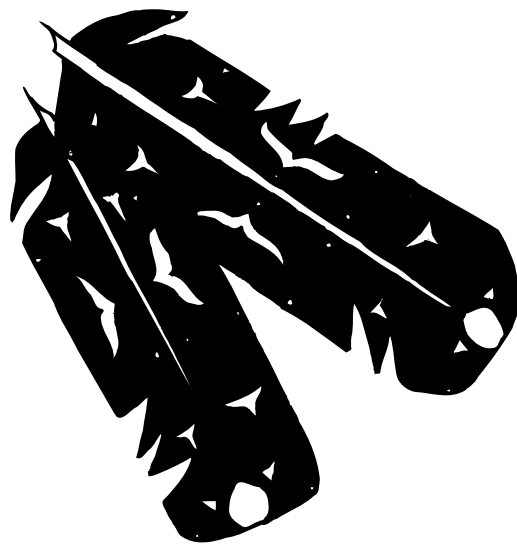


*There are some people
Who'll say
Don't cry, cause
That was yesterday
There are others
Who'll question if it's true
But, don't worry darling
I believe in you
I know how the anger
Devours every part
Of your soul, your spirit
Your mind, your very heart
I know how you live with the abuse
Every single day
I know how hard it is
To just push the pain away
I feel it when you scream
Though you sit and stare
I feel the walls push me away
Though you long for me to be there
I don't know what to do
What could I ever say
To erase the years gone by
And make it go away
Please darling
Before you turn to stone
Always, always remember
You are not alone*



Cherry Kingsley

Acknowledgements

For six months we were haunted. There were moments when we felt we had lost all faith in humanity. It seemed there was no kindness, no mercy, and no hope. We would retire at the end of so many long days and nights, lonely, missing home, wishing we could ‘unknow’.

Just when we felt like we could bear no more witness to the cruelties among us, we would be so touched, so moved, and so inspired by the youth. We found faith in the beauty of the youth who talked to us. Their courage, wisdom, clarity, strength, integrity and spirit compelled us and captured us. Their truth and hope gave us hope. We found solace in the beauty of our land, and in the stories of our elders.

We only wish that we could capture all of it for you the reader. We wish for you to be moved — to be so moved that after reading this you are in a different place — that we all are.

We want to dedicate this report to all of our children who still struggle, still suffer. And to all of you who through your suffering have found courage and vision to try to make it different. Thank you for talking to us, for sharing your stories, for believing still that it can be different. Your voices will be heard.

We would like to gratefully acknowledge the commitment and dedication of the Honourable Ethel Blondin-Andrew, The Secretary of State for Children and Youth, who realizes the importance of this

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We would also like to thank the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development for their financial contribution.

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To Melanie Mark, thank you for your kindness, your focus and your utter commitment. Your strength, spirit and humour were sometimes what I clung to when I felt sad or lost. Every city, every town, every day, you put your whole heart into it. The Aboriginal children of Canada are lucky to have you so completely on their side.

To my son Dakota (my little bear), thank you for your patience and understanding when I was away too much. Sometimes your voice on the phone was like sacred medicine for my heart. I love you!

T'ooyaksiy_isim. To Cherry Kingsley, thank you for taking the risk in giving me this incredible task. Your continuous faith in me has always been appreciated. I am so honoured to be part of such a courageous stance on an issue most would rather shy away from. Your leadership has fueled my spirit to push forward. T'ooyaksiy_isim.

To Rick, thank you for all of your understanding and unconditional love.



Cherry Kingsley and Melanie Mark.

With special thanks to Marian Krawczyk for transcribing the focus groups and writing this document. Marian, you have an amazing gift. Thank you for taking all of our questionnaires, tapes, transcriptions and notes and making it all somehow make sense. Your endless commitment to ensure the voices of youth are heard is reflected and recognized throughout every page.

*All My Relations,
Cherry Kingsley & Melanie Mark*

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Definitions	2
Recommendations	4
Overview	8
Breaking the Cycle	11
Fragmentation of Culture; Fragmentation of Families	13
A Lack of Education; A Lack of Job Opportunities	14
Physical, Sexual and Emotional Abuse	14
Lack of Role Models and Elders	17
Drug and Alcohol Addiction	18
Homeless and Nomadic	19
Health Risks	21
Racism	24
The Role of the Media	25
Over-Representation in the Judicial System	26
Gender Issues	28
Lack of Resources	29
The Effects of Low Self-Esteem	30
Profile of Commercially Sexually Exploited Aboriginal Youth ...	33
Background Characteristics of Commercially Sexually Exploited Aboriginal Youth	37
Dangers of the Trade	36
The National Aboriginal Consultation Project	40
Academic and Literature Review	41
Methodology and Analysis	42
Trials and Tribulations of Road Work	46

Background to the National Aboriginal Consultation Project	49
The Importance of Youth Participation	50
Abuse and Exploitation	52
Prevention	57
Youth Recommendations Regarding Prevention	60
Crisis Intervention/Harm Reduction	61
Youth Recommendations Regarding Crisis Intervention/Harm Reduction	63
Exiting and Healing	64
Youth Recommendations for Exiting and Healing	67
Public Attitudes/Advocacy	68
Youth Recommendations regarding Public Attitudes	71
Youth Participation	72
Youth Recommendations on Youth Participation	73
Conclusion	75
Appendix A	
Declaration and Agenda For Action	77
Appendix B	
The Importance of Youth Participation in Community Development	78
Appendix C	
Resources	82
Appendix D	
Selected Readings	95

Executive Summary

Over a period of five months, consultations with more than 150 commercially sexually exploited Aboriginal children and youth took place in 22 communities across Canada, consisting of major cities, smaller communities, and more rural areas.

Two young Aboriginal women, Cherry Kingsley and Melanie Mark, co-facilitated the focus groups. In addition to consulting with local agencies prior to entering the communities, they each spent up to two days acquainting themselves with each community before the focus groups took place. Familiarization consisted of walking the 'strolls', putting up posters, and patronizing places where the youth were 'hanging out'.

The youth who participated in the consultations agreed to have a tape recorder present, and for those unable or unwilling to attend, written questionnaires were distributed and collected at the end of each visit. The tapes and questionnaires were then transcribed, and form the basis of this document. Youth across the country, on reserve and off, in large communities and rural areas told their stories which had common themes. They told about lifetimes of abuse, poverty and discrimination. They told why services do not work for them and what needs to be done to help them and other youth at risk.

In recognition of the centrality of youth to this project, their recommendations open this document. The report then outlines various individual and systemic factors which commercially sexually exploited Aboriginal children and youth face. Historicizing social factors incumbent on Aboriginal children and youth explains their over-representation within

the larger population of commercially sexually exploited people in Canada. The third part of the report outlines the youth perspective of abuse and exploitation, prevention, crisis intervention, harm reduction, exiting and healing, public attitudes, and youth participation.

The youth made it clear that cultural, historical, and economic factors are important in constructing the experiences of Aboriginal children and youth, and these factors limit the application of non-Aboriginal research, programs, and policy designed for youth-at-risk. The National Aboriginal Consultation Project was a preliminary consultation process with Aboriginal children and youth. What needs to follow is a national and regional dialogue that will validate and meaningfully incorporate the voices of Aboriginal experiential children and youth. With these youth, we can develop a framework that will begin to eradicate the commercial sexual exploitation of Aboriginal children and youth where other policies, initiatives, and research have failed.

The ultimate goal of the National Aboriginal Consultation Project is to record the youth recommendations and then act upon them in conjunction with community members, government officials, and service providers.

Recommendations:

- **A series of national and regional round tables**
- **A series of youth-driven pilot projects**
- **Establishment of a youth network**
- **Creation of a national awareness campaign**

Definitions

All definitions detailed here reflect the spirit of the document and are not intended to be either exhaustive or technical definitions.

Aboriginal/Native

For the purposes of this document, the term Aboriginal or Native is used to describe any person who identifies with their North American Aboriginal ancestry, regardless of status. No differentiation is made between those who are involved with a native cultural heritage and those who are not, or those who live in urban locales versus those who live in rural areas.

Abuse

Aboriginal children and youth who were consulted in the cross-Canada focus groups view abuse as any action (physical, sexual, emotional or verbal) directed toward them which either harms them or keeps them from reaching their full potential.

Commercial Sexual Exploitation

Commercial sexual exploitation refers to the exchange of sex for food, shelter, drugs/alcohol, money and/or approval. The report uses the term commercially sexually exploited children and youth rather than the more traditional term 'child prostitute'. Using the former term refuses to ignore that children and youth in the sex trade are sexually exploited, and moves the true responsibility of exploitation where it belongs, to those who purchase or profit in any way from children and youth in the sex trade.

Community Development

The Community Development approach recognizes the effectiveness of tailoring solutions to the specific needs of the community by involving people on a local level. Diverse members of the community come together to begin to identify local strategies and develop local action plans. Community Development is based on the principles of capacity building, meaningful exchange and participation.

Crisis Intervention/Harm Reduction

Crisis intervention and harm reduction are closely related to one another. The purpose of crisis intervention is to reduce the harm that those involved in the sex trade experience. For this to occur, services must be in place to ensure there is help during times of crisis, whether or not the individual is attempting to exit the trade. Crisis intervention is one of the main paths which youth have to information and services which will help them leave the trade.

Exiting/Healing

The youth describe exiting and healing as a difficult and complex long-term process, requiring both a clear personal decision and community support. Providing care and support during this time can be frustrating, as several returns to the trade are common.

Continued support, despite regression, is essential. Exiting the trade and/or abuse, and subsequent healing, is a process unique to each individual; consequently, each individual requires a tailored plan of action.

Experiential Youth

The term experiential youth has been used to define any youth who are, or have been, involved in commercial sexual exploitation.

Exploitation

Exploitation differs from abuse, though they have a necessary relationship to one another. Exploitation for these youth is seen as taking advantage of someone else for personal profit, pleasure, and/or control.

Focus Group

Focus groups were meetings between the facilitators and youth held in a safe and non-judgmental environment, usually a friendship center. The youth and facilitators sat in an informal circle and discussed the themes introduced by the facilitators.

Prevention

The aim of prevention is to stop something before it happens. It is a holistic approach to the future. It encompasses the need to change existing structures of thought and action to ensure that no other youth must endure commercial sexual exploitation.

Public Attitudes

Public attitudes encompass the social and verbal expression of the larger society's belief regarding the sex trade and those who are commercially sexually exploited. These attitudes of negativity and/or harmful stereotypes, often expressed through racism, stigmatize those involved in the trade. These public attitudes are representative of the respect that society gives them.

Sex Trade

For the purposes of this report, the term sex trade includes any transaction whereby children and youth exchange sex for food, shelter, drugs, approval, money or for a sense of safety and security. The sex trade is not just involvement in street prostitution or escort agencies, and it occurs in all venues in both rural and urban communities.

Youth

Based on the United Nations definition, the term youth in this document refers to any individual between the ages of 12 and 24. Between the ages of 18 and 24 a young person is still very vulnerable and in need of youth services.

Youth Participation

Simply put, participation is the opportunity to define one's own issues and what one deems to be needed in terms of positive social change. Fostering youth participation means creating a supportive environment in which youth can realize their own potential and be instrumental in the development of public policy and programs that affect them.

Recommendations

We know what the problem is, now what's the solution?

Previous studies have shown sexually exploited Aboriginal children and youth form a disproportionately high percentage of the sex trade. In some communities in Canada, commercial sexual exploitation of Aboriginal children and youth forms more than 90 per cent of the visible sex trade in areas where the Aboriginal population is less than 10 per cent.

The Aboriginal youth who were consulted told us in virtually every community that there are no services for them, and that there is nothing for them to do. Front line service providers say they face long hours, chronic underfunding, and minimal resources. Government and private funders have told us there is either no demand for services or that the existing services are not being used. How can such divergent views exist at the same time?

Over the last twenty-five years, it has become increasingly obvious that the majority of programs, services and policies regarding the commercial sexual exploitation of children are not working. The problem has been defined again and again with frightening clarity; what we now need are practical solutions that are workable in diverse communities.

Save the Children Canada has taken on The National Aboriginal Consultation Project as the first step in a long journey to create a comprehensive national strategy to address commercial sexual exploitation

that will work where other services, policies and programs have failed. The Aboriginal children and youth who participated in the consultations have been courageous enough to share their unique expertise and insight into some of the best possible solutions to sexual exploitation. Yet it is important to remember that these consultations are only the first step. The journey has to involve governments, community groups, bands, tribal councils, friendship centers, national Aboriginal organizations and the general public.

Developing Solutions

We need to involve commercially sexually exploited Aboriginal children and youth in developing solutions to this problem. Part of the solution is accepting the fact that experiential youth can provide a powerful message to other youth, service providers and community leaders. We must also help the wider community understand that commercial sexual exploitation is not a lifestyle choice — it is child abuse.

Save the Children Canada supports establishing and linking youth and community together. Any meaningful, long-term solutions to commercial sexual exploitation must be based on both youth participation and community involvement. Together they provide a balance. Both require time, resources, trust, flexibility and risks for all those involved. We cannot place the responsibility of eradicating sexual exploitation on the shoulders of youth alone; communities must acknowledge

their collective responsibility for changing public standards and attitudes towards the acceptance of the sex trade.

Working together, youth participation and community involvement can provide many advantages:

- Youth participation provides a way for children and youth with personal experience in commercial sexual exploitation to give voice to their experiences, their needs and their recommendations.
- Youth participation provides an opportunity for personal empowerment, skill enhancement, and permanent, positive, and sustainable change.
- Youth participation is a way for youth to apply their experience in developing programs that are sensitive and relevant to the needs of other commercially sexually exploited Aboriginal children and youth.
- Community involvement with youth provides a wealth of diverse information for communities fighting for a viable and healthy future for their children and youth.
- Community involvement with youth provides new and innovative solutions and strategies to address issues in situations where traditional approaches have not been effective.
- Developing community-based strategies can have a major impact on the lives of many and on the health of the whole community.

By creating these linkages, we can create the synergy needed to eradicate commercial sexual exploitation of Aboriginal children and youth. The National Aboriginal Consultation Project serves as a beginning for the development of a comprehensive

national strategy. But successful solutions cannot be forged through one organization alone. This report will be just another document gathering dust on a bookshelf unless there is widespread and unified community involvement. To facilitate the creation of these linkages, we recommend a strategy with four main components:

- **A series of national and regional round tables**
- **A series of youth-driven pilot projects**
- **Establishment of a youth network**
- **Creation of a national awareness campaign**

■ **A Series of National and Regional Round Tables**

As a mechanism for creating a comprehensive national strategy, a series of round table discussions will create talking circles where all community members with a vested interest in the well being of children and youth can respectfully come together to discuss and assess their local, regional and national needs. The ultimate goal of these meetings is to find innovative community-based solutions to meet the needs of commercially sexually exploited Aboriginal children and youth, in conjunction with the youth themselves.

National Round Table

The initial round table would bring together twenty-two experiential Aboriginal youth — as representatives of their communities — to engage in extended discussions with national Aboriginal organiza-

tions, service agencies and government departments. However, the formalities of policy meetings, round tables and forums often ensure an atmosphere of intimidation for those youth who participate in them. Part of the responsibility in implementing round tables is to ensure that all parties who come to the discussions have adequate skills and support to advocate their position. Therefore, a series of youth workshops, developed in conjunction with the round tables, will serve to greatly strengthen the many skills that youth are able to bring to the table. As delegates from across the country, these youth would participate over a period of three days preceding the national round table to better equip themselves with the knowledge and skills necessary to make the subsequent national round table a success. This success depends, in part, on having the national round table participants — consisting of the youth, Aboriginal organizations and the government — come together immediately following these youth workshops. The purpose of this initial meeting will be to begin framing a comprehensive national strategy to be detailed and implemented through a subsequent series of regional discussions.

Regional Round Tables

We recommend a series of seven regional round tables to be held across Canada in order to define and address innovative community-based solutions that can be implemented in partnership with experiential Aboriginal youth. The dialogue of these round tables must incorporate the unique cultural and economic diversity of each region that is reflected demographically.

Collectively, these round tables will facilitate the implementation of a comprehensive national strategy to address commercial sexual exploitation of Aboriginal children and youth. The nation-

al round table discussion will allow for a framework to be developed; the regional series will ‘flesh out’ the initial framework to meaningfully address the diverse needs of communities and youth. The implementation of a comprehensive strategy necessitates that we realize that we can only be successful in eradicating sexual exploitation if we incorporate both regional and national youth driven dialogues. By creating a stronger foundation of trust, understanding, commitment and flexibility, built through the participation of communities and youth in these dialogues, we are strengthening our abilities to meaningfully enact change.

■ A Series of Youth-Driven Pilot Projects

The overall objective from these meetings is to implement ten youth driven pilot projects across the country. Together, youth and communities will be able to design, implement and monitor programs developed by experiential Aboriginal youth. Across the country Aboriginal children and youth have stated why most present programs, policies and services do not work – because no one has consulted with them about what their particular needs are. The youth who were consulted told us in clear terms what their needs are, and what will work for them. Therefore, each youth project undertaken with communities will differ in nature. Some communities desperately need more outreach workers; other communities do not have a youth drop-in center. Ratification of the suggested youth based pilot projects will facilitate the creation of appropriate and relevant community based solutions. These localized projects, undertaken by both youth and communities, will lead to a comprehensive strategy to address commercial sexual

exploitation that will work where other programs, polices and services have failed.

■ Establishment of a Youth Network

This recommended template, which emphasizes both regional and national dialogues, would also provide a crucial connection for experiential Aboriginal youth across Canada. Youth need to know that they are not alone. The connections created from participation in the round tables will be the basis of an extensive youth network that provides crucial links between the youth themselves and their communities. One objective of the network will be to better equip youth with the necessary skills to advocate the issues of commercial sexual exploitation within their own communities.

■ Creation of a National Awareness Campaign

In creating partnerships through the round tables and establishing a youth network, we – Save the Children, Aboriginal and other community organizations, government services and the youth – can build a national awareness campaign to eradicate the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal children and youth in Canada. A continuing awareness campaign can take many forms: distribution of educational materials, school presentations, media advertising and public forums are but a few of the possibilities. In many institutions, corporations, and among the general public there is still a widespread acceptance of commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth, and to change these standards

we must address them on all levels: locally, regionally and nationally. A project of this magnitude cannot be undertaken by any one sector of society; widespread awareness necessitates national action.

