Strategies to address trauma and support resilience among homeless, impoverished and prostituted street youth



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Presented at the SVRI Forum: Moving the Agenda Forward.
12 October 2011, Vineyard Hotel, Cape Town, South Africa.

This project was supported by Grant No. 2006-MU-FX-0060 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

SVRI---MOVING THE AGENDA FORWARD……

University of Massachusetts Lowell



Pathways Project

- University of Massachusetts Lowell and Fair Fund, Inc., together with numerous partners in Boston and Washington, D.C., USA, were funded to conduct an in-depth, field-based study of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) taking a life course perspective in examining the lives of adolescent female and male victims.
- Designed to examine pathways into and out of commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) via prostitution.
- Designed to provide useful information to practice and policy communities to prevent CSEC and increase safety and well being of victims.
- Partnership of researchers and advocates to learn from the voices of youth.



Pathways-- Collaborations

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- Consultants
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  - Keesha Egebrecht
  - Makiko Hotoda
- Community Collaborations
  - A Way Back, Roxbury Youth Works, Dorchester, MA
  - Bridge Over Troubled Water, Boston
  - BAGLY, Boston
  - Covenant House, Washington, DC
  - HIPS, Washington, DC
  - Polaris Project, Washington, DC
  - ROCA, Chelsea MA
  - Sasha Bruce House, DC
  - Support to End Exploitation Now (SEEN) Coalition, Boston
  - Vera Institute of Justice, Washington and New York
  - Youth on Fire, Cambridge, MA
  - Young Adult Advisory Committees– Boston and DC
  - Law Enforcement in Boston and D.C.



Inadequacy of prior research…. How do we move the agenda forward?

- CSEC is *understudied* due to secrecy of the behaviors and fact that often the prostituted children are "thrownaways," or are poor, minority, runaway or drug-involved and garner little sustained public concern or attention.
- Prior research often based on select sample of cases known to police and pimp involved.
- Treatment approaches developed from research on other types of child sexual abuse, for example intrafamilial child sexual abuse, may not apply to CSEC.



Qualitative research and data analysis

This research relied on a mixed method and highly collaborative design with a strong qualitative research focus.

Qualitative research:

- in-depth, case-oriented study of a small number of cases
- detailed knowledge with the goal of finding out "how" things happen
- goal is to "make the facts understandable"-- less emphasis on deriving inferences or predictions from cross-case patterns
- driven by concern for the inadequacy of existing theory, a desire to advance new theories, and an interest in critically evaluating the tenets or assumptions of widely held explanations.

Interview guidelines –however, focus was on the teens' accounts they way they wanted to tell it… recent good day, recent bad day, 3 important things for them… etc.



Our Participants

- Interviews with 61 teens in the USA. (Boston metropolitan area and Washington, DC.) --streets, drop in centers, shelters.
- About half had some CSEC involvement either directly or through connection to others– the rest were high risk runaways.
- The participants included females, males and transgendered youth and those who self identified as Black or African American, Hispanic, White, Asian American, Native American and many other ethnic and immigrant groups.
- Today focusing on the girls' stories.



Qualitative data--Pathways In Themes

- Thrownaway, runaway, forgotten youth
- Vulnerable teens-- Acted upon and acting by “choice”
- Use of a variety of tactics by the perpetrators “pimps” (including violence, fear, force, and “grooming”).
- Youth who have grown up “in the system” but also Youth who the system has missed
- Trauma histories



How did they get to the streets? Being thrown out or leaving due to violence in the home…

- Teens reported experiences with family violence including a history of:
  - physical, sexual and emotional abuse
  - attempts to protect siblings from abuse
  - Witness to violence between adults
- Teens end up on the street as an escape from serious family violence or after perpetrating violence (some in self-defense) against parents/ parent figures.
- Others left because they were not cared for, had been dropped off at a shelter, had addicted and incarcerated parents, were homeless, and suffered extreme poverty and neglect.



