

The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Youth in Washington State:

2010 Survey Results and Recommendations

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for

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Background

Though not a new phenomenon, the heightened awareness of the commercial sexual exploitation of children in Washington State and across the country has illuminated the magnitude and impacts of this crime. While data in this field is limited, nationally it has been estimated that 100,000 to 300,000 children are at risk for commercial sexual exploitation each year (Estes and Weiner, 2001). Additionally, approximately 70-90 percent of commercially sexually exploited children have a history of child sexual abuse (Murphy, 1993).

Those who already provide services to sexual assault survivors are well-positioned to implement prevention strategies and respond to commercially sexually exploited youth. It cannot be assumed, however, that these programs inherently possess all of the tools and resources necessary to consistently and intentionally address the unique and complex needs of this population. Furthermore, there are currently a limited number of other organizations and resources that are specifically designed to serve youth who are commercially sexually exploited. Efforts must be made to support programs' capacity-building endeavors and to increase their ability to effectively identify, respond and reach out to survivors. Towards this goal, WCSAP developed and administered a survey addressing this topic in the fall of 2010.

Methodology

The purpose of the survey was to “explore commercial sexual exploitation services, experiences, and training needs regarding working with victims and survivors in communities.” It was designed in an effort to gather general information regarding the extent to which this issue is affecting programs across Washington State, how they are subsequently responding, and what types of assistance would be most beneficial to their work.

The survey was sent to a total of 410 people, including community sexual assault program managers, advocates and staff, WCSAP program members, and marginalized/Native American/specialized/child-centered OCVA contractors. In an effort to solicit responses representative of the breadth of this problem, the survey framing broadly defined the commercial sexual exploitation of youth as “any situation in which anyone under the age of 18 performs a sex act or is otherwise sexually exploited and something of value, financial or otherwise, is exchanged. This may include but is not limited to circumstances in which: a third party benefits from this exchange; international or interstate travel is involved.” Survey questions were multiple choice and open-ended. 40 people completed the survey entirely, and 55 people completed some portion of the survey.

Key Findings

Prevalence

Survey results revealed that 34 percent of respondents knew that youth victims of domestic or international sexual exploitation are seeking services from their agencies. However, nearly 70 percent responded that their agency currently works with homeless and/or at-risk youth. The disparity between these percentages raises questions for further exploration when considering the connections between homeless and at-risk youth and commercial sexual exploitation. For

example, a study of homeless youth in Seattle found that 41 percent had been sexually exploited in survival sex or prostitution; 47 percent of females and 37 percent of males were propositioned to sell sex (Wagner, Carlin, Cauce, & Tenner, 2001). Just over half of WCSAP's survey participants said that their agency has not developed any questions, protocols, or procedures to help identify this population. It is quite possible, therefore, that programs are serving a larger number of commercially sexually exploited youth than they are aware of.

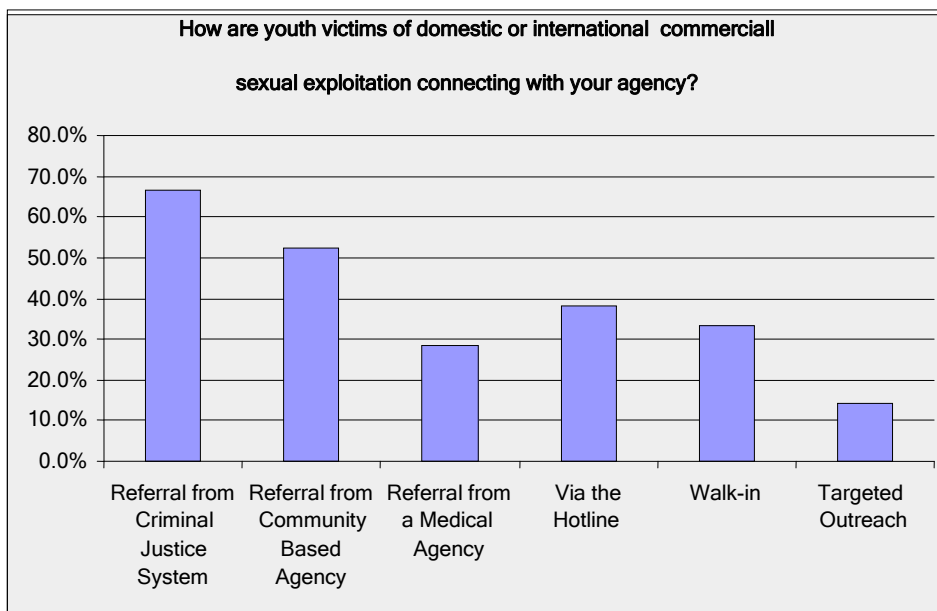
Service Provision

17 people reported that they had personally provided services to exploited youth in the past two years. As indicated by the responses shown below, survivors of domestic commercial sexual exploitation are receiving services in much greater numbers than survivors of international commercial sexual exploitation. Survey participants reported providing a range of services, with 100 percent of respondents providing Information and Referral in the course of their work with survivors.