Facilitating the creation of wider relationships with others who have a vested interest in the well being of our children is an essential precondition to building an environment in our society where all children and youth can be safe, free from being exploited or taken advantage of in any way. Connecting youth with other youth and with community, through participation in the round tables, will provide these linkages to ensure that this report does not become one more document piled under all the others.

We must put aside ideas that the sex trade is ‘no big deal’ or that it affects only a ‘marginal population’. Rough estimates place more than two thousand commercially sexually exploited youth in Manitoba alone.¹ Many of these children and youth will not survive. It is only by bringing youth, governments, community groups, bands, tribal councils, friendship centers, national Aboriginal organizations and concerned individuals together through a series of round tables to develop innovative community-based initiatives can we hope to address the needs of experiential Aboriginal children and youth in Canada. It is only when youth and communities start working together that we can begin our collective healing through the eradication of all forms of sexual exploitation. Through our involvement with youth, we have the collective power to ensure that future generations of children and youth do not have to experience the abuse, shame and fear that is literally killing our youth today.

¹ Manitoba Youth and Child Secretariat: 1996.

Overview

Save the Children Canada undertook this project in order to more fully understand the commercial sexual exploitation of Aboriginal children and youth in Canada. This document reflects five months of subsequent cross-Canada consultations with commercially sexually exploited Aboriginal children and youth. The purpose of the consultations was to give these children and youth a chance to express their ideas and concerns regarding the issues of abuse, exploitation, prevention, healing, exiting, crisis intervention, harm reduction, public attitudes, and youth participation. The consultations are part of our long-term project designed to raise national awareness, change public attitudes, increase the sensitivity of people who work with youth, provide direct assistance to agencies, and ultimately, decrease the market for sex with children.

Attempting to address the issues faced by Aboriginal children and youth exploited through sex work necessitates looking at social attitudes toward children and youth involved in commercial sexual exploitation. While 86 per cent of Canadians are aware that there are young people working in the sex trade,² few realize the dangers associated with the work, or the seriousness of it as child abuse. Over the last twenty years, a sizable body of research by academic, legal, and government bodies has focused on the nature and eradication of sexual exploitation. Within this research, however, the voices of Aboriginal children and youth are non-existent. At the same time there is a

serious over-representation of Aboriginals experiencing abuse and exploitation which makes this deficiency of research truly shocking. This report contends that the very historical, cultural, and economic factors which construct the experiences of Aboriginal children and youth, actually limit the application of non-Aboriginal policy and programs designed for youth-at-risk.

The illicit nature of commercial sexual exploitation prevents 'hard' statistics, but there is a widespread consensus among community organizations, service providers, and front line agencies that Aboriginal youth participation in the sex trade is increasing. In some communities, the visible sex trade is 90 per cent Aboriginal.³ This serious over-representation is directly linked to the unacceptable and continuing high level of risk factors which this population faces. The Aboriginal children and youth who participated in these consultations are perpetuating a vicious cycle which started hundreds of years ago. The negative impact of European colonialism on Native peoples and their cultures has been a decisive factor in creating and maintaining barriers of social, economic, and political inequality. We must realize that the physical and mental well being of all Canadian children and youth are profoundly political issues, and are inseparable from social and economic situations. All of this has been said before in countless documents, policies, and initiatives.

This document differs in its perspective. The consultations were not an attempt to definitively state the 'truth' regarding the

² Ibid: 2000.

³ Rabinovitch: 2000. Manitoba Youth and Child Secretariat: 1996.

commercial sexual exploitation of Aboriginal children and youth in Canada, or to produce statistical research. The objective of The National Aboriginal Consultation Project is to initiate both national and regional dialogues which will validate and meaningfully incorporate the voices of Aboriginal experiential children and youth. This is not an issue of qualitative versus quantitative research, or which is more valid; it is about the youth who have experienced commercial sexual exploitation and abuse. The youth who speak from these pages cannot be seen as a 'minimal' population due to circumstance and poor choice; if we begin to look at all the factors that place youth at risk we soon are able to understand that all Canadian children are vulnerable. This document reflects the real life experiences of the youths themselves, regardless of statistics, percentages or averages. And from these youths we can begin together to build a framework that will reduce commercial sexual exploitation where other policies, initiatives, and research have failed. Success comes from the youth themselves, through their participation in long-term solutions which include both the privileged and the marginalized.

The simple fact of the matter is that commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth is a microcosm of many of the values, attitudes, and beliefs which are predominant in Canadian society at large.⁴ This issue, which has life-long repercussions for those involved, is often minimized and isolated as a 'deviant' activity practiced by individual youth. This common and public perspective allows the rest of society to ignore their own roles in creating, sustaining and perpetuating an environment where commercial sexual

exploitation is allowed to flourish through indifference and willful ignorance. For the Aboriginal children and youth who were consulted, there is no such thing as deviance; there is only survival.

The Aboriginal children and youth who participated in the cross-Canada consultations are marginalized and vulnerable due to both past and present circumstances. If these children and youth do not live within their families, their communities and their cultures, where do they live? They exist at the edges of society where their existence depends on compliance with exploitation and abuse.

Having nowhere to go, most youth who find themselves in this situation are also lacking integral life skills, and have few, if any, chances for meaningful employment. Their situation becomes one of survival, and deprivation of the basic necessities of life ensures that sex for money, food, shelter, drugs, or clothing is a decision about day-to-day existence. Commercially sexually exploited Aboriginal children and youth need safe places to frequent and/or live, consistent support from caring individuals, tailored life skills, education and employment programs, and financial support. Without these, commercially sexually exploited Aboriginal children and youth have few alternatives for physical and economic survival, and little opportunity to reintegrate themselves in the larger communities, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

Previous consultations have shown that the average age of juveniles who become involved in sex work is 14, with some starting as early as nine.⁵ Aboriginal children and youth at this age are not

4 Mathews: 1987a.

5 Bramly et al: 1998. Calgary Police Commission: 1997. Jesson: 1993. Manitoba Youth and Child Secretariat: 1996. McIntyre: 1994.

consenting adults who freely choose to be involved in the trade. While the term 'sex trade' is used in this document, it is crucial to remember that these youth are not trading fairly in a free market system; they are being exploited and abused in exchange for their survival.

Self-esteem is a problem for many Canadian youth today; it is not the burden solely of Aboriginal children and youth. Yet factors such as cultural and familial fragmentation, lack of life skills and higher education, substance abuse, poverty, a history of physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse, and racism create an environment in which many Aboriginal youth cannot help but feel marginalized and vulnerable. It is extremely difficult for exploited, marginalized and/or addicted youth to feel individual and social worth.

Labels of definition, such as 'troubled' youth or 'high-risk' youth diminish their self-esteem. How many see past these risk factors? How many see Aboriginal children and youth in the sex trade as potentially talented, passionate leaders? Quite often we see them as nothing but a problem. We never get a chance to talk to them about their gifts, their abilities, and their dreams. They are poets, writers, inventors, master storytellers, comedians, as well as brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, and friends. How do we keep these parts of them alive? Healthy children and youth are sound not only in body and mind, but also in spirit. What is needed, not only for these youth, but also for all of society, is to understand and celebrate the worth and value that youth bring to Canadian society. Respect and validation are essential ingredients for a healthy sense of self-esteem. Aboriginal children and youth who have been abused and sexually exploited need to know that

they can become role models, that they can and will take the 21st century and make it a better place.

It is all too easy to scapegoat, to blame the government, the researchers, society, or Aboriginal peoples themselves; nevertheless, we must accept our own individual responsibility for an environment where commercial sexual exploitation has flourished. Part of accepting this challenge is the fundamental need to validate our youth, by honoring their experience and unique expertise. Experiential youth must play a central role in the creation, design, development and delivery of any programs expected to impact the lives of sexually exploited youth.

Aboriginal children and youth who participated in these cross-Canada consultations found the courage to share both their pain and their hopes. They need and deserve your attention, your compassion, and a clear response to their recommendations. If you see them only as victims, you have missed the point. They ask for an opportunity to work with communities to ensure that no other youth will be forced to experience their struggle for survival. If we do not work with them to achieve this goal, we must share the guilt with those who have exploited and abused them. It is essential to understand that it is the activity that needs condemnation, not the partakers. After reading this document, there is no excuse to turn away from the reality and say that you didn't know. Nor can you say that you don't know what to do in order to help them. In clear and simple terms, they have shared their needs and desires, and we must ensure that their recommendations do not become one more piece of paper piled under all the others.

Breaking the Cycle

The commercial sex trade is exploiting young people at an ever-increasing rate, perpetuating cycles of violence, shame, disease, and death in the lives of countless vulnerable and marginalized children. Sexually exploited children and youth are forced to struggle for survival in the shadows of society. Most become painfully disconnected from family, community, culture, and hope.

One of the most compelling problems for Canadians at the dawn of the 21st century is the reality that risk factors for Aboriginal children and youth remain at unacceptable levels. We must realize that the physical and mental well-being of Canadian children and youth are profoundly political issues, and are inseparable from social and economic considerations. Aboriginal youth who are caught in the sex trade perpetuate a vicious cycle that started hundreds of years ago. The negative impact of European colonialism on Native peoples and their cultures has been a decisive factor in creating and maintaining barriers of social, economic, and political inequality.

The lives of all children and youth are intimately connected with their parents and a sense of the wider community. We learn from watching, listening, absorbing, and, ultimately, repeating the words and actions which surround us. Aboriginal youth are often the direct recipients of the pain of racism, residential schooling, forced adoption, and cultural fragmentation. For the First Peoples of Canada, the forced fragmentation of Aboriginal culture has led to radical and negative changes in their connections to their lands and tradi-

tions, languages, and to a collective loss of self-esteem. To attempt an understanding of the commercial sexual exploitation of Aboriginal children and youth without this wider context is to invalidate a lived history which continues to affect all of us today.

“Being culturally sensitive involves having an understanding and appreciation of the consequences of European contact on Aboriginal people. With loss of language and externally imposed denial of ancestry came a sense of confusion and loss of self-esteem, which resulted in alcoholism and traditions not being passed down. Despite the length of time Europeans have been here, there is still a lack of understanding about Aboriginal people and their circumstances. They still negatively judge Aboriginal people based on blanket assumptions and negative stereotypes rather than considering each person’s unique circumstances. The general public assumes that Aboriginal people have everything given to them and should be rich. However, these ‘gifts’ have had the negative impacts of loss of self-esteem, language and connections to land and traditions.”

Vancouver/Richmond Health Board, 1997:13

As Canadians, we take justifiable pride in belonging to a society that advocates equality and opportunity for all. Yet, while we often point fingers at the rest of the world, we overlook our own backyard. Refusing to see the historic socio-political complexities which have created the sex

trade as the only option for so many Aboriginal children and youth may be a defense mechanism whereby Canadians absolve themselves from personal responsibility, but it is also a crime.

Aboriginal youth today face this legacy with further handicaps. While Aboriginal peoples make up only two to three per cent of Canada's population,⁶ in many places they form the majority of sex trade workers. In Winnipeg, for example, virtually all street-involved youth are Aboriginal. What forces them in such high numbers into this life? The list of factors seems endless. What is happening, however, is a reflection of the continuing struggles and trauma of the Aboriginal population as a whole.

“[Within] the Native population I think that foster care and adoption...all of these factors that remove you from outside of your community...learning the value of the traditions and culture, really makes and shapes how you value yourself as well. If you don't know where your place is in this world [when] you're young and don't feel a great deal of self-worth or belonging, all those make a recipe for leaving someone very vulnerable. I think in the Native community we've seen that more because of the damage that's been done to the community.”

Female youth, Toronto

There is powerful evidence that Aboriginal youth face much higher risk factors than the general population.⁷ While not every

child may experience every one of these factors, all of these issues are linked, and each in itself can provide pathways to sexual exploitation in the sex trade. These factors include, but are not limited to:

- **Systematic fragmentation of culture**
- **Fragmentation of families**
- **Lack of higher education**
- **Lack of traditional job opportunities/unemployment**
- **Poverty**
- **Physical, sexual and emotional abuse**
- **Lack of role models and elders**
- **Substance abuse/addiction**
- **Homeless/nomadic**
- **Health risks**
- **Media stereotypes**
- **Over-representation in the judicial system**
- **Racism**
- **Gender issues**
- **Lack of resources**
- **Low self-esteem**

The Aboriginal children and youth who participated in the focus groups all experienced one or more of the above risk factors. Nonetheless, we cannot allow the sheer quantity of risk factors each individual youth faces to determine the seriousness of their situation. Each child processes their experiences in different and unique ways. It is the intensity of their experience that determines the damage to the individual. Otherwise, we are caught in a tragic situation whereby the youth must 'prove' that their experiences are more painful than other youth in order to receive attention.

⁶ Boe: 1999. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: 1996.

⁷ Mcevoy and Daniluk: 1994. Rutman et al: 1999. Vancouver/Richmond Health Board: 1999. Werner-Leonard and Trovato: 1990. Ryerse: 1992. White and Jacobs: 1992. Piccolo: 1994.

Fragmentation of Culture; Fragmentation of Families

Historically, Aboriginal peoples in Canada have been denied the physical and social manifestations of their culture. Community celebrations such as potlatching and the Sun Dance, integral to the continuation of their histories, religions, and cultures, were outlawed. Children were taken from their homes and communities and placed in residential schools, where many experienced physical, emotional and sexual abuse. They were forbidden to speak the languages of their ancestors, and taught to believe they were inferior peoples in need of ‘salvation’. Reservations were created on isolated and marginal lands as a solution to the ‘Indian problem’. Families were destroyed as youth were forcibly taken by the Canadian government and given for adoption to non-Aboriginal families. These tragedies ensured that the rich and complex cultures of Aboriginal peoples in Canada became fragmented. Oral traditions, traditional ecological knowledge and ritual all suffered from this systemic suppression of Aboriginal peoples and cultures.

All of the Aboriginal youth who were consulted during the focus groups spoke of the physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse they experienced in their home lives, as parents, relatives, care givers, and neighbors continued to suffer from the legacy of cultural fragmentation. The cycle of abuse has continued through yet another generation. For the youth who participated in the cross-Canada consultations, their early years were filled with adults who were unable to break the cycle of pain and despair. In order to cope, their families and communities turned to alcohol, drugs, and violence to mask their own sense of hope

lessness. Many of those who participated in the focus groups were either forced to leave home in an attempt to survive, or they were placed in the care of the government. Either way, these youth lacked the skills and models necessary to create a healthy life for themselves.

“Take those people from residential schools and generations after... [they need] some kind of counseling to deal with the fact that it happened to them. So that they won’t continue the cycle, even though that down the line the cycle has already continued... [we need to say] ‘look, this happened to you, it’s not your fault’. Then they wouldn’t take another innocent being and do it to them again. I get confused about it all, I know that you can’t pinpoint it because it’s been going on for decades, centuries... my abusers were abused; their abusers were abused, down the line. We’re all hurting in one way or another, and I think that’s why the cycle continues and turns.”

Female youth, Vancouver

“My stepfather was abused as a child, and he didn’t know himself how to be a parent. So he did his best, which was basically what his father did to him. I think that things like this can be prevented... my situation, if the cycle of abuse is broken.”

Female youth, Halifax

A Lack of Education; A Lack of Job Opportunities

According to the youth consulted, the home or care environment they are trying to escape is only one of the difficulties they face. Where can they turn? Who do they turn to? To survive they need money, food, shelter and care. Traditional doors to success, such as university, executive work, or starting their own businesses, are closed to them. Problems in school, including difficulties with peers, drugs and alcohol, truancy, fighting, and sexuality can create barriers. Few Aboriginal students successfully make the transition from Grade eight into secondary school, and there are few, if any, job opportunities available to them at this point.⁸ If they are below a certain age (which varies by province) they cannot access welfare, and few can ask for financial help from family or friends.

The minority of youth who manage to secure work in the traditional sector find that the average annual income for registered Indians is less than \$13,000, half that of the non-Aboriginal population.⁹ In the mid-1980s, when these youth were born, the child poverty rate for Aboriginal children stood at 51 per cent.¹⁰ According to a study in British Columbia, in 1997 80 per cent of Aboriginal children in that province lived in poverty.¹¹ Despite a commitment made in 1989 by the federal government to

eradicate child poverty by the year 2000, the number of poor children has increased in 1999 by 49 per cent.¹² Canada has the second highest rate of child poverty among industrialized countries.¹³ For Aboriginal peoples, rural unemployment ranges from 40–60 per cent, and is as high as 90 per cent in some areas.¹⁴ Unemployment forces youths into sex trade work. Vulnerable children and youth who are forced to leave their family home or care situation for various reasons need shelter and food. For the Aboriginal youth who participated in these consultations, economic need dictated their actions. Decades of research have found economics to be a key reason for engagement in the sex trade.¹⁵

Physical, Sexual and Emotional Abuse

The years of physical, sexual and emotional abuse endured by these youths ensure that it is only a small step into commercial sexual exploitation.

Among adult survivors of abuse, common responses include profound feelings of shame and guilt, sleep disturbances, repression, low self-esteem, depression, isolation, inability to trust, problems in developing, the employment of maladaptive coping strategies, trouble maintaining intimate relationships, and self-abusive behaviour.¹⁶ Tragically, up to 80 per cent of youth who are commercially sexually exploited in Canada report having been sexually abused.¹⁷ Many believe that they are profoundly defective and unworthy of living.

8 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: 1996.

9 Ryerse: 1992.

10 Ibid.

11 Vancouver/Richmond Health Board: 1999.

12 Save the Children: 2000.

13 Ibid.

14 Ryerse: 1992.

15 Sprung: 1995. McIntyre: 1994. Ritch and Michaud: 1985.

16 Mcevoy and Daniluk: 1994.

17 Ritch and Michaud: 1985. Jesson: 1993. McIntyre: 1998. Daum: 1997.

“Aboriginal family violence is distinct in that it has invaded whole communities and cannot be considered a problem of a particular couple or an individual household. Second, the failure in family functioning can be traced in many cases to interventions of the state deliberately introduced to disrupt or displace the Aboriginal family. Third, violence within Aboriginal communities is fostered and sustained by a racist social environment that promulgates demeaning stereotypes of Aboriginal women and men and seeks to diminish their value as human beings and their right to be treated with dignity.”

Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples,
Vol. 3, 1996:57).

The experiences of abuse fundamentally shape the choices they make for survival. In the words of one participant:

“I grew up feeling I had no worth. I didn’t put any worth on myself because I wasn’t worth anything...I’d given it free for how many past years of my life, so that’s how I went about it.”

