



Pathways to Commercial Sexual Victimization of Children: Learning from Youth in a Qualitative Research Study

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Pathways Project

- University of Massachusetts Lowell and Fair Fund, Inc., along with partners in Boston and Washington, D.C., are conducting an in-depth field-based study of CSEC taking a life course perspective in examining the lives of female and male victims, with a focus on prostituted teens.



Approach to the Research

- This research uses a mixed method and highly collaborative design with a strong qualitative research focus.
- A critical component of the project is that it integrates researchers, service providers, grassroots organizers and an advisory board of young women and men who have escaped CSEC into the design, data collection process, data analysis and dissemination.
- Another critical component is the project seeks to listen to the voices of the youth themselves– through their narrative accounts of their lives and pathways to CSEC.



Pathways-- Collaborations

- Consultants
 - Lisa Grace
 - Ben Saunders
 - Kerry Seitz
 - Neil Weiner
- Staff
 - Mary Frederick
 - Samantha Markham
 - Anneli Strandberg
 - Tara Graham
 - Cherie Jiminez
 - Meaghan Shaw
- Community Collaborations
 - Bridge Over Troubled Water, Boston
 - Covenant House, Washington, DC
 - HIPPS, Washington, DC
 - Polaris, Washington, DC
 - ROCA, Chelsea MA
 - SMAYL, Washington, DC
 - Teen Prostitution Prevention Project, Suffolk Co CAC, Boston
 - Vera Institute of Justice, Washington and New York
 - Youth on Fire, Cambridge, MA
 - Youth Advisory Group– Boston and DC
 - Law enforcement agencies



Current research

- The Pathways Project is 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
 - juvenile and criminal justice systems
 - social service and public health providers
 - not-for-profit youth-serving agencies, and communities

To increase the safety and well being of victimized girls and boys.



Approach to the research design

- Our research design is based on our conclusion that there is a need for **life course and community approaches** to developing policy and practice responses to CSEC via prostitution.
- Factors that propel involvement in prostitution are likely to vary for boys and girls and for youth across life course stages as each confronts different lifetime challenges, opportunities, and milestones.
- Understanding these dynamics is central to understanding when and how to intercede and whether to do so as a prevention or intervention strategy.



Current research

- The goals of the project are to:
 1. understand the adolescent victims' perspectives;
 2. identify the factors (individual, family, peer, school, and community contexts) associated with the commencement of CSEC;
 3. identify factors that surround its maintenance and escalation;
 4. identify factors that impede or empower exiting from or overcoming exploitative situations; and
 5. provide concrete recommendations to policymakers, community-based organizations, government agencies, and law enforcement on policies and programs that could help prevent future CSEC or help current CSEC victims access services



Pathways Project – inadequacy of prior research and theory

- Despite some important research on child and teen prostitution, the *sexual victimization of youth via prostitution has been understudied...*
 - sexual violence via prostitution may have escaped attention in large part because of the secrecy of the behaviors
 - Further contributing to the neglect of this crime is the fact that often the prostituted children are “throwaways,” or are poor, minority, runaway or drug-involved and garner little sustained public concern or attention because they are not empowered constituencies.
 - Reliance on theories of child traumatic stress and conceptualizations developed from research on child sexual abuse may not be sufficient for understanding this phenomena.



Pathways Project – early observations

- ***Stereotypes* that were in existence 30 years ago about child sexual abuse still exist today in regard to CSEC.**
 - “he asked for it,” “she seduced him,” “he didn’t know she was under age”
- Very little is known about boys and CSEC



Research Methods

- ***Focus groups* composed of**
 - (a) participating key agency partners who are representatives of law enforcement, social service agencies and non-governmental organizations that intervene in CSEC and
 - (b) young adults currently or previously involved in CSEC.

These focus groups occur at several points in the study

- They are designed to assist in:
 - refining our participant identification and recruitment strategies
 - refining our interview protocol
 - reviewing results and assisting in the interpretation and dissemination of findings so that they will be most useful for policy and practice communities.



Research Methods

- Key informant interviews With girls and boys involved in CSEC via prostitution and with teens who are runaways at high risk for such victimization experiences
 - in order to probe for detailed information about the causes/correlates of CSEC and the service needs of the victims (and impediments to accessing such services)
- In Boston and Washington, D.C., we are interviewing 100 adolescents (males and females, aged 14-19) who have experienced sexual violence via teen prostitution or who are runaways at risk for such victimization experiences.
- Adolescents will be predominately runaway, homeless, or “thrown away” youth.



Interview Elements

- Demographic characteristics and living situations
- History and dynamics of violence and exploitation
- History of interaction with social services, CBOs, and schools
- Peer interactions and supports
- Risk/protective/resiliency factors
- Health, medical and other self-described needs, service access, and impediments to access
- Awareness, utilization of resources and supports when exiting CSEC
- Juvenile/criminal justice history and perceptions of interaction with juvenile justice systems
- Recommendations for changes in systems



Design and Interview Challenges

- Collaboration— *“an unnatural act between non-consenting adults.” Jocelyn Elders*
- Recruitment of youth participants
- Safety (Participant and Interviewer)
- Confidentiality
- On going monitoring of protection of human participants
- Multiple interviewers
- Interview locations and timing
- Incentives– the right gift card for the right youth
- Fun with digital recording devices and non-consenting computers
- Debriefing and availability of resources– possible web site
- Youth in Danger Protocol– suicidality, homicidality and imminent risk of severe harm
- Snowball sample– still a question for us
- Not just paying lip service to collaboration with youth and community in interpreting findings and developing strategies for intervention



Data analysis

- Using the grounded theory approach, our qualitative data will be analyzed at multiple levels in order to explore both the experiences of individuals and the similarities and differences between individuals of different genders, ethnicities and those interviewed in different cities.
- Our analyses will include case-study, cross case, and cross-site approaches. Analyses will be conducted within gender, within race-ethnic group, within city and also across ethnicities and genders, and across race-ethnic groups, genders and cities.
- Analysis of data at the within-case level permits a detailed understanding of the experiences of a particular group whether it be all females or all males or all transgendered youth, several individuals within a particular ethnic group, or several individuals within a city. Analysis at the cross-case and cross-site level will also enhance examination of the intersections of gender, ethnicity and geographic locations.



What we hope to accomplish

- By identifying an appropriate group of adolescent girls and boys, from whom we can directly elicit information, we will be able to begin to map out pathways into CSEC.
- Through the interview process, an interview protocol based on the experiences of survivors, will emerge. *The findings will be helpful in framing future research.*
- Our protocol will provide useful data on individual, family, peer, school and community contexts of CSEC, and serve as a useful tool that scientists, service providers, and policy makers can use in their future work.
- The research approach will facilitate utilization of findings to provide youth-informed policy and programmatic recommendations.



Findings and Implications

- Voices of the victims critical– and need to include communities of color and other understudied groups
- Overcoming the challenges and learning how best to do this work will be part of the benefit of doing this project
- Collaborations take time
- Unique aspects of CSEC are challenging for systems that respond to the problem: (e.g., multiple jurisdictions, distance between communities of support for each teen, and the extent to which these teens are “thrownaway” and disconnected.)



Critical “findings” to date

- Some youth identify classic “child sexual abuse “ as CSEC– one young woman said she traded sex for a place to stay– sex with step father.
- Important to understand social context and ecology of CSEC– invisibility of street youth and disdain for racial and ethnic minority youth.
- Changing landscape of CSEC– Craig’s List
- Important to understand “thrownaway” family context. Also realities of street life– hunger, danger and different mechanisms of social support.
- See individuals as survivors.
- Consider human rights perspectives.



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