| How many have been victims of <i>domestic</i> commercial sexual exploitation? | | |
|---|------------------|----------------|
| Answer Options | Response Percent | Response Count |
| 1-5 | 50.0% | 8 |
| 6-10 | 31.3% | 5 |
| 11-15 | 12.5% | 2 |
| 16-20 | 6.3% | 1 |
| 20+ | 0.0% | 0 |

| How many have been victims of <i>international</i> commercial sexual exploitation? | | |
|--|------------------|----------------|
| Answer Options | Response Percent | Response Count |
| 1-5 | 100.0% | 5 |
| 6-10 | 0.0% | 0 |
| 11-15 | 0.0% | 0 |
| 16-20 | 0.0% | 0 |
| 20+ | 0.0% | 0 |

As illustrated in the graph below, youth are primarily accessing services through referrals from the criminal justice system and other community-based agencies. This aligns with individual comments indicating that collaboration with local juvenile detention centers and youth shelters is a promising strategy for connecting with survivors and building a coordinated community response.



Challenges

While some of the challenges in working with this population are connected to the dynamics and cultural characteristics of individual communities, several overarching themes emerged in participants' survey responses. Specifically, housing issues and barriers to disclosure appear to be central concerns across Washington State.

It is important to highlight that participants' comments related to housing not only focused on the lack of housing specifically designed to serve commercially sexually exploited youth but also on the impacts of restrictive shelter policies. Several people referred to their inability to shelter unaccompanied minors and the resulting scarcity of bed space for those under 18. One survey response also addressed the reality that even if they are available, shelters may not be inherently safe and secure for this population. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some shelters have instead become an area of focus for pimps' recruitment efforts.

The general lack of resources for victims, such as housing, transportation, counseling, education and employment alternatives, and culturally and linguistically appropriate services, represents a challenge in itself. Unfortunately, this may also impact survivors' willingness to disclose their experiences or needs. Building relationships with and gaining the trust of youth who have been sexually exploited is already a difficult process but as one individual explained, this is compounded when service providers cannot meet their needs. "The risks they take with disclosure outweigh the help that I can offer."

Survey Limitations

The limitations of these findings primarily relate to the method used for information gathering. Though a very practical method for reaching stakeholders across the state, surveys can also be constraining in the breadth and depth of information they are able to provide. In contrast to interview methodology, survey designs prevent a more thorough understanding of participants' perspectives due to brief open-ended responses and the lack of context for these responses. Thus, analysis of the survey data is also fairly restricted.

The response rate for this survey was 13.4 percent. Additionally, because some respondents did not answer every question in the survey, the percentage data is not based on a consistent number of responses for each question. This survey and its results serve as a first step in the process of developing a comprehensive understanding of programs' experiences and perspectives in regards to working with survivors of commercial sexual exploitation in Washington State.

Recommendations

Given the significant overlap between child sexual abuse (CSA) and commercial sexual exploitation, service providers who are working with survivors of CSA or other identified at-risk youth can have a central role in prevention and education. Practical tips on how to talk with youth about the realities of sexual exploitation, recruitment into "the life" and alternatives would enable advocates to be involved in prevention and intervention efforts.

Simultaneously, we must also address one of the primary impediments to effective service delivery: identifying youth survivors of commercial sexual exploitation. The absence of specific tools designed to help programs identify victims and the need for skill-building in this area vocalized by survey participants indicates that this should be a focus of future trainings and resource development. Such efforts should account for the diverse contexts in which identification may occur and thus be designed for sexual assault/youth advocates *and* their system partners. However, if increased identification is to truly benefit survivors, providers must also expand their awareness of other community resources and have access to opportunities to build their skill-set in working with this population. Finally, it should be noted that even if programs have the knowledge and tools needed to identify and serve youth survivors of commercial sexual exploitation, their ability to respond to the complex needs of this population is largely impacted by more basic capacity issues (time, people, funding, community resources).

Several survey participants commented that this problem has not surfaced in their communities. This may be an indicator of the previously discussed need for protocols and procedures aimed at identifying survivors. It may also relate to additional feedback received that there is a limited understanding of how this problem is manifesting in rural areas, as almost all of the trainings and materials have approached the topic from an urban context. While this information is helpful, it does not wholly apply to a significant portion of programs in Washington State. Before we can begin to address the disparity in resources (i.e., community services, housing, mental health, program capacity) between rural and urban settings, we must first gather additional information on commercial sexual exploitation in rural communities. Once we know what it

looks like and how service provision may differ, we will be in a better position to develop appropriate and practical resources.

Several survey questions specifically elicited suggestions for future trainings, resource development, and beneficial next steps regarding the commercial sexual exploitation of youth. The most common requests included:

- training on effective methods for identifying survivors of commercial sexual exploitation and engaging them in services
- information on culturally competent service delivery to survivors and additional resources to reduce language and cultural barriers between service providers and youth
- information and training on the dynamics that may be present in situations involving pimp control and how this may impact a survivor's decision-making
- prevention materials and strategies for working with at-risk youth
- training, materials, and education for clients, the general public, and system partners

Several responses also referenced the importance of finding ways to involve survivors in our work and honor their experiences when generating solutions and strategies.