Female youth, Vancouver

Research has shown that running away from an abusive situation is at best a temporary solution. Had those involved in the sex trade not run away, they would have been exposed to considerably higher numbers of unwanted sexual acts from their abusers.¹⁸ Yet in their attempts to escape the violence, shame and fear of abuse,

¹⁸ Lowman et al: 1986.

¹⁹ Mcevoy and Daniluk: 1994.

Aboriginal youth are forced into situations where the cycle is perpetuated. In looking at the generational transmission of abuse, it becomes apparent that an understanding of the cycle of abuse within families and communities can often predict future functioning of children and youth if the cycle remains uninterrupted. While it is important to remember that not all young persons who have been sexually abused turn to the sex trade and not all sex trade workers have a history of abuse;

“Suffice it to say that a background of sexual abuse prior to sex trade work is common and is often interpreted as a preparatory step in preparing the young person for the street. In other words, sexual abuse is a training ground for the young person, who often enters sex work. Is it possible that sex work allows an individual some control over abuse?”

McIntyre, 1994:30

Clinical and anecdotal evidence suggests that the incidence of sexual abuse among Canada’s Native peoples is as high as 80 per cent.¹⁹ Abuse of children and youth does not occur exclusively in families; many of the Aboriginal youth consulted shared stories of trauma at the hands of family friends, neighbors, and/or peers. These youth felt that there was no one that they could talk to about the abuse, or that they wouldn’t be believed. According to the youth:

“Having all the abuse in the family and all the alcohol, really there was nobody to turn to... I was afraid for my life.”

Female youth, Vancouver

“I know there are members in my family who were sexually abused by other members of my family. I think it’s kind of heartbreaking because no one has ever mentioned it... I guess we’re afraid to tell our family.”

Female youth, St. John’s

“My dad is a real Indian, and he has a real temper. It goes off with a click of your finger. He likes to hit, and then make sure later on that [we] forgive him. He would hit us a lot when we were little kids, and then go to my mom and tell her that she would rather leave us over him, since she knows what he was like, that he was abused as a child.”

Female youth, Summerside

“I left home [after being abused] with the attitude of being a bastard since my mom told me I was. I was so angry I treated people bad, and they treated me bad. I would never tell anyone about my problems, but I was really scared inside... I would hide everything.”

Male youth, Toronto

“At first it was just little stupid things, like punishments that I used to get... but when I hit puberty, he started sexually abusing me. I told my mother, because I was always told to tell if stuff like that happened... I guess he convinced her that it didn’t happen, and that I must have been exaggerating. After that it kept happening, but I just let it, because if anybody was going to believe me it was going to be my mother.”

Female youth, Halifax

“In Aboriginal cultures [there] is this constant silence; no one wants to talk about the issue. We all know that it goes on, all over the place. Our generation has to do something, otherwise it will continue, continue and continue, and that’s a fact. All the people that keep it in, we have an opportunity for everyone to maybe stop pretending.”

Female youth, Thunder Bay

Lack of Role Models and Elders

Commercially sexually exploited Aboriginal children and youth who participated in the consultations felt they did not have adequate parental role models and few opportunities to develop a positive sense of cultural heritage and pride. The youth felt that there was nowhere, and no one, to whom they could turn. Additionally, the youth felt that there are few Aboriginal elders and role models within Canadian communities. Fully half of Native peoples are under the age of 25, while less than five per cent are over the age of 65. Children under 15 account for 35 per cent of all Aboriginal peoples.²⁰ In many places in Canada, life expectancy for Native peoples is equivalent to parts of Africa.²¹ Life expectancy for Aboriginal youth today decreases dramatically when they are forced to live in marginal areas such as the streets, hotels and SROs (single room occupancy dwellings). Yet these are the very places where the majority of youth find themselves in when they leave their home or care environment. Many young Aboriginals gravitate to the street where their 'street family' looks after their needs, making them feel wanted, nurtured, supported, and protected, at least initially.

“ [My friends] were doing it first, they used to talk to me about the glamour of getting into the really nice cars, the glamour of the money and the really nice clothes...and I thought, ‘Well, one of these days’ .”

Female youth, Vancouver

“ In the terms of exiting, it was really hard to leave my friends behind. They were my family; I didn’t grow up with my [biological] family. I loved them, and I still love them, and it’s really difficult to leave them behind, and that’s part of the difficulty.”

Female youth, Halifax

In the face of poverty, racism, institutionalized oppression, physical and sexual abuse, family violence, alcoholism and cultural shame, Aboriginal children and youth who are commercially sexually exploited experience increasing fragmentation of their individual identities and a profound personal disempowerment.

In the absence of meaningful role models within their communities, youth often turn to their peers and friends in times of crisis or need. If these children and youth do not have a physical, emotionally and sexually safe environment in which to explore their boundaries, they come to see the sex trade by their street 'family' as acceptable, and over time this undermines the larger social sanctions against working in the trade.

“ I was on the streets for a while...I met this girl, and she said, ‘you can live with me, you don’t have to worry about anything, you don’t have to worry about rent’...I never thought for an instant that she was into prostitution and that was her idea for me.”

Female youth, Toronto

²⁰ Boe: 1999.

²¹ Vancouver/Richmond Health District: 1999.

Many young people are impressed with the clothes and other trappings acquired by friends involved in prostitution, especially if they have relatively few resources. For commercially sexually exploited Aboriginal youth in Canada, this attraction to street life masks feelings of loneliness, alienation, and a lack of connection with their families, with former friends and schoolmates, and with community values.

Drug And Alcohol Addiction

Faced with the fragmentation of culture and family, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, a lack of life skills, educational disparities, few job opportunities, and a lack of role models, it is easy to understand why Aboriginal peoples turn to alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism. Of course, non-Aboriginal peoples also become addicted to drugs and alcohol. Native peoples, however, continue to be over-represented in populations dealing with substance abuse, and it is important to remember that this is not because they are Aboriginal, but because of their legacy with issues of cultural genocide.

Using drugs and alcohol as a temporary escape from the realities of their daily existence, Aboriginal youth who are sexually exploited through prostitution are once again trapped in a cycle of pain, hopelessness, and shame. Alcohol and drugs sedate the feelings surrounding sex work. Many youth feel these substances can distance them from their lifestyles, and provide a mental and emotional break. Typically, youth begin to use heavily after abuse and/or entering the sex trade. One study of adult female sex trade workers, most who had begun working before their 18th birthday, found that 50 per cent of the women were spending between \$100 and \$300 per day on alcohol and other drug

consumption.²² Other youth are forced into the trade through the need to support their addictions. What starts out as a friend ends up as a master. Addiction becomes one more seemingly insurmountable obstacle to exiting the sex trade.

“I was sleeping with guys to get drugs. I was addicted to heroin, crack, coke... I was in and out of jail for three years...my sister was a prostitute, I don't want to see her that way, I love her. My mom was into it to [drugs and prostitution]...it's so hard because I don't know where I'm going to be living or anything.”

Female youth, Mission

“I grew up...in an abusive home. My Mom gave up on me when I was 13, and I started fixing. I was constantly being moved from foster home to foster home, and I had nobody to talk to about anything. I was never stable; half my foster parents were assholes, especially emergency foster care. I didn't really know much about it, just [what] I had heard from my friends. The money part of it [the sex trade] was in my hands for maybe 15 minutes. I'd get it and go straight to the dealers.”

Female youth, Saskatoon

²² Sprung: 1995.

“I was really young and I thought a hundred dollars was a lot of money, but it would go in half an hour. I would say that I was going to have a hoot and then I would go to make more money, and save that money for myself, but then I just wound up spending that money on more drugs.”

Female youth, Winnipeg



Homeless And Nomadic

Reserves often have minimal resources, and residents are forced to secure work elsewhere. Additionally, many Aboriginal women and youth leave reserves due to abusive environments.

“All my friends are Natives, they ignore it [abuse] or they’re used to it, they know what’s going to happen next. When I was younger, my stepfather always used to beat up my Mom. I wish I could help, but I don’t know how. [If you] call the cops, they would pick him up and he would be free the next day. My Mom couldn’t take it anymore.”

Male youth, Iqaluit

“Our Native communities are not healthy places a lot of the time, there’s a lot of abuse that happens there. People leave those communities to the larger centers hoping to find that love and peace that they’re looking for. It’s unfortunate that when they get there it’s not all roses.”

Female youth, Halifax

On the reserves, there is often little to keep youth meaningfully engaged.²³ Migration to cities such as Calgary, Toronto, Winnipeg, Halifax and Vancouver is increasing every year.²⁴

²³ Federal/Provincial Territorial Working Group on Prostitution: 1998.

²⁴ Victoria Capital Regional District: 1997. Manitoba Youth and Child Secretariat: 1996.

“Statistics showing project patterns of migration between rural and urban settings indicate that by the year 2016, the urban Aboriginal population will have increased in absolute numbers from 319,997 in 1991 to 457,000, a 43 per cent rise in 25 years.”

Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples,
Vol. 3, 1996: 45).

The possibilities and excitement that large cities offer is seen as a solution. When Native children and youth arrive in the city, networks are scarce and there are very few services they can access. Friends and family members who are in the city are usually in the same situation the youth are in, and are unable to access help for any extended period of time. Urban or rural of origin, when left to fend for themselves, youth are often forced into situations of exploitation. The Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, or the Westside in Winnipeg, have a disproportionate number of Aboriginal peoples.²⁵ These areas draw high-risk Aboriginal youth searching for a way to survive.

Only 5–20 per cent of commercial sexual exploitation is visible as the street sex trade.²⁶ While many youth visibly work the streets, the majority find themselves in much more isolated surroundings. Hotels, trick pads, massage parlours, restaurants, back alleys, and bars are all venues for the selling of sex. In smaller communities, prostitution can be hidden, or even

invisible. In some coastal communities for example, commercial and private boats are used as sites of sexual exploitation. Regardless of location, these youth are isolated from the larger community. Of the many dangers inherent in such isolation, one is a drastic decrease of ‘outside’ connections.

Many of Aboriginal youth in the sex trade have a history of running away, either from the family home, care institution, or both. Young people on the run are particularly vulnerable because their street ‘protector’ may threaten to hand them over to police. Runaways fear the police and/or a punitive care accommodation; therefore, children and youth who have left their homes or care placements are among the most vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Until free, accessible, and non-judgmental shelters are widely available the sex trade will remain the only survival option left to most runaway children.

“Already jaded by experiences in foster and group homes, few young people with any experiences of the main child protection agencies will go voluntarily into the system’s embrace. So, instead, they run to the streets where they meet others just like themselves, kids without external supports being eaten away inside by internal conflicts.”

Webber, 1991:77.

²⁵ Vancouver/Richmond Health Board: 1999. Calgary Police Commission: 1997. Boe: 1999.

²⁶ Jiwani et al: 1999. Manitoba Child and Youth Secretariat: 1996. McIntyre: 1994. Ritch et al: 1985.

Health Risks

The majority of Aboriginal youth consulted who are, or were, in the sex trade struggle with addiction, often with more than one substance. Many youths reported exchanging sex for drugs and/or alcohol, even before becoming more formally involved in the sex trade.

“I met a bunch of guys I knew, they were always giving me rock [crack] for free, I never had to do anything, except for this one guy. Then we met these guys, [and] you had to go around the whole room to get a piece [of crack from each guy].”

Female youth, Winnipeg

“I just got involved in the drugs because I got involved with the wrong guy and eventually drugs just took over me. I thought I would be OK, you just start [by] running drugs for people, and they started saying ‘why don’t you just go sleep with this guy’, or ‘why don’t you just go do [these] different things’... I just got sucked into it [the sex trade]. I ended up going through correctional centers, going through detox, going through everywhere. You basically wind up losing everything.”

Female youth, Mission

Sharing needles has increased the risk not only of HIV/AIDS, but also of Hepatitis C, which many outreach workers now see as the new epidemic. Clients pay more for unprotected sex, or refuse to wear condoms, and sexually transmitted diseases in Aboriginal youth often go undetected until serious harm has resulted. Pregnancy is also a major health issue for young Aboriginal females. High rates of alcohol and drug abuse have resulted in an alarming proportion of Aboriginal babies having Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Fetal Narcotic Effects and Sudden Infant Death.²⁷ Several youth who participated in the focus groups felt that their physical and mental disorders stemmed from this often undiagnosed syndrome. The prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse among the parents of sexually exploited Aboriginal youth suggests this may be another factor which exposes youth to a high risk for sexual exploitation.

“My Mom, when she was pregnant with me, she drank a lot and did a lot of drugs. That’s why I have bad nerves and everything. There’s nothing that can stop it, I’m going to be like this for the rest of my life.”

Male youth, Halifax

At best, addiction leads to a suppression of the immune system, leaving children and youth open to a host of illnesses. At worst, it leads to death through illness, suicide, and violence. This is compounded by poor nutrition; most youth live on fast food. Along with poor sleeping patterns,

²⁷ Boland and Duwyn: 1999. Vancouver/Richmond Health Board: 1999, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: 1996.

malnutrition increases the likeliness of getting sick, and being unable to fight infections and illness.²⁸

There is unequivocal evidence that Aboriginal peoples suffer elevated mortality rates in relation to the general Canadian population.²⁹

- Registered Indians have 206.9 deaths per 100,000 in relation to accidents and violence versus 63.3 of the reference population.
- Alcohol related deaths and drug-induced deaths are both 8 times higher for Status Indians.
- Three times more Status Indian women die from HIV/AIDS than all non-aboriginal women in Canada.
- Infectious and parasitic diseases kill Aboriginal peoples at four times the rate of the reference population.
- In urban areas, the life expectancy of Native peoples is often 15 years less than the reference population.
- Innu people in Labrador and Quebec have the highest suicide rate in the world (178 per hundred thousand people per year versus 14 per hundred thousand in the reference population).
- Based on 1992 statistics, rates of infection for tuberculosis are 43 times higher among registered Indians than among non-aboriginals born in this country. This rate is roughly the same for people living in Africa.

While Aboriginals experience relatively fewer deaths due to degenerative diseases than the reference population, the lower rates are a function of: 1) the

predominance of a younger population, and 2) their lower life expectancy.

“Natives occupy the lowest strata of the larger society’s socioeconomic hierarchy, and their mortality levels, especially with respect to accidents and violence, are largely the result of the disadvantaged socio-economic position ...[a] subordinate status, a style of dying that corresponds to their unique and underprivileged style of living.”

Werner-Leonard and Trovato, 1990:13

Relationships have been established between general mortality levels and the high levels of poverty, unemployment, poor housing conditions, inadequate access to medical services, isolation, low levels of education and occupational skills, and discrimination. Aboriginal peoples are the most socio-economically disadvantaged group in Canada. Aboriginal youth who are commercially sexually exploited also face the likelihood of chlamydia, syphilis, gonorrhoea, and/or herpes and may not be aware of the serious health threat which these diseases pose. Also, juveniles working in the sex trade are at extremely high risk of being infected with, or become transmitters of HIV/AIDS.³⁰

“Somewhere down the line, the guy I screwed, well I screwed his wife also, and his wife’s ex-husband, and I screwed his ex-wife, you know what I mean?”

Female youth, Saskatoon

²⁸ Dean and Thomson: 1998.

²⁹ Werner-Leonard and Trovato: 1999. Vancouver/Richmond Health District: 1999. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Samson et al: 1999.

³⁰ Federal/Provincial Territorial Working Group on Prostitution: 1998.

It is imperative to address these concerns about physical health. Yet, truly healthy youth need not only physical, but also the mental and emotional care and security.

“The loss of family and friends, public and police harassment, illness, harsh pimps, and the stress of continually struggling for survival in a hostile environment leaves many adolescent prostitutes depressed, emotionally drained, and in despair. These consequences then become added to the problematic situations many of these youth were fleeing in their home environment. The net result is a disturbed, fearful, and much victimized young person whose mental health is often in shambles.”

Mathews, 1987b:13

Other reported mental health problems include a sense of powerlessness and betrayal, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, disassociation of emotions from memory, eating disorders, manic depression, and schizophrenia. Tragically, this appears to be compounded by the legacy within Aboriginal communities of poor mental health stemming from colonization, and leading to widespread occurrences of ‘passive suicide’, active suicide, and depression.

“To me, I think that [the mental pain is] the killer of it all for so many people, they hold it in, and they begin to cherish it, and it grows almost to become a friend. All of the hurt and all of the pain becomes a friend. It becomes everything [you] know.”

Female youth, Fredericton

“A lot of our issues are the same, all the way across the country, whether we want to see it or not, and it all comes back to that same thing, that abuse in our families and our communities. And the voices of the kids are not even heard, and that’s so unfortunate, because we have young kids who are dying in our communities at very young ages because they are taking their lives. They think that nobody’s listening to them, that they don’t have a voice.”

Female youth, Halifax



Racism

Canadian society has a long history of racism. While we have made great strides in other aspects of our country, many Canadians still feel a long-standing hostility to Aboriginal peoples. Racism in the 21st century can take on a variety of subtle forms, but few would deny its existence. We only need to talk to our friends and neighbors about First Nations issues to witness fear, resentment, and ignorance. Issues of historic genocide remain unresolved, and taint our celebrations of diversity. Confusion and helplessness plague our social relations, yet racism is not inevitable; it is untenable that we do not place the elimination of racism as a priority.

“People judge us by negative things. They see a drunk Aboriginal and they think we’re all drunks. We are equal but we are all also very different people. Abuse has been around us for years and someday, people will understand us and why some us are the way we are.”

Female youth, Prince Albert

“People stereotype Aboriginal people as ‘sniffers’, ‘skimmers’, every name there is... [that they are] dirty people, people on welfare, can’t get a job, always drunk, can’t afford to take care of their kids...”

Female youth, Winnipeg

“In Vancouver, some people would just let us [sex trade workers] die, somehow other people get to decide who gets to live and who gets to die, and who deserves it. A lot of them are Aboriginal, so if you are Aboriginal and work in the sex trade, [the general feeling is] who cares, another problem over.”

Female youth, Vancouver

Regardless of the geographic location of the focus groups, Aboriginal youth unanimously stated that racism was one of the largest influencing factors in their lives. Mainstream society’s expectation for Aboriginal peoples to walk a ‘negative path’ had led to a pervasive invalidation of Native cultures and history. This common stereotyping leaves Aboriginal children and youth feeling worthless and undeserving of help. Being told all of your life that you are inferior because of the colour of your skin shapes your thoughts, your actions, and your sense of self-worth.

