there has come to be a “collective intuition” about the rough magnitude based on these earlier claims. But in reality there is little scientific substance behind any of them. This is not an uncommon phenomenon in social problem analysis and has been called the “Woozle Effect” (Gelles 1980). The “Woozle Effect” occurs when one writer reports an estimate based on a typically weak methodology or “guesstimate” that is subsequently cited by other writers, but without the first writer’s caveats (Gelles 1980). Estimates of prostituted juveniles seem to have taken this path: the “gut hunches” of one author and the compiling of such hunches by the General Accounting Office have seemed to provide a basis for contemporary estimates of juveniles who are prostituted, despite the fact that the General Accounting Office states that the estimates in the literature are “general perceptions” (General Accounting Office, 1982).

What are journalists and scholars to do?

It is our suggestion that in the absence of any estimates with any good scientific basis, that scholars, writers and advocates stop using the unsubstantiated estimates and simply indicate that the true incidence is currently unknown. It is very frustrating to write about a topic and not have an estimate of its magnitude, but we believe that continued citation of unsupported estimates gives them credibility. Even writing that “No one knows how many juveniles are being prostituted, but estimates have been made from 1,400 to 2.4 million,” contributes to the problem. It gives people the impression that these are knowledgeable estimates about the current situation and that the real number lies somewhere in the middle of that range, which it may not.

For brief treatments of the problem, one can say simply: "Unfortunately, there are no credible or supported estimates about the size of the problem." For more extended treatments of the problem, one can cite some of the statistics, but then indicate that these numbers are based mostly on guesses or extremely imprecise and speculative methodologies. It would be a good idea when citing any numbers to be sure to include the low end estimate from law enforcement of 1,400, since this is among the most recent and clearly defined of the estimates, and counters the assumption that all the estimates are large.

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