Finally, multiple people requested guidance in regards to organizational policies and procedures that are sensitive to the challenges faced by sexually exploited youth. For example, it appears that some agencies have amended their intake process to include questions about prostitution, survival sex, sexual exploitation, etc. While helpful to the identification of survivors, subsequent mandatory reporting requirements also have significant implications for youth who are seeking services. Broadly speaking, how can we reduce barriers to access and be responsive to their needs while still fulfilling the responsibilities and respecting the restrictions that come along with our roles and our funding? This question indicates a need to reassess, clarify and potentially revise existing agency practices to incorporate these considerations.

Conclusion

The information gathered from this survey highlighted those areas that require further attention and additional resources. It also identified that programs have been adaptive and innovative in responding to this problem despite existing resource and knowledge gaps. Some of the practices that are already being implemented, such as system coordination, have proven to be quite valuable in this context but we must also continue to expand our thinking and relationship-building efforts beyond traditional system partners. While there seems to be a general awareness of the problem of commercial sexual exploitation, there is still a lack of practical and advanced information and training on how to effectively respond to the unique challenges that service providers may face while reaching out to and serving commercially sexually exploited youth. This is especially true for those who are working in the rural areas of Washington State. Finally, the insights gained through this initial survey warrant further information-gathering to guide future work. The perspectives of service providers and survivors are invaluable as we continue to develop and implement new strategies and resources to support these youth.

References

- Estes, R.J. & Weiner, N.A. (2001). *The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada and Mexico*. University of Pennsylvania, School of Social Work, Center for the Study of Youth Policy.
- Murphy, P. (1993). *Making the connections: Women, Work and Abuse*. Paul M. Deutsche Press, Orlando, FL.
- Wagner, L., L. Carlin, A. Cauce and A. Tenner. (2001). *A Snapshot of Homeless Youth in Seattle: Their Characteristics, Behaviors and Beliefs About HIV Protective Strategies*. *Journal of Community Health*, 26(3),219-232.

Appendix A: Compiled Survey Results

Has your agency developed any questions, protocols or procedures to help identify youth victims of commercial sexual exploitation (domestic or international)?

| Answer Options | Response Percent | Response Count |
|-------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| yes | 20.8% | 11 |
| no | 50.9% | 27 |
| unsure | 28.3% | 15 |
| If yes, please describe | | 7 |

Are youth victims of domestic or international commercial sexual exploitation seeking services from your agency?

| Answer Options | Response Percent | Response Count |
|----------------|------------------|----------------|
| yes | 34.0% | 18 |
| no | 34.0% | 18 |
| unsure | 32.1% | 17 |

If yes, how are they connecting with your agency? (Please check all that apply)

| Answer Options | Response Percent | Response Count |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Referral from Criminal Justice System | 66.7% | 14 |
| Referral from Community Based Agency | 52.4% | 11 |
| Referral from a Medical Agency | 28.6% | 6 |
| Via the Hotline | 38.1% | 8 |
| Walk-in | 33.3% | 7 |
| Targeted Outreach | 14.3% | 3 |
| Other (please specify) | | 5 |

Does your agency currently work with homeless and/or at-risk youth?

| Answer Options | Response Percent | Response Count |
|--|------------------|----------------|
| yes | 69.8% | 37 |
| no | 17.0% | 9 |
| unsure | 13.2% | 7 |
| If yes, please describe how you address the potential for sexual exploitation and discuss any resources that would enable you to better serve homeless and/or at-risk youth in this capacity | | 21 |

Have you personally provided services to commercially sexually exploited youth in the past 2 years?

| Answer Options | Response Percent | Response Count |
|----------------|------------------|----------------|
| yes | 32.7% | 17 |
| no | 67.3% | 35 |

How many have been victims of *domestic* commercial sexual exploitation?

| Answer Options | Response Percent | Response Count |
|----------------|------------------|----------------|
| 1-5 | 50.0% | 8 |
| 6-10 | 31.3% | 5 |
| 11-15 | 12.5% | 2 |
| 16-20 | 6.3% | 1 |
| 20+ | 0.0% | 0 |

How many have been victims of *international* commercial sexual exploitation?

| Answer Options | Response Percent | Response Count |
|----------------|------------------|----------------|
| 1-5 | 100.0% | 5 |
| 6-10 | 0.0% | 0 |
| 11-15 | 0.0% | 0 |
| 16-20 | 0.0% | 0 |
| 20+ | 0.0% | 0 |

Please check all of the services that you provided.

| Answer Options | Response Percent | Response Count |
|--------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Crisis Intervention | 81.3% | 13 |
| Information and Referral | 100.0% | 16 |
| Housing Assistance | 25.0% | 4 |
| Medical Advocacy | 62.5% | 10 |
| Legal Advocacy | 75.0% | 12 |
| Other (please specify) | | 2 |

Have you attended any trainings on this topic in the past 2 years?

| Answer Options | Response Percent | Response Count |
|----------------|------------------|----------------|
| yes | 69.2% | 27 |
| no | 30.8% | 12 |