In British Columbia, community consultations reveal that Aboriginal women are disproportionately the targets of assault.³¹ Racism appears to motivate these attacks; patterns of assaults in some areas suggest that victims are selected on the basis of race alone.³² Despite a proud heritage, shame marginalizes Aboriginal youth. Unfortunately, racism is a problem not only on an individual level; it has become institutionalized in our media and judicial system.

31 Province of British Columbia and Justice Canada: 1995.

32 Ibid.

The Role of the Media

The media is an active and powerful component in shaping antagonisms between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. Canadians state that they want the Aboriginal population to be on equal footings with the rest, yet when strides are made for a balance in political, social, and economic power, the media portrays the general population as outraged. We need look no further than the furor created by the Nisga'a treaty or more recently the Atlantic lobster fisheries crisis, and yet how many newspapers or news stations report on the fact that a quarter of all reserve housing is not even considered adequate for living in? While major traumas may be covered for their sheer newsworthiness, the media is guilty of massing diverse Native cultures, histories and peoples into a single category of 'special interest'. This may be the result of an understandable desire to get to one answer that can apply to every Aboriginal 'issue', but it misrepresents the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and culture.

Additionally, adolescents are bombarded with media messages which suggest that self-worth is measured by seductiveness. Adolescents and youth are constantly surrounded by cultural and media images aggrandizing a youthful sexuality, portrayed by pubescent girls of European heritage as the desired norm. In a seeming paradox, North American culture rewards youthful appearance, seductive behaviour, and sexual attractiveness, and yet punishes youth who display those very qualities. It is deeply troubling that Canadian society punishes Aboriginal children and youth over these issues rather than blaming those who purchase, or profit from their sexual exploitation and vulnerability.

“They are always looking down on us and blaming us, but it’s not only us. It’s their husbands that are picking us up. Everybody is in denial; everybody pinpoints us, and blaming us because we’re the ones out on the street. But they’re the ones that are picking us up and giving us money. They’re always calling us little sluts and whores, but they never say anything about the johns... like they’re picture perfect guys.”

Female youth, Saskatoon

“The images we present in our media usually portrays the joys and rewards of sex, but rarely the problems and responsibilities. We frequently condemn adolescent sexual behaviour as being immature, and yet paradoxically, it is the very desirability of this youthful sexuality that is used in advertising to titillate and sell consumer goods. Perhaps this is an indication that we undervalue our young people, that we are really more interested in their ‘youth’ as a commodity, with its exchange and use value. Although not intended in the usual sense of the word, the media acts as an advertising agency for prostitution. It does this through advertising escort agencies and in the way media portrays and glorifies prostitution in many pocket novels, in films on commercial television, and in music videos. When one considers the extent to which cultural images of youthful sexuality permeate our society, it becomes difficult to fathom the difference, if any, between adolescent prostitution and sexual exploitation of young people in the media and in advertising.”

Mathews, 1987b: 14

Sexual behaviour is presented as desirable and the media portrays street life and being on the run as exciting and glamorous. The youth felt that movies such as *Pretty Woman*, magazines and fashion glamorized the idea of the sex trade, and that they did not represent the reality of their lives.

“Know those porn star shirts that say XXX? ‘Touch this’ or whatever they say...all I can say is that you see 15 year olds walking around in them and I’m sorry, but the first word that comes to my mind is sex. What is this? It has a lot to do with society. Society is saying what you should be wearing.”

Female youth, Mission

Over-Representation in the Judicial System

Within the judicial system, Aboriginal peoples, both adults and youth, are seriously over-represented. Aboriginal children are removed at a much higher rate from their homes than non-Aboriginal children.³³ This translates into a serious over-representation of Native children and youth in care. Some care facilities work; many do not. Studies have determined that the rate of sexual abuse in foster care is even higher than it is in the average home.³⁴ For those youth who are placed into foster care, the cycle of cultural and familial fragmentation is perpetuated. Consultations with Aboriginal youth identified their care experiences as paving the way for their commercial sexual exploitation.

The Canada Institute of Child Health reports that 6 per cent of Aboriginal children under 16 were removed from their homes due to suspected child abuse, compared with 1 per cent of the children in the entire non-Native Canadian population. This over-representation in care carries on into adulthood for Aboriginal peoples. Rates of incarceration for the adult Native population are 6–8 times higher than for a person of non-Aboriginal descent.³⁵ Federally, Aboriginal peoples represent 17.5 percent of all inmates, with a high in the Northwest Territories of 61.9 per cent.³⁶ While there are attempts by our judicial system to help those youth who come into its reaches, they are usually misguided and short-sighted. Justice for Aboriginal youth means incarceration and trauma, not resolution and safety.

33 Vancouver/Richmond Health District: 1999.

34 Pellatt: No date.

35 Krawll: 1994. Boe: 1999.

36 Boe: 1999.

“ [When I was arrested for prostitution] all my friends were there and it hurt so much, it made me feel much lower...they [the judicial system] treat you like such a bad person or that you're a slut, tramp or whore. You're forced to go there [the streets], you were forced into that spot and if you said no, you were beat up or something worse, you could be killed. And they make it out like you're nothing, they don't try to help you, they just charge you and send you on your merry way...they know where you're going off to, you have to pay off your fine.”

Female youth, Saskatoon

“I had care status, group homes, foster homes, assessment homes, shelters, and I hated it. I hated being in care; I hated it for a lot of reasons. First of all some of the placements ...were mean, but also because going to school and living in the neighborhood people would know you were in care and they would hassle you...at school, by teachers and by the neighborhood. There was all of this shame and stigma, like 'why are you a welfare kid?' 'What did you do to be in care?' and those kinds of questions. I hated it, like that was my identity or something.”

Female youth, Vancouver

“There was a lot of physical abuse [in my family]...I stabbed my sister when I was eight, that meant Children's Aid, where there was a lot of sexual abuse from the staff. One day I ran away from a group home with a friend of mine...I had no clue what she was doing and she said, 'wait here' and that's how it happened [my first time in the trade]...it felt like it was what I was supposed to do, it felt like I did it before.”

Male youth, Toronto

Gender Issues

The vast majority of commercially sexually exploited youth are girls. Estimates of girls in the sex trade run between 75–80 per cent with the remainder being boys, transgendered and transsexual individuals.³⁷ Gender minorities and gay youth are often subject to social and familial disapproval, and experience feelings of isolation from their peers. There is real vulnerability caused by being young and gay in a heterosexual world, which leads to social isolation in mainstream society.

“I think I would have jumped from the CN tower a couple of times, just from being transsexual, because that’s one of the things that has been so hard. Being 21, a prostitute for ten years, being a transsexual, and just living this entire lifestyle is very hard. I’ve tried going home [to the reserve]...a few times, but it just doesn’t work because of my sexuality. It’s much easier for me to be in the city and deal with it.”

Male youth, Toronto

“Coming from a transsexual, the transgender probably gets it the worst out of any gender that is in the sex trade. I go out there now and I want to vomit. I have so many scars from being beaten, raped and stabbed. I’ve been shot twice, I don’t know how many times I’ve been stabbed and raped.”

Male youth, Toronto

“There’s so much going on in our communities and a lot of the time we don’t want to talk about those issues, about sexuality. Our communities are sometimes not ready to hear them, especially if you’re a gay youth coming out from our communities...you’re more likely to run into people that are going to abuse you in the larger centers. As I was coming out myself, I wish there was someone I could have talked to...they could have helped me a whole lot.”

Female youth, Halifax

“I don’t think we should only look at the girls; we should look out for the guys too...getting raped [by clients in the sex trade].”

Female youth, Mission

Aboriginal gay male youth, as well as those who are transgendered and transsexual, may feel forced into commercial sexual exploitation as a form of self-recognition and a means of practicing. Although they represent the minority of commercially sexually exploited youth, boys still need services since the risks associated with violence and homophobia are present regardless of biological gender.

³⁷ Calgary Police Commission: 1997. City of Burnaby: 1998. Jesson: 1993. Jiwani et al: 1999. Manitoba Child and Youth Secretariat: 1996. Mathews: 1987b.

Lack of Resources

When we examine how all of these issues interrelate it is easy to feel overwhelmed. Small wonder that in some communities, Aboriginal youth appear to make up 90 per cent of the visible sex trade. Attempting to cope with any one of these factors, much less the multiple ones faced by Aboriginal children and youth, can become a nightmare.

“It has been estimated that 50 per cent of Aboriginal children, whether living on or off reserve, are living in poverty. The ill health effects of poverty on children are well documented and particularly disturbing. Poor mothers are more likely to have low birth weight babies. Poor children are more likely to have chronic health problems and to be admitted to health care facilities. Poor children are more likely to die of injuries. Poor children are more likely to have psychiatric and emotional disorders. Poor children are more likely to do badly in school and drop out...On the basis of 1991 census data, more than 60 per cent of Aboriginal households in Winnipeg, Regina and Saskatoon were below the low income cut off or poverty line established by Statistics Canada.”

Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples,
Vol.3, 169: 1996

The loss of self-esteem that comes from struggling with these issues cannot help but create a deep vulnerability in our youth. This vulnerability makes them easy prey for those seeking to abuse them through sex.

Previous consultations have shown that the average age of juveniles who become involved in sex work is 14.³⁸ Aboriginal children at this age are not consenting adults who freely choose to be involved in the trade. For the commercially sexually exploited youth that were consulted during the focus groups, they did not feel that sex work was something that a person should do. None of these youth feel that it was a long-term career choice, and yet once they are trapped in the trade, few have any way out.

“When I was downtown I wanted to stop so many times. I could say I want to stop right now; I want to stop tomorrow, but what next? What is the second step next to that? I can stop right now, but what do I do then? Where do I go? Who do I talk to?”

Female youth, Vancouver

“I’m not away from it, I do work here, my family...quite a few of them are pimps and [they] run the houses...I fear for my life, because these people will track you down like a dog and kill you.”

Female youth, Halifax

“You can run, but there’s no one to run to, because you don’t know anybody if you’re alone. Most people are just alone, there’s nobody else out there, and they think that this is it. There’s nothing left for them.”

Female youth, Winnipeg

38 Bramly et al: 1998. Calgary Police Commission: 1997. Manitoba Youth and Child Secretariat: 1996. Mathews: 1987a. Ritch and Michaud: 1985.

Youth do not see prostitution as a long-term career; rather they view it as a necessity in the day-to-day act of survival. The longer they are involved in prostitution however, the stronger their ties become to peers and the street culture. This results in further alienation and division from the larger community.

“When I wanted to leave my pimp [I remember] all the things that they would say to me. I always felt like a freak growing up in [foster] care, being abused...they would try to build me up. ‘Oh you’re beautiful, let me buy you this dress and take you around to this party and show you to my friends’. I always felt so pretty just with them, and I knew that I didn’t have that many friends I felt like I could talk to, so they fed into that. Meanwhile they’re selling me, and keeping all...the money.”

Female youth, Halifax

The Effects of Low Self-Esteem

Loss of self-esteem is a serious problem affecting many Aboriginal youth. Lack of self-esteem and confidence can be both a consequence and an antecedent to the above risk factors. Historically, Aboriginal peoples of North America have faced cultural genocide through deliberate social, political and economic fragmentation and repression. This legacy is alive and well in our society today, despite our protestations to the contrary.

“The...dysfunction of today is a legacy of disrupted relationships in the past, but the effects are broader and more diffuse than can be traced in a direct cause-and-effect relationship. There are entire communities whose members are imbued with a sense of violation and powerlessness, the effect of multiple violations having reverberated throughout kin networks. The treatment of individuals is only part of the healing process that needs to take place. Bonds of trust and hope must be rebuilt within whole communities as well.”

Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples,
Vol. 3, 1996:36

While Aboriginal communities are undergoing fundamental transitions in strengthening their communities and cultures, Native children and youth still face unacceptable levels of risk. These factors perpetuate low self-esteem through intergenerational structures on both individual and institutional levels.

“At that time [when I was working in the trade] I really wanted to die... I couldn't look at myself in the mirror. I couldn't accept the fact that I just thought I was a dirty bitch. Just a slut...”

Female youth, Goose Bay

“[To exit] you need the self-esteem because you lack respect for your own body. And that's what I find with a lot of people who haven't been through it [is that they don't understand that].”

Female youth, Halifax

“Regardless if you feel that you're a piece of crap before you do it [work in the trade], you will after... there is something in you that makes you question your self-worth, and I think that hitting where that question started is where we can prevent youth... from getting into the sex trade.”

Female youth, Toronto

“[I wouldn't have worked in the trade if] I could have had better self-esteem, I didn't have any boundaries, and I didn't care. I didn't know my worth at that time.”

Female youth, Thunder Bay

“I got to the point that I didn't care what I looked like, I didn't care who I was having sex with, I didn't care what was happening to me and I didn't care if I was going to live to see the next day. It got to the point where nothing mattered.”

Female youth, Saskatoon

Low self-esteem ensures that sex trade workers are easy 'prey' for those who tell them what they most need to hear: that they are loved, that they are appreciated, they are understood and that they will be taken care of. No child or youth who has lived with a crippling lack of self-esteem could refuse such an apparent sanctuary.

Self-esteem is a problem for many Canadian youth today; it is not the burden solely of Aboriginal children and youth. Yet factors such as cultural and familial fragmentation, lack of life skills and higher education, substance abuse, poverty, a history of physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse, and racism create an environment in which many Aboriginal youth cannot help but feel marginalized and vulnerable. It is extremely difficult for youth to feel either individual or social worth when they experience exploitation, marginalization and/or addiction.

Part of what diminishes their worth are labels of 'troubled' or 'high risk' which come to define them. Their social and personal identity is then based on their exploitation and abuse, not on their potential. How many Canadians see past these risk factors and labels and see Aboriginal children and youth in the sex trade as talented individuals and potential leaders? Quite often, we are guilty of seeing them as

nothing but problems. We never really get a chance to talk to them about their gifts, their abilities, and their dreams. They are poets, writers, inventors, master storytellers, comedians, brothers, sisters, friends, daughters and sons. How do we keep this part of them alive? Healthy youth are sound not only in body and mind, but also in spirit.

“I’ve been trying for two years now to try and find some type of funding [for a youth center], but every time I try and talk to someone in authority, they basically laugh at me...they say, ‘you’re just a teen without education, we don’t want to listen to you’.”

Female youth, Mission

What is needed, not only for youth, but for all of society, is to understand and celebrate the contribution which youth bring to Canadian society. Respect and validation

are essential ingredients for a healthy sense of self-esteem. Aboriginal children and youth who have been sexually exploited through prostitution need to know that they can become role models, and that they are the people who can and will be the ones that take the 21st century and make it a better place.

Many Aboriginal youth take an active and vital part in their communities, creating programs, services and activities that highlight their talents and concerns. Across Canada youth are searching for, and finding, meaningful cultural and community connections, learning the language of their grandparents, and graduating with honors from top universities. The focus of service providers, community members, and policy analysts needs to encompass the uniqueness, individuality and potential of each and every youth. A holistic future for Aboriginal youth requires that we ensure Canadian society welcomes and nurtures all youth, regardless of their ethnicity or background.



Profile of Commercially Sexually-Exploited Aboriginal Youth

We must look at both social and individual factors, and their influence on Aboriginal children and youth. While individual factors play a crucial role, it is important not to lose sight of the reality that these factors are part of a larger social picture. Individual factors that are associated with commercially sexually exploited youth can all, through one path or another, be traced back to cultural and economic conditions that stunt the healthy emotional and psychological development of young people. This is particularly relevant when discussing Aboriginal children and youth in Canada, who have inherited a legacy of cultural fragmentation, racism and genocide.

Risks for Aboriginal children and youth, like those of all individuals, are unique. Each child and youth responds differently to his or her abuse, and while we may be able to generalize, it is crucial to understand that while all of these factors may be relevant for one individual, for others some factors may be more influential than others. We also have to consider that not all Aboriginal youth who are in the sex trade have experienced any, or all, of these factors. Not all youth struggle with addiction or abuse before their entry into commercial exploitation. Not all youth have fragmented families or a lack of education. What they do all have in common is a fundamental sense of negative self-worth and identity.

It is also important to realize that while these youth are burdened with particular risk factors and are often in crisis, these difficulties do not have to ultimately define

them. Aboriginal children and youth, like the broader population, have unique strengths and competencies.

Background Characteristics of Commercially Sexually Exploited Aboriginal Youth

- Low self-esteem.
- Average age of entry is 14 years.
- A history of poor school attendance, often has not completed grade 9.
- Has had experience of early sexual activity, often as sexual abuse.
- Has been physically, sexually and/or emotionally abused.
- Has run away from unstable/fragmented homes and/or care institutions.
- Has few, if any, traditional job opportunities.
- Little or no access to networks of family or services.
- Homeless and/or nomadic.
- Commonly passes through the stages of involvement in the sex trade, from 1) drift: the process of drift from abuse and/or casual sex to the first act of prostitution, 2) transition: alternating between soliciting and a more conventional life to 3) professional: associating entirely with others in the sex trade, where they are accepted for who and what they are.

The main predictor of youth becoming involved in the sex trade is the overwhelming presence of disruption and discord in their lives, accompanied by low self-esteem. Each of the youth interviewed had

a particular story to tell; yet there were compelling similarities in their backgrounds. Almost all of the Aboriginal children and youth who participated in the focus groups had experienced sexual abuse and came from broken families and/or care situations. The majority of Aboriginal youth consulted in the focus groups also reported engaging in early sexual activity. Attendance at school is usually poor, due to the inability to fit in, racism and/or the inability to concentrate stemming from mental and/or physical symptoms of abuse. Running away from the home or care environment is also a major predictor to involvement in the sex trade. Any trauma that detaches children from their families, communities and cultures increases the likelihood of involvement in commercial sexual exploitation.

Once a child or youth loses such basic parameters as safety, shelter, and sustenance, their vulnerability forces them into situations whereby the sex trade can become the only viable alternative for survival. Painfully few of these youth had planned to work in the sex trade, or chose the street life; rather they were attempting to leave an environment which for one reason or another was intolerable. These youth have been forced by circumstances beyond their control into premature independence.

“My Mom doesn’t want me...my babysitter sexually abused me for five years... My Dad used to really hurt me, and my Mom would always call me down, I wasn’t good enough, I was trash, that’s why I had to move away ...I have nowhere to go.”

Female youth, St. John’s

“I was neglected a lot as a child and it brought up other problems like that [of] abuse with all the uncles coming into the house. There was no love, I grew up not knowing what love was, and when love was shown it wasn’t love, it was like ‘here’s a quarter, thanks for sitting on my lap’...My parents were never there, I don’t know who my biological father is and my Mom has been an alcoholic for a long time...I never lived with them.”