Key theme: Abandonment – being thrownaway

S: ***My parents both told me when I was younger … they were like, "you are the accident that kept this terrible relationship together" …They are like, "you shouldn't even be here." ….***

You know, sometimes I think maybe she should have gotten that abortion. ….. when I am in need and I ask for help, people are like, "aw .. fuck you!"

Beyond parental abandonment--teens had an acute awareness of their social status and the extreme challenges they faced

I'm at the, I'm at the bottom, you know? … The only place I could really go is up.

One teen said:

"They don't really care about like me and other homeless people…. you know, food is like the only really necessity…. I usually like to eat out of the garbage..."

Extreme poverty in the Teens' Lives

- The accounts of the youth we interviewed reflected experiences with and their awareness of the grim realities of their lives (living in cars or in the subway; stealing food) and their own social position.
- They spoke openly about situations that most adults in the communities they traveled to (all over the US) would prefer not to see (e.g., a teen sleeping in a doorway most nights only a block away from venerated universities or government offices). The youth are indeed "hidden in plain sight."
- Participants' accounts made it apparent that they know their physical and social location.



Perspectives on pathway in …

- Pathways in to CSEC-- teen prostitution also reflects elements of survival and agency. Key theme emerged on the extent to which "the life" was a means of coping and micro-control.
  - Shelter
  - Food
  - Money
  - A "family"
  - Treated like a "queen"

Later Experiences of Physical Violence in "the Life" challenge the survivability and competes with attraction of the $$$

Teens spoke of the violence the pimp perpetrated against other females: *She was in the tub … bleeding from her eyes… bleeding from her lips…bleeding from her nose.*

I've seen people shot in the head in front of me over it...seen girls get shot… And I was just like "what am I gonna do?" I had nobody so that's the only thing I knew how to do.

So why do they stay? Accounts reveal manipulation by pimps combined with the material goods:

The money, it feels good… when you have cars, the clothes, the jewelry. All that feels good but when you're jumpin' in and out of cars, sleepin' with this guy and that guy, you feel nasty. You feel like you're not wanted and that's when the pimp comes in to make you feel like you're wanted… You know what I mean?

Implications for service providers -- change approach to commercial sexual exploitation of children

Change the way we think about CSEC survivors: need a more nuanced understanding of harm and survival -- While to outsiders this life does not even barely resemble "survival," the youth have negotiated life at a very young age to deal with hunger and poverty and "survived" the violence in their homes, on the streets and in "the life." For some teens simply being alive means they have already "saved" themselves. This may explain why some express resentment at and resistance to being "rescued." New approaches to services are needed.

Change the way we provide services: The youth are internal migrants who reside in and cross multiple jurisdictions—this calls for innovative coordinated social responses across jurisdictions boundaries. Need to move away from a family-based and geographically bound service model.

Implications for service providers -- change approach to commercial sexual exploitation of children

<u>Change the Societal response:</u>

These children are hidden in plain sight --"disappeared" except when they are on a stroll or advertised on-line. They are the victims of the commoditization of sex – the men who pay for sex with teens go unpunished.

As one teen who was 13 when she "turned her first trick" said,

When you're a female you can make any street a strip and that's what we call it, a "strip." Any person, if you look good enough and if you're showin' enough, any person's gonna pull over --and that's anywhere you are. You know what I mean? Do you understand that?



Summary of Key challenges for developing Interventions for Street Youth and Prostituted Teens

- Develop ways to reach, build and maintain connections with youth on the streets (use of internet and electronic networking devices and social networking sites). Need to get smarter than the pimps!
- Interventions for those with complex trauma
- Figure out who will take the place of the families
- Professionals and youth mentors with training on and specialized knowledge about CSEC



Need to change our approach to youth … to avoid re-recruitment

- Recognition of the difficult steps they are taking and their survivor strengths– some second chances as well
- Assistance locating safe places to live that do not totally discount their abilities to exercise responsible choice.
- Empowering rules they can live with
- Opportunity to participate in planning the steps for a positive future.
- Opportunity to build a new, healthy support system
- Opportunity to complete their education
- Quality services for teens aging-out of the youth services systems.

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