

Myths and Facts of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children

Myth:

Individuals in prostitution are consenting adults.

Fact:

The overwhelming majority of those involved in the sex trade are children, teens, and adults who entered the trade before they turned 18, particularly women and girls. An estimated 199,000 children and youth are exploited in the commercial sex trade in the United States every year¹, and one million children worldwide.²

Myth:

The buying and selling of children only happens overseas, where sex tourism flourishes.

Fact:

The sexual exploitation of children happens on a large scale in the United States as well. The U.S. State Department found that the majority of victims of sex trafficking within the United States are girls under the age of 18³, and the average age of entry into prostitution in the United States is 15 years old.⁴ In Washington state, the average age of entry into the commercial sex trade is 14 years old.⁵

Additionally, the increased use of the internet and technology has made it easier to sexually exploit children everywhere. Pimps use the internet, text messaging, digital and web cameras to set up “dates” for the children and youth.⁶ From 2010 to 2015 there was an 846% increase in reports of suspected child sex trafficking attributed directly to the increased use of the Internet to sell children for sex.⁷

Myth:

Teenagers involved in prostitution are delinquent criminals who deserve to be arrested.

Fact:

According to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), any child under the age of 18 who is used for the purpose of exploitation through sexual servitude (prostitution), regardless of the absence of economic leverage, manipulation, fraud, coercion, threats, force or violence, is considered a victim of a severe form of human trafficking.⁸ Tragically, in the U.S., these children are routinely arrested and charged with prostitution rather than being given the protection of the TVPA and the social services they deserve.⁹ Every act of “prostitution” where a child is involved and a pimp, parent, or other person

receives money is an act of child rape, human trafficking, and commercial sexual exploitation. Every minor who is involved in “prostitution” is a victim of child abuse.

In Washington state, “Safe Harbor” legislation was passed to better help child survivors of sex trafficking by:

- Prohibiting anyone under the age of 18 to be charged with the crime of prostitution;
- Allowing law enforcement to take youth victims into custody for their protection when the child is in danger;
- Create liaisons with the Department of Children, Youth, and Families to connect youth to services’
- Pilot two therapeutic receiving centers where law enforcement can take sexually exploited children instead of detention to receive services and begin the process of recovery.¹⁰

Law enforcement in several Washington state jurisdictions have redirected their focus to arresting buyers and referring victims to services.⁵

Myth:

Youth are sexually aware and should be allowed to choose prostitution as an expression of their sexuality.

Fact:

According to Federal law, there is no such thing as a “child prostitute,” and any child under age 18 engaging in commercial sex is a victim of sex trafficking.¹¹ Some of the most marginalized children are disproportionately at risk of being trafficked or exploited, including those who are LGBTQ+, homeless, or those escaping an abusive home. Most runaway, homeless, abused, and at-risk children are approached by pimps and drug dealers within 48 hours of landing on the streets.¹²

Regardless of how they became involved in prostitution, children can never consent to being exploited and abused. As stated by End Child Prostitution and Trafficking International, “It is adults who create ‘child prostitution’ through their demand for children as sexual objects, their misuse of power and their desire for profit.”¹³

Information provided by StolenYouth in conjunction with Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE).

Sources:

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- ² “Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage.” International Labor Organization, Walk Free Foundation, International Organization for Migration, 2017 United States.
- ³ U.S. Department of State Human Smuggling and Trafficking Center (December 2008). Domestic human trafficking: An internal issue [Electronic version]. Retrieved from <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/113612.pdf>
- ⁴ National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Child Sex Trafficking. Received from <https://www.missingkids.org/theissues/trafficking>.

- 5 Boyer, Debra. (2019) Commercially Sexually Exploited Children in Seattle/King County 2019 Update. StolenYouth.
- 6 Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation. Addressing Misonceptions: Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children. http://media.virbcdn.com/files/d0/FileItem-150146-AM_Children.pdf
- 7 Testimony of Yiota G. Souras, Senior Vice President & General Counsel, National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, Nov. 2015
- 8 Trafficking Victim Protection Act of 2000, H.R. 3244, 106th Cong., 2nd Sess. (2000).
- 9 Brantley, N. (June 2009). Framing the issues of commercial sexual exploitation of children. Motivating, Inspiring, Supporting & Serving Sexually Exploited Youth (MISSEY).
- 10 Child Sex Trafficking Survivors Deserve to be Protected, Not Criminalized. <http://sdc.wastateleg.org/dhingra/2020/02/28/child-sex-trafficking-survivors-deserve-to-be-protected-not-criminalized/>
- 11 Human Trafficking. <https://www.covenanthouse.org/homeless-issues/human-trafficking>
- 12 Project to End Human Trafficking, Prostitution Research and Education Center, Breaking Free, and The National Center on Missing and Exploited Children. Buying sex stops here.
- 13 ECPAT International (n.d.). CSEC Terminology: Prostitution of Children. Retrieved from http://www.ecpat.net/EI/Csec_prostitution.asp