Female youth, Saskatoon

“I left home when I was very young... that was just the thing you did. You ran away from home, you started partying and getting involved in drugs, you got involved in the streets and you just continued on with that life. It wasn’t like there were people out there trying to stop you...I can’t remember being a young girl. I think it was from the trauma, when I got sexually abused it was so traumatic for me that I wiped out my whole childhood.”

Female youth, Halifax

Having nowhere to go, most youth who find themselves in this situation are also lacking integral life skills and have few, if any, chances for meaningful employment. Their situation becomes one of survival, and the deprivation of the basic necessities of life ensures that the exchange of sex for money, food, shelter, or clothing becomes a decision about day-to-day existence. Without safe places for them to frequent and/or live, consistent support from caring individuals, tailored life skills, educational and employment programs, financial support, commercially sexually exploited Aboriginal children and youth have few alternatives for physical and economic survival, and little opportunity to reintegrate themselves into the larger community.

Both Aboriginal boys and girls are introduced to the sex trade through their need to survive. Commercial sexual exploitation depends on keeping the child isolated from family, community and culture once he/she is involved. This is easier because this lifestyle often provides a sense of community and belonging. Most youth already have a history of exploitation, and unfortunately, the step into a more formal existence as a 'paid' sex trade worker is a small one. They have already endured several years of 'unpaid' sexual abuse.

“Years of unpaid sexual abuse eventually create a personality that attracts victimization by others. Sooner or later, most will be sexually abused by more than one person, more than half will be raped at least once, and one-fourth will be sexually assaulted by more than one man at a time.”

Johnson, 1992:55

“I needed some extra money and I started working for an escort agency...it just seemed natural. I thought that if I could make money doing this [why not]... because I've giving for free for how many past years of my life?”

Female youth, Whitehorse

Some youth have friends who tell them about the 'easy' money and sense of control; others have boyfriends or mentors who introduce them to the street as a seemingly natural part of their relationship. Many Aboriginal youth consulted stated that they entered the trade as a way to please another person.

“My friends liked to take me along [when they worked] and that's how it started for me. 'Look how easy it is, and you get this much money', and then the boyfriend who says 'come on, I love you so much, go out and make me some money ...because if we don't have money, we can't spend time together'.”

Female youth, Saskatoon

Low self-esteem stemming from their personal and cultural histories ensures that this need for approval comes at the cost of physical, emotional, and sexual health. Once they enter the street sex trade or other illicit activities, there is a general acceptance from other sex trade workers. With acceptance comes a sense of belonging and this leads to further involvement in a world where they feel they are understood. Often Aboriginal youth will lose touch with the larger society for years at a time, associating only with other sex trade workers, pimps, and street involved youth. This isolation makes children and youth even more vulnerable to the demands of boyfriends, pimps, and drug/alcohol addictions. It is a tragedy for all of Canada that this exploitative 'community' is the only one that offers these children and youth opportunities for survival and a sense of belonging.



For some youth, along with the constant level of fear and anxiety, there is also paradoxically a sense of control and excitement. Running from situations over which they have no control, many Aboriginal children and youth feel that they are actively shaping their lives for the first time. Youth involved in the sex trade often feel that they can control the activity and the degree of intimacy. There can be a sense of freedom in new experiences with clothes, drugs and lifestyle. There is a sense of closeness and acceptance that they feel among their friends in the street culture. Many initially feel that they are only temporarily engaged in this work and have some sort of plan to leave it. The reality of constant danger and restriction of movement within the lifestyle quickly takes over, interrupting and preventing relationships and connections in the 'straight' world. The feelings of control give way under the experiences of degradation and assault the youth must face on a daily basis.

Dangers of the Trade

Recent research in Canada indicates that violence is far more likely to occur within the context of the street than in 'protected' indoor venues.³⁹ Due to racist stereotyping and Eurocentric standards of beauty, Aboriginal sex trade workers are usually street trade workers. They are less likely than non-Aboriginal people to work in the more formalized indoor venues, leaving them further marginalized and in danger. For Aboriginal children and youth, physical violence and emotional abuse are daily elements in this life.

“In Toronto there’s not one girl alive [that I knew when I was 14], and in Winnipeg, there’s only two of us [left]. That’s the reason I want to stop... I don’t want to die.”

Female youth, Winnipeg

“The numbers [of women I knew in the trade] are getting smaller and smaller. The last time I went home there was only one person still alive that I knew. All the rest of them had died...being shot, drug overdoses...”

Female youth, Halifax

“I have...a lot of friends who have died from drugs, from murder, from even being beaten. I’ve been to the lowest of lows, getting beaten as badly as you can get beaten, waking up in a ditch wondering where the hell I was. I was one of the lucky ones who got out of it when I could...”

Female youth, Mission

The major factors that lead to the deaths of Aboriginal children and youth who are sexually exploited through prostitution are murder, AIDS, suicide, and overdoses. Violence against those exploited through prostitution is extreme, and in many cities there is evidence that it is increasing.⁴⁰ In every city and town there are 'dates' that are less interested in sex than in having the power to hurt youth involved in prostitution. In Canada, women involved in the sex trade are 160 times more likely to be killed than other women.⁴¹ Across Canada, there has been an alarming increase in the number of murders of female sex workers over the last 10 years. In Vancouver alone, over 20 women have disappeared from the Downtown Eastside since 1986. The rates of

³⁹ Sprung: 1995.

⁴⁰ Handbook for Action Against Prostitution of Youth in Calgary: No date. Manitoba Youth and Child Secretariat: 1996.

⁴¹ Jiwani et al: 1999.

conviction for those who have murdered sex trade workers is less than half the national average.⁴² Police state that murders of persons involved in prostitution often remain unsolved, as there is usually insufficient evidence to prosecute. Frighteningly:

“99 per cent [of adult street sex trade workers] believe that girls and boys were more at risk of being victimized than adult sex trade workers, and 32 per cent of the women believed that Aboriginal women are more victimized than other cultures in the sex trade.”

Sprung, 1995:18

Almost all of the Aboriginal youth who participated in the cross-Canada consultations reported that they experienced violence while working, from clients, partners, pimps, and the police. They may have escaped their original abusers, yet continued survival in these marginalized circumstances ensures that the abuse continues. Many Aboriginal youth consulted had internalized this abuse as a common element in their lives, and felt powerless and unable to effect change. Even more frightening is that many youth, being recipients of abuse for most of their lives, come to identify commercial sexual exploitation as a ‘normal’ life progression.

“After a while, it’s like a cycle, it goes back to the same thing... A lot of people knew about it [the exploitation and abuse] but they didn’t do anything about it, it makes you weak after a while... [and then] you don’t feel like it’s exploitation, you just start feeling it’s normal.”

Female youth, St. John’s

“Sexual abuse is the biggest part of it, and some of it is self-inflicted. What I mean by that is speaking from my own experiences I have enabled myself to feel worthless, no good. I’ve allowed myself to be abused by men... because of my own abuse. It was so easy to go into an abusive relationship [with my pimp] after my parents and school, just going from one abusive relationship to another.”

Female youth, Summerside

⁴² Lowman et al: 1986.

Although the number of HIV/AIDS cases in Canada has stabilized, sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS are increasing dramatically among Aboriginal sex trade workers, especially among Aboriginal women.⁴³ The number of identified HIV positive cases among street workers has risen, particularly among those who are injection drug users. Clients are also a decisive factor in this increase: many are willing to pay extra for, or force sexual intercourse without protection, becoming carriers for the virus, infecting other workers, as well as their wives and partners.

Aboriginal youth and children involved in commercial sexual exploitation survive in an atmosphere of violence and intimidation, where their very existence can

depend on compliance with their continued abuse. Difficulties in accessing health services, lack of proper housing, counseling, income assistance, education and skills training, racist and gendered stereotypes, and drug and alcohol addiction, are all problems faced by sexually exploited youth in the sex trade. The complex and challenging social, political, and economic factors underlying this situation must be examined before a comprehensive, long-term action plan can be made. The absence of information on the experiences and needs of sexually exploited Aboriginal youth highlights the need for research that will assist Aboriginal communities and Canadian society in developing appropriate prevention and support programs.



43 Vancouver/Richmond Health Board: 1999.

The National Aboriginal Project

This document reflects the personal stories and recommendations of Canadian Aboriginal children and youth who have experienced commercial sexual exploitation. The purposes of the consultations were to reach Aboriginal children and youth across Canada and give them a chance to express their ideas and concerns regarding the issues of abuse, exploitation, prevention, healing, exiting, crisis intervention, harm reduction, public attitudes, and youth participation. The national consultations are the first step in a project designed to raise awareness of the issue across the country, change public attitudes, increase the sensitivity of people who work with youth, provide direct assistance to agencies, and ultimately, decrease the market for sex with children. These goals can be achieved through implementing the recommendations of Aboriginal children and youth who have experienced this exploitation first hand.

The youth who participated made a concerted and courageous effort to communicate their past, their present, and their hopes for tomorrow. It is now our collective responsibility to ensure that their voices are not only heard and respected, but also acted on promptly and decisively. This report documents their recommendations in order to create positive change for all of Canadian society. Only by working together with experiential youth will holistic and long-term solutions become a reality. The youth who courageously participated in the National Aboriginal Consultation Project need and deserve your attention,

your compassion, and your clear response to their recommendations.

We cannot focus exclusively on the past of Aboriginal youth, which is often filled with pain, loneliness, and anger. In reading this document, many may erroneously concentrate on the abuse, the drugs and/or the poverty and come away with feelings of despair. While the issues which shape sexually exploited Aboriginal youth are of extreme importance, the shattered lives of these youth cannot be defined by trauma alone. Individual labels of 'high risk' or 'troubled' obscure the reality that solutions to commercial sexual exploitation can only be found within an integrated society.

Aboriginal youth who participated in these national consultations felt that concerns regarding prevention, intervention, healing, public attitudes and youth participation could not be dealt with separately from one another. They eloquently described the necessity of implementing holistic programming before more of them die. Death is a daily possibility for the majority of these Aboriginal youth. Death for them comes not just for the body, but also for their hope and for their spirit. Attempting to find blanket solutions to such a complex issue may seem like a daunting, if not impossible, task. Healing from sexual exploitation is an individual process and requires individualized attention and programs. Our best chance of success is to listen to the Aboriginal youth who have experienced this life first hand, and to implement their recommendations.

As members of Canadian society, we must recognize that the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth is a reflection of our own values, attitudes, and beliefs about the value of children. It is all too easy to blame the government, the researchers, or society itself. We must shoulder our individual responsibility for allowing an environment where commercial sexual exploitation can flourish. Part of this challenge is the fundamental need to validate our youth, by honoring their experience and their unique expertise. Experiential youth must play a central role in the creation, design, development and delivery of any program that expects to impact the lives of youth sexually exploited through prostitution.

It is known that Aboriginal children and youth represent a disproportionate percentage of commercially sexually exploited children and youth across Canada. National surveys have shown that 14–65 per cent of youth in the sex trade described themselves as Aboriginal.⁴⁴ In some communities this percentage is as high as 90 per cent. In many cities, most ‘trannies’ (transsexuals and transvestites) working the street are Aboriginal.⁴⁵ Sexual exploitation for these youth does not always mean that money is involved: often children and youth are exploited in exchange for a roof over their heads, something to eat, or even to gain approval. The sex trade is not about power, glamour, or freedom. It takes place on the street, in bars, the back of restaurants, trick pads, cars, massage parlours, at parties, in private homes, boats, in alleyways, hotels, and just about anywhere you can think of. The reality is that violence, addiction, AIDS, and suicide are common

themes in the lives of youth involved in the sex trade. Most often, the money that is earned is given over to boyfriends, pimps, and to support addictions. Many do not survive.

Academic and Literature Review

Current material on commercial sexual abuse includes academic research, legal initiatives, and government policies and services, all designed to understand and eradicate sexual exploitation. Over the last 20 years, Canadian awareness of commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth has increased. 86 per cent of Canadians are aware that there are young people working in the sex trade in this country.⁴⁶ In the early 1980s, the federal government initiated two national reports on juvenile prostitution. While both the Badgley and Fraser Reports recommended government and community intervention, little has been achieved in 15 years. Looking back even further, a pattern of research emerges. Most of the information generated has been purely descriptive in nature, and fails to provide concrete support for, or evaluations of, existing programs. Nor does it make recommendations for future programs. This may be why many Canadians are aware that commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth exists, yet feel that ‘it has always been happening and nothing can be done about it’. Good intentions are displayed through short-term programs and policies, but there is widespread agreement among professionals, as well as a growing concern, that we can no longer afford to let the present situation continue without serious consequences for both adolescents and society.⁴⁷

44 Save the Children Canada: 1998.

45 Ibid.

46 Burton: 2000.

47 Mathews: 1987b.

Decades of academic research have been important in charting high-risk predictors for youth who are sexually exploited through prostitution, yet it has provided few recommendations into meaningful programs of prevention, intervention, exiting, healing, and youth participation. The lack of research and funding monies ensures that those studies attempting a holistic view are deemed as ‘unworkable’, due to financial and policy restraints. This is a tragedy. Children in our society are often seen as an economic liability, and are accorded little prestige or personal control. This attitude reduces the status of children and leaves them particularly vulnerable to abuse, neglect, and exploitation of them in physical, emotional, sexual, and commercial terms.

A crucial oversight in the literature regarding commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth is the absolute lack of research regarding Aboriginal youth. Extensive reviews reveal that there has never been any work done specifically with Aboriginal children and youth in the sex trade. Considering the serious overrepresentation of Aboriginals experiencing abuse and exploitation in Canada, this deficiency of research is shocking. This report contends that historical, cultural and economic factors are important in constructing the experiences of Aboriginal children and youth, and that these factors limit the application of non-Aboriginal research, programs, and policy to Aboriginal youth-at-risk. Aboriginal youth involved in the sex trade face economic, political and social marginalization, and this lack of policy representation appears to be mirrored in the lack of research.

Therefore, this work represents a groundbreaking development in our common goal to eradicate the sexual exploita-

tion of children and youth. Advocating experiential youth participation is not merely the latest ‘fad’ in community development; it is an integral component to any long-term solution to the difficulties which Aboriginal children and youth face in Canada. Secondly, the nationwide consultations which provided the information for this report encompassed Aboriginal children and youth exclusively, in order that they create a body of research specifically designed to address the concerns of the Aboriginal population and communities.

Methodology And Analysis

This report is based on transcripts of cross-Canada consultations conducted in 22 communities over a five-month period. The National Aboriginal Project was a participatory program involving Aboriginal youth who are, or have been, experiencing commercial sexual abuse and exploitation. The goal of this project is to facilitate a better national understanding in local communities, among service organizations and in the government, of the realities and needs of commercially sexually exploited Aboriginal youth.

The National Aboriginal Project is an initiative of consultation with Aboriginal children and youth across Canada. It is not meant as a quantitative study; statistics do not figure prominently due to the social stigma which surrounds the issue of commercial sexual exploitation. Rather, its focus is on the youth themselves, and their experiences with sexual exploitation through prostitution. It is not the intent of this report to exhaustively catalogue these experiences; rather it is to give Aboriginal children and youth a platform to be heard. The ultimate goal of The National Aboriginal Consultation Project is to record their

recommendations and then act upon them in conjunction with community members, government officials, and service providers.

Two women of Aboriginal ancestry, Cherry Kingsley and Melanie Mark, co-facilitated the consultations. Over the last 10 years, Cherry Kingsley has become one of Canada's leading advocates of youth and has spoken to diverse audiences about her experiences in the sex trade. She was one of the founding members of the Alberta Youth in Care & Custody Network, the BC Federation of Youth in Care Networks and the National Youth in Care Network. She was a member of the Board for the National Youth in Care Network for seven years, the last two as president. Her work has taken her from the floor of the United Nations to addressing the national convention of military police in Ottawa. Cherry has advocated the recognition of the issues of sexual exploitation her entire career.

Melanie Mark has worked with youth on various levels, and has recently completed her criminology diploma. Growing up with many of the issues related to this project, Melanie understands the complexity and necessity of being an Aboriginal role model in Canada. Her experiences as an Aboriginal summer student with the RCMP and as a Native court worker have equipped her with a unique perspective concerning Aboriginal children and youth.

Participants in the consultations agreed to having a tape recorder present during the focus groups. For those who were unable or unwilling to attend, open-ended questionnaires were distributed and collected at the end of each trip. The questionnaire was also instrumental in eliciting responses from youth who had difficulties with expressing themselves verbally. Verbatim audio recordings of the focus groups were transcribed in their entirety.

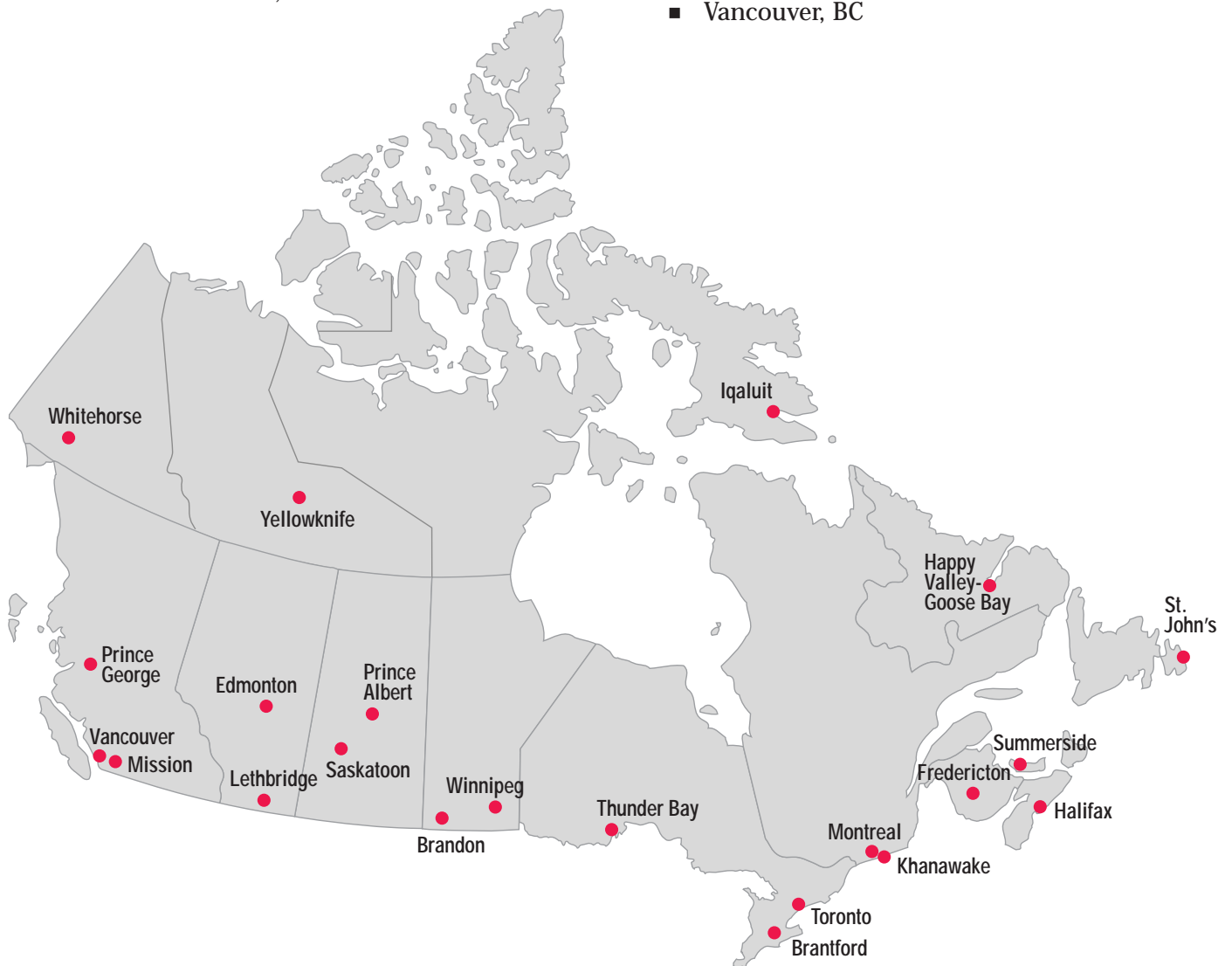


Cherry Kingsley and Melanie Mark on Parliament Hill.

