

Research Brief - Sexual Exploitation of Youth



Centre of Excellence for Children and Adolescents with Special Needs UNBC Task Force on Substance Abuse

The sexual exploitation of youth through prostitution is defined as “any child or youth under the age of 18 who is engaged in the sex trade by choice or circumstances” (Preventing Violence, 2002).

Sexually exploited youth have often been regarded as prostitutes who have chosen their life-style. It is just recently that the fact that these children are abused and exploited during the sex trade has been recognized and relevant research, prevention, and intervention services and programs have been provided for them.

Background

It has been estimated that 10 – 15% of prostitutes on the street are youth and 70 – 80% of Canada's adult sex-trade workers begin as children.

The age of children involved in sexual exploitation range from 13 to 19, although some are as young as 10 and under.

In terms of gender, adolescent girls are over represented in the sex trade. It is reported that the ratio of girls to boys that are sexually exploited is four to one.

The impact of sexual exploitation on youth

The most common reported negative impact of sexual exploitation on youth includes: substance abuse, suicide, poorer health, HIV and AIDS, pregnancy, dropping out of school at an early age, and exposure to violence.

Approximately 90 % of sexually exploited youth abuse drugs.

Risk factors for sexual exploitation of youth

The research done in the field of sexual exploitation of youth agrees that there is a combination of several risk factors causing youth to become involved in the sex trade. The major risk factors include dysfunctional or broken families, poverty, a history of abuse, running away from home, low self-esteem, and conflict over sexual orientation.

Services and programs

Different programs and services can be provided depending on the youth's needs. These services are divided into four categories; prevention, harm reduction, crisis intervention services, and programs to assist leaving the sex trade.

Prevention approaches target the general and high-risk population before they become involved in the sex trade. Prevention programs usually target systemic issues such as racism, poverty, broken families and experience of abuse.

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Information for this brief was garnered from a review of relevant literature in 2003. Please contact the UNBC Task Force for a bibliography.

Centre of Excellence for Children and Adolescents with Special Needs
UNBC Task Force on Substance Abuse
University of Northern British Columbia
3333 University Way
Prince George, BC V2N 4Z9
special@unbc.ca

(250) 960-5806 phone
(250) 960-5644 fax
www.unbc.ca/centreca



Prevention programs require a multi-dimensional approach that includes education, structural changes and community support.

Harm reduction approaches are designed to reduce the harm and negative impact of the sexual exploitation on youth when they are involved with the sex trade. Some strategies of harm reduction approaches include 'bad date' databases, sexual and reproductive health education, distributing information about resources and services, food vans and food banks, needle exchanges and temporary safe housing.

Crisis intervention services provide immediate support to deal with crisis situations during the sex trade. Some of the strategies of crisis intervention include safe and supportive housing, 24-hour drop-in centres, counselling, psychological and medical care, alcohol and drug treatment, and suicide prevention services.

Most sexually exploited youth have left the sex trade more than once.

The process of leaving the street is challenging for the youth. Therefore providing some programs for helping and supporting the youth in order to exit the sex trade are necessary. Strategies to assist children and youth in leaving the sex trade include stronger support for youth (such as drop-in centres and legal and financial supports), safe long-term housing, training programs, and labor market attachment programs.

Barriers to program effectiveness

There are some barriers that limit the effectiveness of suggested programs and services. These barriers can be categorized into four major categories that include:

- *Personal barriers:* economic needs, drug abuse, fear of their pimp, a lack of trust

because of the history of abuse, and lack of self-esteem.

- *Interpersonal barriers:* lack of family support and peer pressure.
- *Community and social barriers:* social stigma around sexual exploitation, and the isolation, rejection and marginalization of sexually exploited youth.
- *Structural and program barriers:* a lack of culturally oriented services (particularly for Aboriginal youth), a lack of social services for males, and inaccessible crisis intervention services at night.

Principles for program design

A number of elements for designing effective programs for sexually exploited youth have been introduced. The most important elements include:

- Youth participation,
- Equity of access to services,
- Youth oriented services,
- Culturally specific programming, and
- A multi-service agency approach.

For more information on this topic see:

The Justice Institute of British Columbia (2002). *Commercial Sexual Exploitation: Innovative Ideas for Working with Children and Youth*. B. C. Canada: Social Services and Community Safety Division Justice Institute of British Columbia.

Goulet, L. E. (2001). *Out from the Shadows: Good Practices in Working with Sexually Exploited Youth in the Americas*. Victoria, BC: University of Victoria.

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