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CRIMES AGAINST

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

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There are frequently cited statistics about the number of juveniles who are being prostituted (or trafficked) within the United States. The numbers 300,000 and 100,000 are widely used. A close look at these estimates, however, reveals that none are based on a scientific foundation. They are guesses or extrapolations based on questionable assumptions. They do not have the substance of typically reported crime statistics, such as 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.** The best estimates using scientific methods suggest much smaller numbers, but also may miss a considerable part of the problem.

This bulletin will review some of the estimates and their weaknesses.

Most Widely Cited Estimate

The most commonly used estimate of juveniles being prostituted comes from Estes and Weiner (Estes & Weiner, 2001). These authors concluded in a large, publicized report that about 326,000 children were "at risk for commercial sexual exploitation." This number has been highlighted as recently as 2016 in a peer-reviewed journal without qualification (Kruger et al., 2016).

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 a 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 runaways 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.

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 (U.S. General Accounting Office) 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 prostituted juveniles. 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

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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 (U.S. General Accounting Office) 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.

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 the 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.. 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 (2006) 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 (Hilowitz et al., 2004). 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 youth who run 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 through 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 homeless runaways (who are not well counted) and generalize to the experience of all runaways.

Some other figures for “sex trafficking of children” are also available from academic sources, but once again with a speculative methodology—a “computer simulation.” Clawson, Layne, and Small (2007) 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 “probabilist[ies] based on a mathematical equation, not a reality” (personal communication, M. Layne 2/4/2008,).

More Scientific Estimates

There are some other systematic studies about the problem but they have serious weaknesses, too.

The National Juvenile Prostitution Survey sent questionnaires to a representative national sample of 2,598 state, county, and local law enforcement agencies asking them whether they had made arrests or detentions of juveniles engaged in prostitution (Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2010).

The question read: “In the calendar year 2005, did your agency detain or arrest any juveniles for crimes involving prostitution?”

Using weighted data, the study calculated that there were an estimated 1,450 arrests/detentions of juveniles for crimes related to juvenile prostitution in the United States in 2005 with the 95% confidence interval ranging from 1,287 to 1,614.

This is a scientific estimate, but it is based only on arrests/detentions of juveniles, and it is well known that many youth engaged in prostitution are not arrested or detained.

Another systematic study, Youth Involvement in the Sex Trade, interviewed 949 youth in six sites, using a Respondent Driven Sampling methodology, that is, having youth recruit other youth whom they knew to be involved (Swaner, Labriola, Rempel, Walker, & Spadafore, 2016). The sites were high risk locales, Atlantic City, the Bay Area, Miami, Dallas, Chicago, and Las Vegas. Based on the fact that 10-13% of the youth engaged in prostitution said they had been arrested, the study made an estimate that about 10,500 were engaged in prostitution nationwide in 2009 with a range of about 4,500 to 21,000. The study came to this conclusion by extrapolating from the number of arrests reported by law enforcement. However, the study also recognized that their methodology may have missed youth tightly controlled by pimps or other exploiters.

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Another study experimented with a different method for counting cases beyond those known to police and professionals. Through direct observation, they tried to estimate the number of “youthful girls” in marketplaces such as the street, major hotels, over the internet and through escort services. For Atlanta, the jurisdiction with the most complete set of observations, they estimated that 200-300 adolescent girls were engaged in commercial sex activity each month from August 2007 to May 2008 (The Schapiro Group, 2008, 2010). This is similar to the range found for major urban areas in the Youth Involvement study. But it also had major weaknesses in that the study did not know the actual age of youth being observed, some of whom may have been over 18, and it also may have missed some of the relevant population.

Official Police Statistics

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) showed 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 (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2010).

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 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.

Other Problem Statistics

Because we do not have good representative samples of juveniles engaged in prostitution, firm statistics about their histories are also suspect. One statistic that gets a lot of repetition is the idea that the “average age of entry into prostitution” for juveniles is 12-14, cited in recent reviews of the problem (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014). There is no credible source in the research literature for this estimate. It has flaws at face value because “average age” would suggest large numbers

entering before that age to counterbalance those entering after that age.

The treatment and advocacy group Polaris Project has disavowed this factoid (McCartin, 2016) saying that “this stat is not actually supported by any data.” This should not be misunderstood. There certainly may be a lot of young teens involved in prostitution. It is also well-established that many of those involved in prostitution were sexually abused or exploited by someone (often a family member) much earlier in their lives, setting the stage for them to become engaged in the later commercial use of their sexuality (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2013). But there is no good science behind the idea that juveniles engaged in prostitution on average or mostly began these commercial activities between 12 and 14.

Another questionable factoid pertaining to the sexual exploitation of youths is that 1 in 6 runaways are *likely* sex trafficking victims. This estimate is based on data from 18,500 runaway cases reported to NCMEC in 2016. Many youth engaged in prostitution do start out as runaways. But running away is a very common youth problem, estimated at up to 357,000 reported to the police per year, most of which do not get reported to NCMEC. The sexual exploitation rate among runaways in general is undoubtedly much lower than those in the NCMEC report population. This is suggested by the NISMART, in which it was found that less than 1% of runaways were thought to have been engaged in commercial sex, according to caregiver reports (Hammer et al., 2002).

Unfortunately, the research on this topic is in its early stages and few of the most commonly cited findings have a strong empirical basis.

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. Also, the methods used to create many 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,” named after a Winnie-the-Pooh episode, occurs when one writer reports an estimate based on a typically weak methodology or “guesstimate” that is subsequently cited by

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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 clearly defined of the estimates, and counters the assumption that all the estimates are large.

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