This process also involved repeated readings of the transcripts and written questionnaires to acquire a general feel for the material, highlighting quotations, as well as the organization of those quotations into clusters of themes which provided some structure for the recommendations. In many cases, the meanings of the Aboriginal participant's words were clear and explicit. Other occasions necessitated a combination of listening to tone and cadence, and contextualizing the words within the larger frame of the focus group. The aim of the recordings was to identify common experiential themes which accurately and fully represented the lived experiences of the participants.

Focus groups were held between January and June 2000 in twenty-two communities,⁴⁸ including:

- Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Labrador
- St. John's, Nfld
- Fredericton, NB
- Summerside, PEI
- Halifax, Nova Scotia
- Iqaluit, Nunuvut
- Toronto, Ontario
- Thunder Bay, Ontario
- Brantford, Ontario*
- Khanawake, Quebec*
- Montreal, Quebec*
- Winnipeg, Manitoba
- Brandon, Manitoba
- Prince Albert, Saskatchewan
- Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
- Lethbridge, Alberta
- Edmonton, Alberta
- Yellowknife, NWT
- Whitehorse, Yukon
- Prince George, BC
- Mission, BC
- Vancouver, BC



⁴⁸ Attempts were made to host focus groups in Montreal, Kahanawake and Brantford, however no youth attended. This may have been the result of a lack communication between service providers and the youth, as well as the lack of community support. Additionally, youth may have felt that attending would effect their relations within the community. This lack of support is in no way was particular to these communities, rather it reflects the barriers experienced in almost all communities by the facilitators in trying to approach youth.

The consultations were evenly divided between large urban centers, smaller cities, and more rural locales. The focus groups centered on six theme areas:

- Abuse and exploitation
- Prevention
- Crisis intervention/harm reduction
- Exiting and healing
- Public attitudes/advocacy
- Youth participation

Based on previous consultations the above themes were identified by experiential youth as the ones most relevant to the issue of commercial sexual exploitation. The sites for the nation-wide consultations were community-based, youth-friendly facilities. Before entering each community, contact was made with youth workers, youth service agencies, band offices, and Friendship Centers. Existing contacts from the International Summit in Victoria and previous consultations with youth across Canada were initially used as starting points in each community. Many of the communities in which the consultations were scheduled to take place had little or no knowledge of the project, and new contacts were forged through local Friendship Centers. The centers in these communities were an important source of information for the facilitators and simultaneously provided a link to the youth.

Both of the facilitators spent up to two days in each community before outreach consultations took place. Familiarization consisted of walking the 'strolls', putting up posters, and patronizing coffee shops or anywhere else the youth were hanging out. Usually, the youth consultation took place on the third day, once the youth had become more familiarized with both the facilitators and the project.



Above: Cherry and Melanie in Yellowknife, below: Melanie in Iqaluit.



The format of the focus groups was a talking circle, using an eagle feather to recognize and honor speakers who held it. Confidentiality and anonymity were protected during both the consultations and transcription of the meetings, and only the participants of the consultations and the facilitators were present in the room during the discussions. Generally, the focus groups were 2–3 hours in length, and the average attendance for each group was 8.5 youth. The deliberate sizing of each focus group allowed the youth to speak for as long as they felt was necessary. Considerably more females than males participated in the consultations. This may reflect the higher percentage of females being sexually exploited. As well, it may indicate denial on the part of males to identify with their own exploitation.

Trials and Tribulations of Roadwork

The administrative component — making and coordinating contacts, soliciting and requesting permission, as well as scheduling the focus groups — proved to be challenging. In many communities, service providers were unaware of other agencies and contacts, and were unable to pool resources. This proved to be particularly difficult as most contacts were made long-distance from Vancouver. Administrative challenges can be daunting, even if you live in the community. For the facilitators, there was the additional problem of geography. The distance between Vancouver and other communities meant that there were few networks to rely on. There were instances of contacts being made but, on arrival, people had forgotten about the facilitators. A few communities and service providers did not respond at all to commu-

nications. This begs the question: How is society supposed to provide a seamless continuum of care when it is fragmented among the service providers themselves?

The difficulties described above were not specific to any one community. There were many Friendship Centers, service providers and communities who went out of their way to accommodate the project. Their help was instrumental in making the National Aboriginal Consultation Project a success.

The veil of social silence which surrounds commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth influences the reactions of many community members in Canada. It is truly unfortunate that several communities flatly refused to participate in this project without allowing the youth to decide for themselves. This refusal further marginalizes youth who suffer from sexual exploitation, and ensures that their voices will never be heard. How can we condone this silence when there are young people across Canada being bought and sold?

At times, the facilitators felt there was a struggle with some agencies and community members about the need to address the issue at all. Having to ‘sell’ the project to communities and service care providers necessitated extensive media interviews and press releases. While the media was responsible for raising the profile of The National Aboriginal Consultation Project, there was a disturbing focus on the more sordid facts of commercial sexual exploitation. Fascination with details of extremism in sexuality, youth, and violence seriously threatens sexually exploited Aboriginal youth; their suffering is used as titillation.

Community and social silence has a further negative impact on experiential youth. Many of the youths consulted were them-

selves uncomfortable and/or unable to discuss their experiences. Their silence stems from a position of multi-stigmatization. Youth often feel the need to be a 'protector' of their community by denying the reality of what exists in their communities and extended families. No matter how bad it is for them, they feel that disclosing their reality will only bring labeling and shame. They all know it exists; they have been exposed to it and they have been victims of it. Yet they fear speaking up because of the dangers of retaliation. While these consequences differ between communities, they are almost always negative: i.e. telling the authorities will land you in foster care. Caught between shame and negative consequences, youth do not go to the very services that are supposedly in place to help them.

There were real differences in communication between the urban and rural locales of the focus groups. The price of speaking up in smaller communities is higher. This is compounded by the fact that small-town commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth can look very different from that in larger communities. There may be no visible face to the sex trade as there is in cities, and youth who are exploited rarely receive money for their abuse; more often they receive alcohol, drugs, or a place to stay. There is an inherent understanding that in smaller communities,

“You are stuck in the reality of abuse; there is nowhere to go so you might as well accept it.”

Female youth, Winnipeg

The silence surrounding Aboriginal children and youth also stems from the reality that very few have ever been asked about it. The

modicum of safety in silence and/or denial is compounded by Canadian society's ambivalence, a stance which obscures the issue. There is much resistance to discussing the issue; some communities and youth feel that if they don't have to talk about it, it cannot affect them. This reticence translates into a life-long pattern of denial with a potentially lethal effect. Many Aboriginal children and youths consulted for this project have severe difficulties in expressing themselves, due to either repression and/or a lack of education. These limit their ability to conceptualize solutions, and further reinforces a low sense of self-worth; this low sense feeds into their silence. They feel guilt, as though what has happened is their fault. They feel that their lives are always going to be this way.

“I don't think there is any way to get away from it; it [abuse and exploitation] is still going to happen around you, everywhere...”

Female youth, Goose Bay

“I don't think that it [working in the sex trade] could have been prevented in any way... I was sexually abused when I was five, and ever since I was five it was the only way I ever knew...”

Female youth, Winnipeg

This inability to realize that their lives can be different leads to a profound sense of apathy. These feelings of helplessness, while powerful, were not the dominant emotion in the focus groups. In most communities, the youth felt quite strongly

about bringing their experiences to a wider audience in the hopes that others would not have to suffer. For the youth that participated in the consultations, the impact of being able to talk with others who had similar experiences was often very emotional. For these youth, the silence and stigma surrounding the juvenile sex trade is quite literally a killer. The longer they are forced to remain silent through shame, guilt, anger, and pain, the less chance they have of surviving. In order to break this cycle of silence, and to begin healing, we must empower the many youth who had extreme difficulties talking about such personal issues.

“If we never had another group like this, I probably would never talk about my problems... [here] you can understand how everybody else feels. So have groups like this one to be strong inside.”

Female youth, St. John's

“I would just like to thank you for giving us the opportunity to talk to an adult. It is amazing to me, to know that I'm not the only one around here who has been through this.”

Female youth, Summerside

“What I wanted to say for a long time is thank you for listening.”

Male youth, Toronto

“This is probably the first time I've every really actually talked about it. It feels like I'm cutting wounds and pouring salt into them, and I don't really feel comfortable talking about it, but I guess this is my first step, so thank you for having this.”

Male youth, Halifax

“I really wish that all my friends from the stroll and the bar could have been here, to sit in the background and watch, because this was so good. I wish somebody was filming us, because it would have been good for a lot of people, [other] Aboriginal youth, elders, doctors, lawyers, just everybody to have watched this group.”

Male youth, Toronto

It is within our power to advocate community-level support groups. It is crucial to understand the need of the youth to share their stories, for their healing process to begin, as well as ours. Youth participation is necessary to have any success in the eradication of commercial sexual exploitation. We must come together as a community to honor and listen to these youth if we are to have any hope at all of eradicating or even minimizing the stigmatization and exclusion of future generations.

Background to the National Aboriginal Project

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) is the most widely accepted human rights document in history. All but two countries have ratified this *Convention*, and are therefore legally required to uphold its commitments to children's rights. Canada is one of the *Convention's* signatories. Article 34 of the CRC states:

States parties undertake to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. For these purposes, States parties shall in particular take all appropriate national, bilateral and multi-lateral measures to prevent:

- a) **The inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity:**
- b) **The exploitative use of children in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practices:**
- c) **The exploitative use of children in pornographic performances and materials.**

The purpose of the World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, held in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1996, was to develop an international declaration and agenda for action based on the CRC. Cherry Kingsley attended the Congress, only to find that of 1,300 delegates, only 15 youth were present. Out of these 15, only 3 of them had personal experience in the sex trade. Along with Honorable Landon Pearson, Senator, Advisor on Children's Rights to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Government of Canada, Cherry publicly stated that for any govern-

ment or social service agency to truly understand the factors which make children and youth vulnerable to exploitation, listening to and incorporating the voices of experiential youth was essential.

The CRC also speaks of the need to give children and youth a voice and the right to be heard. Article 12 states that:

States parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Article 13:

The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

The World Congress was the birthplace for 'Out From the Shadows.' With the support of the Canadian government, Cherry and Senator Pearson created a diverse team that successfully raised funds to conduct national and international youth consultations, and organized *Out From the Shadows — First International Summit of Sexually Exploited Youth*. This unique Summit was held in Victoria, Canada, in March 1998. Fifty-five delegates participated in the five-day event, and they came from nine Canadian cities, three American cities, as well as from Bolivia, Chile, the Dominican

Republic, Honduras, Peru, and Brazil. The purpose of the Summit was to bring experiential youth together in a safe, confidential and respectful setting, to express and record their stories, and to forward their recommendations. These recommendations took shape as the *Declaration and Agenda for Action*, which can be found in its entirety in Appendix A.

In March 1999, Save the Children Canada started its *Out From the Shadows* Program, which took as its starting point the *Declaration and Agenda for Action*. It soon became clear that special emphasis had to be placed on the issue of Aboriginal children and youth who were being commercially sexually exploited in Canada. It was also understood that a National Aboriginal Project for commercially sexually exploited children and youth could not be undertaken in any meaningful way without grounding it in child and youth participation.

Save the Children Canada is a non-political, non-sectarian organization whose philosophy is to help entire communities, as opposed to just one child. Through their foresight in advocating for youth participation, a partnership of concerted action has enabled and furthered the success of programs such as the National Aboriginal Consultation Project. Save the Children Canada is dedicated to the objectives of the UN's *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*. It was Save the Children's founder, Eglantyne Jebb who helped draft the first Charter on the Rights of the Child, which was subsequently adopted by the United Nations. Save the Children Canada's goal is to effect lasting, positive change in the lives of children in Canada and around the world. Save the Children Canada pursues its mission through child focused community-based

projects, activities and advocacy, working in partnership with local community groups both at home and abroad, to assist, enable, and empower them to improve the quality of life for children. Save the Children has set the standard for working with children and youth in crisis. Together, Save the Children Canada and the Out From the Shadows Program are making a difference – today.

The Importance of Youth Participation⁴⁹

Canadians are at last beginning to recognize the need for a concerted and cooperative effort to eradicate the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth. In attempts, however, to find viable solutions for vulnerable children, the youth themselves are often stigmatized and given no power, no influence, and no voice. Youth are not merely 'adults in training', or the passive recipients of legislation: they have specific rights, as well as needs.

The youth at the Summit identified the need for many changes in order to prevent further exploitation and to provide support to youth currently experiencing exploitation. Based on the successful participatory outcomes of the Summit, it is crucial to understand that experiential youth must play a central role in the creation, design, development and delivery of such programs. The most important component of experiential youth participation is *realistic participation*. Fostering youth participation means creating a supportive environment in which all youth can realize their potential and be instrumental in the development of public policy and programs that affect them.

⁴⁹ For a comprehensive overview of the importance of youth participation in community development, please refer to Appendix B.

Youth participation is a crucial component in advocating and implementing positive social change. Front line programs developed and delivered by experiential youth have a higher success rate than other programs and services. Developing trust with experiential youth can be difficult. In order to create meaningful programs, policies, services, and strategies to address the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth, we must realize the importance, benefits and unique perspective that experiential youth bring with their participation.

These benefits are experienced both by the individual youth who have the opportunity to participate, and the larger system that encompasses the delivery of strategies to address commercial sexual exploitation. Involving experiential youth accesses a diversity of information and benefits everyone in the community.

- It provides a way for children and youth with personal experience in commercial sexual exploitation to give a voice to their experiences, their needs, and their recommendations.

- It ensures that their voices are heard and considered by the individuals and the organizations who are committed to eliminating the global sexual exploitation of children and youth.
- It can provide an opportunity for personal empowerment, skill enhancement and permanent, positive, sustainable change.
- Participation is part of a growing worldwide trend to involve people in decisions which affect them.
- It provides new and innovative solutions and strategies to address identified issues in situations where traditional approaches have not been effective.

The Aboriginal community of Canada has faced, and continues to face, many barriers. The levels of poverty, education, life expectancy, abuse, violence, and addiction are many times higher than in the non-Native population. Aboriginals continue to face endemic racism, ignorance, and intolerance from 'mainstream' Canadian society. Commitment to involving experiential Aboriginal children and youth in ending commercial sexual exploitation is a significant step towards a healthier future.



Abuse and Exploitation

The first area of focus in the consultations were the issues of abuse and exploitation. What did the youth themselves identify as being harmful to their bodies, their minds and to their healthy development both as family members and as citizens of larger communities? Abuse was identified as any action (physical, sexual, emotional or verbal) directed towards them that kept a young person from being able to reach their full potential. Both short-term and long-term effects of abuse were identified. The impact of abuse on self-esteem, sexuality, social development, the ability to learn and trust are only a few of the effects that the youth mentioned. We often think abuse is a 'family' matter, but in fact it is everywhere in our communities. Many youth reported severe and abusive trauma from outside the family, but felt that they could not disclose their pain to family members and/or caregivers because of feelings of fear, shame, or in the belief that their family wouldn't accept the truth.

Tragically, both male and female Aboriginal children and youth are apparently abused at a substantially higher rate than characteristically reported for non-Aboriginal groups.⁵⁰ We cannot assign the responsibility for this solely to Aboriginal communities. It is crucial to understand the depths of cultural trauma experienced by Aboriginal peoples in Canada to make sense of, and to construct a healthier understanding of, the pervasive history of multi-generational abuse and deprivation within Canada's Aboriginal communities. Breaking the cycle means a recognition of

this history, and the legacy which continues to affect our youth today. Only by working together can Canadians of all generations and cultures begin a collective healing for the protection, validation, and empowerment of all children and youth.

Both male and female youth who are, or have been, involved in the sex trade report significantly more negative sexual experiences early in their lives than those who are not involved in the trade, regardless of race or economic status. The correlation between early sexual abuse and entrance into the sex trade has been well documented.⁵¹ More than 80 per cent of the Aboriginal youth consulted in the cross-Canada focus groups reported incidences of sexual abuse. All of the youth identified with a sense of shame and guilt, a sense of acute vulnerability, fragmentation, and invalidation, along with cultural shame. Many studies have found that girls who have suffered sexual abuse develop an identity that is tied primarily to their sexuality. This 'victim state' includes a poor sense of self, a sense of alienation from home, school, and social networks, and a lack of control over their environment.⁵²

“Abuse...comes when you're forced into something, it comes in many forms: emotionally, physically... basically all my friends and family have been through it in one form or another.”

Female youth, Goose Bay

50 Mcevoy and Daniluk: 1994.

51 Ritch and Michaud: 1985. Manitoba Youth and Child Secretariat: 1996. Jesson: 1993. McIntyre: 1994.

52 Mathews: 1987a. Ritch and Michaud: 1985.

This question was of particular concern to many of the youth, as they felt that early abuse and exploitation led to a more entrenched connection with the sex trade. Studies have overwhelmingly shown that the main predictor of children and youth entering the sex trade is their history of abuse.⁵³ With more than 80 per cent of these youth suffering from sexual, physical, emotional and verbal abuse, sex trade work becomes an illusion of escape and independence for them. Tragically, once they are there, the abuse these youth face usually intensifies.

The experience of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse for Aboriginal children and youth, while having similarities to the abuse suffered by non-Aboriginals, differs contextually and culturally. Isolation, extreme poverty, economic and social deprivation, high rates of alcoholism, substance abuse and domestic violence, as well as racism, differentially construct the experiences and consequences of abuse on Aboriginal youth. Many of the youth consulted understood that what happened to them was part of the multi-generational cycle of Aboriginal abuse and pain which remains unbroken.

Many Canadian communities state that commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth does not occur within their jurisdiction, and yet 86 per cent of Canadians also state that they know that there are young people who are commercially sexually exploited and abused.⁵⁴ This seeming paradox translated into more than one community refusing to let us speak with their youth. This silence, based on an attitude of 'if we can't see it, it doesn't exist' constitutes a denial of a complex problem that is killing our youth. In all of

“It’s anything...it doesn’t have to be in the home with parents, it could be in the street or pimps who take advantage of kids, [they] take over and control the lives of the kids...”

Female youth, St. John’s

“To me, abuse is a breakdown, whether it’s emotionally, physically or mentally, it’s just constantly picking at you. The innocence of growing up and not knowing that it’s supposed to be different. When you’re a child, you think that’s the norm and it’s supposed to happen.”

Female youth, Vancouver

“There’s so much abuse out there and I think we close our eyes to it, we don’t want to see it because it’s happening in our own families, it’s happening to our friends...we want to think it’s happening to other people, but it is here and we have to take responsibility...”

Female youth, Halifax

“I think another form of abuse is when the adults see it and ignore it. That happened big time with me...everyone saw it and no one did anything. I think that’s a big form of abuse. Everyone does that to you, and then you just take on that role for yourself.”

Female youth, Winnipeg

⁵³ Calgary Police Commission: 1997. Bramly et al: 1998. Capital Regional District: 1997. Jesson: 1993. Jiwani et al: 1999. Frederick: 1987a. McIntyre: 1994.

⁵⁴ Burton: 2000.

“I just fell for it...I was in a vulnerable state, I lost my virginity to rape, and I was consistently abused by my mother. I was ashamed of myself, who I was, what I looked like and when I met this man he was the world to me. He said, ‘Oh, you’re so pretty’ and I fell for it [and became a prostitute for him].”

Female youth, Winnipeg

“When I was sexually abused it was so traumatic that it wiped out my whole childhood...I ran away from home, I started partying and getting involved in drugs, and I got involved in the streets and I just continued on with that life...I don’t ever want to see young people go through that, it’s not a life you grow up in and say, ‘I want my child to live on the streets, do drugs and become a prostitute’.”

Female youth, Halifax

“There was a lot of physical abuse from my stepfather...I stabbed my sister when I was eight, which meant Children’s Aid, where there was a lot of sexual abuse there from the staff. [When I started turning tricks at 11] it felt like that was what I was supposed to do; it felt like I had done it before.”

Male youth, Toronto

the communities in which the focus groups were held, there were myriad examples of youth exchanging sex for drugs, food, shelter, other basics of life and/or money. This type of exploitation is a community issue. It not only affects the communities in which the street sex trade is evident, it affects all communities. Youth from small communities and reserves often run away to the anonymity of the big city and then gravitate to the streets. Judging the seriousness and extent of commercial sexual exploitation of Aboriginal youth merely on its public visibility does not reflect the reality of its existence in hotels, bars, restaurants, trick pads, boats, at parties, and in the backs of cars, just to name a few venues. Across Canada, communities estimate that only between 5–20 per cent of sexual exploitation is occurring on the street.

Youth involvement in the sex trade is fundamentally a social and community issue. The sooner that we are able to accept our responsibility for helping youth break the cycle of exploitation and abuse, the sooner we will be able to honestly say that commercial sexual exploitation does not exist in Canada.

Aboriginal youth identified exploitation as different from abuse, though one cannot exist without the other. For youth across Canada, exploitation was seen as taking advantage of someone else for personal profit, pleasure and/or control. Children who have been abused are much more vulnerable to exploitation. Their vulnerability ensures that they are easy ‘prey’ for those who tell them what they most need to hear: that they are loved, appreciated, understood, and that they will be taken care of. What child or youth who has lived with the pain of abuse could refuse such an apparent sanctuary?

“One of my ex-boyfriends told me that this [working the streets] is what I should be doing...I thought I was in love with the guy...I had no actual place to stay, I had no money, I had no food, nothing...you get to the point that you're so desperate that you'd do anything.”

Female youth, St. John's

“We were at a party, and he [my boyfriend] decided that he was going to do coke...and what happened [after a big fight] was I wound up naked, standing in the middle of the living room, so that people could admire the way I looked naked. He got a gram of coke for it. I was in that room with probably 25 people and nobody really seemed to mind what was going on. I was 13.”

Female youth, Summerside

“In the schools...the guys, if there was somebody and they wanted something... if the girls don't do it for them they say, 'If you don't do this, something's going to happen to you.' It [being forced to give sexual favors] always seems to happen to the girls who are Native.”

Female youth, Summerside

“[It's] when people prey on other people who are less fortunate or not as strong as other people. For example, pimps nailing you on the streets, they know you have nothing, so they'll give you this and give you that. They'll promise you everything, and then...you have to sleep with old men for them.”

Female youth, Halifax

“My Mom told my Dad that he had to make a choice between me and her, and I didn't want to hear the answer so I just left. We were living on the reserve then, and I moved to the next reserve because they kicked me out of the house. I was living with a 45 year old man and he had three sons...but that was my only choice at the time. I had no money, nowhere to go, there were no jobs... I was being abused sexually every day sometimes for two years, and it was for...a place to live. It was expected because I was the only girl there.”

Female youth, Brandon

“For me, when I was 16, when I was living on the reserve, I was sleeping and there were these two older men, and I don’t know what they were doing. But when I woke up I didn’t have any pants on and my underwear were hanging on the wall, and they were sitting there laughing like it was a really big joke.”

Female youth, Saskatoon

Abuse and exploitation are not comfortable issues for discussion. These youth showed tremendous courage in speaking about personal experiences with the pain, confusion, and shame that are the lasting effects of physical, sexual, emotional and verbal abuse. The abuse which these Aboriginal youth suffered as children shaped their choices as adults, while their vulnerabilities forced them into a world where they were they still had no control. The public attitude towards commercially exploited youth often portrays them as ‘knowing’ what they’re ‘getting into.’ In reality, most Aboriginal youth consulted become involved because there was, and is, little or no support or intervention for them during the times they need it the most.

Prevention

The youth were asked how commercial sexual exploitation could be prevented, along with the abuse and exploitation that are daily events in the sex trade. The focus was on community solutions and youth participation. A child who feels comfortable talking about sexuality and healthy sexual development is more likely to continue seeking support when difficulties or traumas arise. One of the main themes that emerged from the consultations was the need for both sexually exploited youth, and community members, to be able to discuss the issue of commercial sexual exploitation. Canadians agree: 82 per cent feel that presentations in schools about the dangers of the sex trade are a good idea and that they will act as a deterrent.⁵⁵

Educational strategies should incorporate broad involvement including: school districts, teachers, parents, community leaders, youth and people with direct experience within community development programs. The public school system and entire com-

munities must be educated about realities which these youth face if meaningful long-term solutions are to be found. Those who purchase and profit from commercial sexual exploitation must be shown the consequences of their actions.

“I guess a good place to start would be educating the whole community that exploitation happens more than everybody thinks it does. I think the first step is education for the whole community. If anybody does get a circle going like this it will help a lot in the community to raise the level of knowledge.”

Female youth, Goose Bay

“For myself, if I had been informed as a child, I think I would have made a better choice as a teenager and adult. In school, the children are learning to learn, so why not teach them everything else too? Especially if it can prevent something.”

Female youth, Vancouver

“I think that a lot of people really need to know that abuse isn't this big bad word of inadequacy and shame. It took me a year and a half for me to say that I was in an abusive relationship. That's kind of a scary thought, that I allowed society and myself to twist and jade my own opinions. So maybe stop it at its prime root.”

Female youth, Summerside

⁵⁵ Burton: 2000.

“Most importantly, to prevent it in society is [by] doing what you’re doing. To not hide the fact, not to live in the shame and the fear and the silence. To me, I think that’s the killer of it all for so many young people.”

Female youth, Summerside

“This is something that we need to talk about. This is not something that a lot of people are proud of talking about. It takes a lot to say it, when you start talking about your body and sex, there are a lot of feelings of shame, and people feel that it’s not right.”

Female youth, Halifax

“Let people in the communities make it a big deal. Make more people talk about it, what these things are, get all the community to talk about it and get it going there.”

Male youth, Brandon

The youth also emphasized the important role of cultural connection in preventing commercial sexual exploitation. Many youth felt that Aboriginal peoples in Canada face a high degree of racism, and that prevention therefore necessitates the cooperation of the Aboriginal community in educating and helping youth. Building self-esteem through cultural connection is of long-term benefit to the whole community of Canada, both for Native and non-Native peoples.

“Prevention can start wherever, it can start from the people who did go to residential school, it can start from us or from the 13-year-olds today. But I think it should start everywhere along those lines because of the fact that it has happened. Not just for the future, I think it has to run back to the past.”

Female youth, Vancouver

“In non-native schools they should have a Native counselor so they would be more comfortable with [someone] they could talk to, and somebody that could do something about it.”

Female youth, Brandon

“I think that specifically around Aboriginal youth that there is a real importance around community and culture being a really good thing. Learning the value of the traditions and culture really makes and shapes how you value yourself as well. If you don’t know where your place is in this world and you don’t feel a great deal of self-worth or belonging, all those make a recipe for leaving someone very vulnerable.”

Female youth, Toronto

“A [Native Center] place where you could go 24 hours a day, I can relate to that kind of place. A place that everyone knew...people who worked there would be open-minded. That they’re not going to pass you off to someone else.”

Female youth, Vancouver

“More education about how things were back in the days [when Native culture was stronger].”

Female youth, Winnipeg

The third major aspect in prevention to emerge from the consultations was the desperate need for ‘some place to go’. In every community, youth discussed drop-in centers, emergency shelters, support groups, and community friendship centers with flexible and late-night hours as a central component in preventing child and youth sexual exploitation. Having a place that feels safe and offers support, shelter, and activities, would enable the youth to find alternatives to a life on the street.

“There needs to be more groups, more support, not just in the schools. A place like a center where people could go who have been hurt or are hurting where other people would help.”

Female youth, Summerside

It is truly unfortunate that in the discussion of prevention, there is little mention of the economic handicaps youth face when they attempt to exit the trade. The overall shortage of jobs and decent wages for young people is rarely discussed. An early introduction to sex, via sexual abuse, in combination with poverty and low self-esteem, results in vulnerable youth on the verge of entering the sex trade.

“[There needs to be] more programs where youth got paid. If they gave the kids incentives and things they never had before, because they’re out there for something, right? If there were programs for people who were thinking about it, and add a little bit of extra cash. Most people are out there because they need stuff, right? So why not give people what they need?”

Female youth, Winnipeg

Prevention of such a complex tragedy as commercial sexual exploitation is a long-term process that requires whole communities to heal. Many youth acknowledged that their own pain stemmed from their parents’ experiences of physical, sexual, and mental abuse resulting from residential schools, forced adoption, and racism. The youth also realized that this tragic cycle must be broken, and that they could play an instrumental role in the healing process. These youth voiced what they believe will prevent others from being forced into their footsteps.

Traditionally, many academic studies of children and youth involved in the sex trade have tended to focus on either structural factors or individual predictors. For the Aboriginal youth who participated in the consultations, there is a desperate need to simultaneously address both. Prevention and early intervention are keys to addressing this issue, and traditional care models are not working. We must begin to implement a community-wide multidimensional approach which incorporates and promotes youth participation.

With regard to prevention, the following themes were the most commonly voiced concerns of Aboriginal youth across Canada.

Youth Recommendations for Prevention

- Awareness-raising through education and discussion
- A safe, non-judgmental place to go
- Cultural connection
- Raising self-esteem
- Service providers who have experience in the trade
- Viable economic alternatives

In the opinion of the youth consulted, raising awareness through discussion and education, cultural connection, and having a safe place to go, both in times of crisis and for fun, are of fundamental importance for the prevention of commercial sexual exploitation. The youth indicated that these problems must be addressed collectively for successful and holistic solutions. Other important issues, such as building self-esteem and being able to find people who could be trusted to be supportive were also discussed as having a significant impact on decisions.

Crisis Intervention/Harm Reduction

When asked, ‘Once a young person is already being abused or exploited, how do we intervene? What is the most helpful and when?’ the youth overwhelmingly emphasized 24 hour centers, safe housing, crisis lines, and education about existing resources. Almost all youth participating in the consultations suggested the need for experiential counselors who had themselves survived the sex trade.

“You don’t want to go some place and have a suit sitting there saying ‘come over here and talk to me, I’ll fix you’. You know what? I’m just going to walk out the door and never come back, if you walk in and you don’t see people who you think you can trust, who look familiar, similar to people that you know...you walk over and say ‘Hey I just need to talk’. And they say ‘have a seat, or do you want to go to the next room or are you hungry? Do you want to clean up? Do you want a shower?’ A suit’s not going to do that, they’re already clean, they don’t worry about that. They’ve never been on the streets to the point where they’re dirty and gross and smelly and stinky and hurting.”

Female youth, Vancouver

“I don’t want somebody coming up to me saying, ‘you’re wrong, you’re doing it because you’re stupid’. You need somebody out there who actually has experience, somebody to tell you their story, and that ‘this is what I did to get out of this. This worked for me, it might work for you, it might not. If it does great, if it doesn’t, we’ll find some other way’.”

Female youth, Mission

“I wish there was something we could do about it [men beating up and raping young sex trade workers]. We need to open a house or something, to do something, a center for them to stop by. There’s a lot of it going on, even in a small hick town.”

Female youth, Mission

“If you could have a safehouse...if [you] could go and get a hot meal and a decent night’s sleep without worrying how much cash [you’re] going to be bringing in that night.”

Female youth, Goose Bay

“Sometimes you can’t really talk to people that you don’t know. That’s where a center would come in handy. It would give you something to do; you don’t have to talk about it [the sex trade]. You can go to the center and do painting. Let them relax, have a couple of couches lying around where they could lay back, put their feet up, put a movie on, or maybe a dance with music, whatever. Just to get your mind off it for awhile, let yourself relax. And then see if you’re willing to talk to somebody, or even just bring a friend along to the center that you can talk to.”

Male youth, Vancouver

“A place for people to feel safe... where you can talk to people your own age who have been there and dealt with that stuff... For all those years I was on the streets and doing stuff like that I was always wishing that I had a place to go to, just to sit there with people I can actually call friends and say, ‘this is my problem’. And I think that’s one of the biggest reasons I stayed on the streets, because I think that I didn’t have a place like that.”

Female youth, Mission

“Having somebody for you there to talk with when you need it, to express your emotions, it’s so good when you know that you have somebody by your side, that you know that you can turn to when you’re hurt, and say, ‘this is my problem, can you help me?’ You can’t have somebody professional, you gotta have somebody down to earth who’s going to give a damn about what you’re saying, not looking at the time.”

Female youth, St. John’s

“I wish I knew about the agencies when I first started doing it, because knowledge is power, and a lot of people just don’t have that knowledge. I wish I had it when I first started... I honestly believe I wouldn’t have started.”

Male youth, Toronto

“If you’ve been on the streets, like if you’ve been up for 24 or 48 hours without sleeping, you do all kinds of things [to survive].”

Male youth, Halifax

“If there’s a youth that needs housing, try to hook them up with independent living, getting them the resources and letting them know what’s out there and maybe trying to get them a place to live. The basic necessities, [such as] food, where they can get it. Letting them know where these places are is a really big thing.”

Female youth, Winnipeg

These quotations illustrate the need for safe and non-judgmental centers, houses, shelters, and crisis lines staffed by those experienced in the realities of commercial sexual exploitation. Aboriginal children and youth who are, or have been, involved in the sex trade find trusting other people extremely difficult. Trust is not only about being able to share the same experiences, it is also about the larger communities in Canada being able to entrust their youth with designing, and implementing, long-term programs which will help them. Adults who have never faced the reality of exploitation are often reluctant to share their decision-making with the exploited; this must change before more children die.

Frustration often runs high on the parts of both youth and the service providers. Adolescents are hard to ‘process’, or serve, and they are often seen as a problem to

agencies with limited resources of money and manpower. Rather than force abused youth into categories of ‘troubled youth’ created by bureaucrats and service providers, we must regard them as youth in crisis, and provide services appropriate to their situation. One example: youth who work into the night and early morning are usually asleep during the day when agencies are open; the services offered by the agencies will therefore rarely be accessed by the youth most in need.

It is crucial to understand that Aboriginal youth do not passively accept help. Rather, they reach out in a desire to be treated as equal partners within the larger community. We must listen to them in their times of crisis. We must listen to what they say will help them in their times of crisis to reduce the harm that comes to them.

Youth also identified a need for more education about existing resources, as well as handing out resource information at schools for youth who are too shy, fearful or ashamed to ask for help.

Youth Recommendations for Crisis Intervention and Harm Reduction

- 24 hour drop-in centers
- Safe housing
- Crisis lines
- Experiential youth and counselors to staff all of the above
- Education about existing resources

Exiting and Healing

During the consultations, the youth were asked what was, or would have been, most helpful during the processes of exiting and healing from commercial sexual exploitation. The central focus lay on those wanting to exit but finding they had little help or hope in their lives. Most respondents felt that community and governmental programs and services already in place are often not enough. Aboriginal youth described exiting as a complex and difficult process requiring both a clear personal decision and community support. Most of these youths face multifaceted crises. They may reject help during the very process of asking for it. The responsibility for compassionate care and support lies therefore with the provider; frustrating as this may be, the child cannot be blamed for this. Youth involved in the sex trade exhibit symptoms of their trauma through poor concentration, as well as the loss of ability to structure and use a schedule and/or a budget. They may feel powerless and unable to affect change. Social skills may be minimal. Precisely because of these difficulties, Aboriginal youth and children must receive unconditional positive regard from those attempting to help. Several returns to the trade are almost inevitable. Continued support, therefore, despite regression, is essential.

Inadequate support services were a common theme with Aboriginal youth. Most youths felt that there were no accessible lines of communication and/or help. In communities with services, the youth

spoke glowingly about services specialized for sex trade workers, but also expressed frustration that these overtaxed agencies weren't able to provide more resources. Most tellingly, all of the youth strongly identified with the need to talk to someone who had been there, who would genuinely listen, and who would take a longer-term approach to their needs in exiting and healing from the sex trade.

“I think there should be centers, phone lines, outreach people. With that idea, it should be with people who have been there, not just people who have read a book and think they know it all. They gotta have the experiences, they gotta understand to the fullest extreme, because if you don't understand, and if you don't know it, you can't really empathize with them to your fullest and how can you have that layer of trust? To have somebody on the phone line would benefit so much knowing they were not alone, that other people went through it [and] that there is life after all of that.”

Female youth, Vancouver

“You have to have something, a center, a phone line, an outreach person who you can say to, ‘you know what? I’m ready to get out, come and get me right now.’ I’m calling, I’m reaching, grab me. From there you take a step towards healing, and you say, ‘oh right on, they grabbed my hand, I’m on my way out’.”

Female youth, Vancouver

“Part of the process of leaving was having the [outreach center] here, and I honestly believe that they were one of the main sources of helping me get off the streets. There were caring and understanding, and most of them are like myself, ex-program users. If anybody now says, ‘I need your help’ I give it to them, because that’s what I didn’t have...a lot of people just need that, in order to leave it all, you need the support. And I find with a lot of people who haven’t been through it don’t know what it’s like. They can hear the story, but...”

Female youth, Halifax

“You gotta have people there with you through the whole thing, helping you out. You can’t just get up and go [from the sex trade], but have people there for you when you need them.”

Female youth, Goose Bay

“A place being open 24 hours is a good idea, because if there was actually something else to do, once you’re at work and it’s really dead, you get even more determined that you’re going to stay there until you make some money. But if there was something close by where you could chill, and have something else to do, and it was close to you, then you’d probably end up doing that and eventually just give up and go home instead of just staying there, freezing your ass off and working all night.”

Female youth, Winnipeg

A second issue was, again, the importance of cultural connection. The theme of finding strength and power from their Aboriginal heritage was of fundamental importance to almost all youth who participated in the consultation.

“I used to hate being Aboriginal. Now, to be Aboriginal you can be proud. I don’t really know anything about it, but having that knowledge gave me hope to say that maybe I’ll look into it. I want my child to grow up being proud of being Native as well. Healing, as far as I can see, is part culture.”

Male youth, Vancouver

“ [Exiting and healing] has to do with culture too, because if you don’t know where you come from, then you don’t know exactly where your background comes from, all your spirituality. You’re almost lost still, because you’re not in balance, there are four things: the physical, the emotional, the spiritual and the mental, and you have to have a balance with each and every one. Without it you can’t be healthy, you can’t be fully yourself.”

Female youth, Vancouver

“In order to heal, I believe because of my background that you have to find who you are and what your spirit wants you to do. I stayed with a healer, he was a medicine man, and he was the one who taught me that you look inside of yourself and that’s the best way to heal.”

Female youth, Mission

“When I think of what’s missing, what I think about [is] culture, on the reserves, there’s still lots of barriers out there, with people leaving because of their sexuality, not having acceptance, or not being able to go to the community. They miss that piece, and in the city they miss the community that they don’t have. So there’s a link that disappears.”

Female youth, Toronto

As with prevention, exiting and healing is a complex issue with many concerns. Many youth felt that their own healing needed to be undertaken within the wider healing process of the Aboriginal community. Cultural connection for these youth can take a variety of forms, including sweat lodges, pow wows, fasting, artwork and

oral traditions. The vast majority of the youth expressed interest in having access to a Native center which would both help them exit the sex trade and guide them on their healing path.

This is not to say that the burden should fall solely on the shoulders of the Aboriginal communities. Far from it: solutions must address complex issues related to culture, gender, and class, as well as the consequences of multiple forms of abuse. We must also deal with the pervasive lack of trust many Aboriginal people have of mainstream institutions, and particularly of the judicial system. The Aboriginal population, the government, and those of non-Aboriginal descent must work together both as individuals and communities, and must embrace those who need them most, their own children.

We must also understand that exiting and healing is a unique process and any services must therefore be flexible. Each child responds to his or her abuse differently; each case requires an individual plan of action. New issues will surface at various stages of their lives. Attempts to measure the success of exiting the trade and the healing journey will be, of necessity, protracted. We must also recognize that children and youth who do not wish to leave the sex trade also require support and services. It is not just 'service compliant' children and youth who 'deserve' to survive.

The Aboriginal youth who were consulted strongly felt that all four aspects of a person be acknowledged: the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. This holistic concept balances a healthy person in order that health and harmony can exist in all their relationships.

The focus groups were also an avenue for the youth to discuss the larger social issues of education, self-confidence and trust as crucial to the exiting and healing process. Learning basic life skills, including those surrounding money management and social interaction, was also seen as critical to a life outside of the sex trade.

Youth Recommendations for Exiting and Healing

- Specific services/agencies for the unique needs of Aboriginal youth sex workers
- Services and support for those who do not wish to exit the sex trade
- Longer term services
- Experiential counselors
- Decreasing obstacles youth face in accessing services
- Education
- Self-confidence building
- Building trust with agencies, outreach workers and counselors
- Basic life skills training
- Social skills training

Public Attitudes/Advocacy

Youth who participated in the consultation process were asked, 'What are some of the negative attitudes or harmful stereotypes which the public has about Aboriginal youth in the sex trade? What information do you think the public needs to know about the abuse and exploitation of Aboriginal youth?' For Aboriginal youth who are, or have been, involved in the exploitation and abuse of the sex trade, the two most harmful stereotypes they identified were racism and the stigma that is attached to street sex trade work. The double stigma of 'loose' morality and racism with which these youth are burdened is further entrenched when society actively encourages a silence around the proliferation of the sex trade itself.

Attempting to address Aboriginal youth exploited through sex work means changing our attitudes toward children and youth involved in commercial sexual exploitation. While 86 per cent of Canadians are aware that there are people under the age of 18 in the sex trade, few realize the dangers associated with the work, or its seriousness as child sexual abuse. Simply put, commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth is a microcosm of many of the values, attitudes, and beliefs which are predominant in Canadian society at large.⁵⁶ Commonly, these issues are seen to involve 'deviant' activity by individuals who find themselves in this situation because 'they don't know any better, they

can't make good choices' or, paradoxically, because underneath it all 'they know what they're doing, and anyway they must like it'. For the Aboriginal children and youth consulted, it is about survival. This attitude of passive indifference places the onus of responsibility onto an abstracted and impersonalized youth, who must then face this stereotype as representative of the disrespect with which society views them. This common perspective allows society to ignore its role in creating and perpetuating an environment where commercial sexual exploitation flourishes through indifference or willful ignorance.

“Everybody goes around saying, ‘Oh they’re just whores, they’re just sluts, they’re just there for the money’. Nobody actually wants to sit down and find out why they’re out there doing it. Some people are just too ignorant to accept the fact that they’re not just out there for sex, they’re out there because they’ve got nowhere else to go, to get money, to get clothes, to get food in their stomach.”

Female youth, Mission

⁵⁶ Mathews: 1987b.

“ [People] think that all prostitutes are on heroin, or they like to be beat up. The stereotype that is ‘oh, they all knew what they were getting into’, which they don’t.”

Female youth, Vancouver

“I hate how [TV] shows all hookers as being female... There’s not only females out there selling their bodies, there’s not only females out there who are living on the streets, doing drugs and having pimps. There’s a good bunch of them out there that are males.”

Female youth, Mission

“I think people put a lot of shame on it [working in the trade], like it’s this dirty deed. No it’s not nice, it’s not pretty, there’s nothing fun about it, but it is a fact. And people shouldn’t be afraid to lay it out on the table without sugar coating it, and people should be able to say, ‘this is what happened to me, and I didn’t like it at all’.”

Female youth, Summerside

“I think it’s hardly discussed because people don’t want to know what’s going on, then they feel safe. People believe that [it] is your own fault, that you’ve brought it on yourself. It’s so hard to talk about because the person inside is so vulnerable, and you don’t want to let everyone know...”

Female youth, Thunder Bay

“At the reserve people say, ‘Oh, where are your whore boots?’ I’d rather avoid that kind of stuff, I hibernate because I don’t want to face that... half the reserve is your family, it’s embarrassing and it hurts. It’s like ‘You’re my family and you’re supposed to love me’, but...”

Male youth, Toronto

“I think all these ‘higher’ people, as I’ll put it, they think that us young Aboriginal girls who work the streets are dirty, and that’s why we’re doing it, but it’s not like that. The public thinks that Aboriginal girls are dirty, yet it’s their husbands who are coming to pick us up and all the young girls. I’d try to talk to them and tell them about my life.”

Female youth, Winnipeg

“Why are we so quick to pick on the prostitute on the corner, why do we never ask, ‘What can I do? How can I help you, what do you need?’ That’s the last thing that comes to mind. It’s so often a reverse, like when I think of the Native community, that it’s their responsibility to educate non-Native people about how it [their culture] works, even though they [White people.] have created all the damage. Is it the people involved in the sex trade’s responsibility? Who is responsible?”

Female youth, Toronto

“You have to let them [ignorant people] know it’s out there. In order to change and help...we have to listen. If we want these people to come out [the public], and come together and to change, we have to voice our opinion about what we honestly feel...and I know what it feels like to sell my ass.”

Female youth, Halifax

“People have to realize it’s there and admit it. On my reserve they don’t like to admit that it’s happening there. Getting them to realize that it is, that’s a really big problem...”

Female youth, Brandon

“The people that are discriminating with racism need to change, and the only way that’s going to change is by listening to us, and what we went through, why we were there, and what their role is. They need to realize that we’re there not because we want to be there, we’re there because we’re put there, or we’re forced there, or we’ve been abused all our life and there’s no other way we know.”

Female youth, Winnipeg

“Part of the culture in Canada is ‘I don’t want to step in your business’, and I think that’s cultural, a societal rule. People don’t want to go up to other people and say, ‘You look like you’re in pain, I’m going to help you’. Nobody wants to do that, and that’s not always a good thing.”

Female youth, Toronto

Sadly, there is a desperate need for community recognition of the racism and stigmatization expressed toward commercially sexually exploited youth. Many youth felt that they were not welcomed by the community, and this separation of the youth from society further ensures entrenchment of the trade. Literally, there is nowhere for these youth to go if the community turns its back on them. Our communities must refuse to ignore them. We must work together, both as community members and individuals, to broaden our understanding of the concept of 'community'. Can we truly have healthy communities when we refuse to integrate and respect those members in the most danger? Aboriginal youth who participated in the focus groups saw the lack of social acceptance and understanding as one of the root causes which kept them silent — and that silence kills them.

Youth who work the streets do not have a glamorous lifestyle. They suffer from extremely high rates of violence and addiction, and many do not survive due to AIDS, overdoses, suicide, and/or murder. Media glamorization of the sex trade is harmful: participants of the consultations felt that these portraits actively encourage a belief among youth and children that sex work holds a viable future.

Sexual exploitation of youth generates billions of dollars for merchants, advertisers, and manufacturers. The media sensationalizes the life to sell newspapers and magazines, and to attract viewers and listeners. Such sensationalism has dire consequences. Aboriginal youth often believe that if they cannot achieve Eurocentric standards of appearance, they may emulate

their actions, a belief which often leads them to copy that seen in the media. If our young possess few or no skills to evaluate and critically reflect on consumer and lifestyle images, we as adults and educators are failing in our jobs. Unless we, as a society, recognize that the media and the government have roles in Canada's passive approval of commercial sexual exploitation, we shall continue to wonder why such abuse persists and flourishes.

Youth Recommendations regarding public attitudes and stereotypes

- Racism needs to be immediately and meaningfully addressed.
- The stigma of 'loose' morals of those in the sex trade is false and harmful.
- The social silence and passive indifference surrounding the issue of youth in the sex trade must be changed.
- The public must recognize its role in sustaining and perpetuating an environment where the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth can flourish.
- The public needs to realize the dangers for the youth (emotionally, physically, sexually and spiritually).
- The need to educate the public that commercial sexual exploitation is a serious form of child sexual abuse.
- The need to raise awareness regarding why youth engage in the sex trade.
- The need for the media and advertising to 'de-glamorize' prostitution.
- The need for community respect and understanding must be addressed.

Youth Participation

This part of the talking circles focused on youth involvement in exiting, healing, intervention, and prevention, as well as what they wished they could do to change negative public attitudes. The issue about which youth felt most strongly was using their experiential status to help other youth who wanted to exit. Unlike most service providers who have never worked in the trade, the youth felt that, based on their own experiences, they could better understand the specific needs and concerns of other youth trapped in the trade. Many youth stated that they wanted training so they could help others out of their situations. Youth have asked, again and again, for the opportunity to connect with those who have successfully exited the sex trade. As well, those who have successfully exited have repeatedly asked to play a meaningful role in providing outreach, support, public education, advocacy, and in mentoring young people caught in the sex trade.

Ideas for youth participation include: peer support groups, staffing safe houses and hotlines, having focus groups, creating drop-in centers including programs and events, and just being able to talk about their experiences with those who need non-judgmental support. Creating and staffing these support networks enables others who are still involved to talk more comfortably about their needs, and allows them to see that there are people who have exited. As well, a primary concern among youth was the need for experiential Aboriginal youth to educate the larger community from their own unique perspective.

“To have somebody on the phone line [they] would benefit so much knowing they were not alone, that other people went through that [involvement in the trade], that there is life after all of that.”

Female youth, Vancouver

“What I want [is] to encourage everybody, youth, children and elders, I want them to all interact. I think that’s what will prevent a lot of this, is knowing each other, and getting youth involved.”

Male youth, Halifax

“They [pimps] said that they were the only people who truly loved me and nobody else would care about me if something happened to them. So basically, just knowing that there are people out there who care and who will be your friend and listen, I think that’s one of the best things.”

Female youth, Halifax

Through these cross-Canada consultations, the youth identified the need for many changes in order to prevent further exploitation and provide support to those currently experiencing exploitation. Based on the successful participatory outcomes of the focus groups, and developmental programs worldwide, it is clear that experiential youth must play a central role in the creation, design, development, and delivery of such programs.

Those with experiential status are familiar with the particular difficulties that sexually exploited youth face, as well as the types of services and resources needed to support both those who remain involved, and those who choose to exit.

Simply put, participation allows people to insert their own experiences into planning for positive social change. We only have to look at the strolls across Canada and listen to these youth to see that traditional service programs are not working. Fostering youth participation means creating a supportive environment in which Aboriginal youth can realize their own potential and be instrumental in the development of public policy and programs that affect them.

Youth Recommendations on Youth Participation

- Using their own experience to help and benefit other youth
- Training experiential counselors to help others out of their situation
- Connecting with others who have successfully exited the trade
- Having a central role in providing outreach, support, public education, advocacy, and mentoring for others in the trade

“There’s girls out there as young as 10-12 years old. My role is to get the information out there, to the people who are picking and choosing who is going to live and who is going to die. How would they feel if it was their children out there turning tricks? Try to educate these people, and the governments, [because] that is what’s killing us.”

Female youth, Brandon

“I am trying to get a sexually exploited safe house for youth going, and I think that’s one of the most important things. Those that have been exploited will feel more comfortable talking to someone like me than [someone] who hasn’t gone through it.”

Female youth, Brandon

“I know what it’s like, being spit at, looked down and beaten on. I don’t want anybody in my family to go through this, all the sexual abuse, the exploitation, just everything. You could tell them in advance the things that are going to happen to them, [that] you could end up with a man who will kick your ass on a daily basis, you could end up being a crackhead...”

Female youth, Winnipeg

- Creating peer support groups
- Staffing crisis hotlines
- Creating and running drop-in centers
- Creating and staffing non-judgmental support networks
- Educating the larger community about their experiences
- Creating, developing, and delivering specific programs for commercially sexually exploited Aboriginal youth



Conclusion

Cultural, historical, and economic factors are important in constructing the experiences of Aboriginal children and youth. Aboriginal children and youth in Canada face a legacy that affects them to this day. Feelings of cultural shame, experiences with racism, economic, social, and political disadvantages, and cultural and familial fragmentation have all led to Aboriginal peoples being marginalized. Many Aboriginal children and youth have inherited the pain and confusion their parents have experienced. This may be one of the root causes for the disproportionate representation of Native youth in the sex trade.

Aboriginal communities are in a period of great transition and are moving toward their rightful place as equal, yet distinct, citizens of Canada. In no way does this report adopt a position of paternalism: Aboriginal peoples are actively engaged in society to make Canada a strong, equitable, and progressive country at the dawn of the 21st century. Aboriginal communities are taking control and authority in resource and program decisions, and the National Aboriginal Consultation Project is another crucial step along the way. If Aboriginal youth, with the help of both Aboriginal communities and the non-Aboriginal population, cannot break the cycle that paved the way to their own exploitation, what hope do we have for future generations?

Youth must be involved. One of the main concerns of this project is to facilitate Aboriginal youth participation in providing for a national understanding of commercial sexual exploitation. Youth participation is crucial in the advocacy and implementa-

tion of positive social change. Front line programs developed and delivered by experiential youth have a higher success than other programs and services. In order to create meaningful programs, policies, services, and strategies to address the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth, we must realize the importance, benefits, and unique perspectives of experiential youth. The benefits of youth participation in community development must be taken seriously to ensure any long-term success.

Due to the illicit nature of the sex trade, numbering the youth commercially sexually exploited in Canada is extremely difficult. Anecdotal evidence comes from service providers, the police, academics, and most importantly, from the youth themselves. Their evidence proves that sexual exploitation of Aboriginal children and youth is a very serious social problem that appears to be growing.

Risk factors determining Aboriginal youth involvement in the sex trade remain at unacceptable levels, and these factors may limit the applicability of existing approaches when working with Aboriginal peoples. Intervention strategies and policy initiatives over the last 25 years have not helped in reducing the numbers, and there is a strong consensus across a broad spectrum of service providers and professional groups that the present situation cannot continue without serious consequences for both Aboriginal youth and Canadian society. Youth participation and community development are crucial components in meaningful and long-term

solutions which will incorporate all members of our communities, particularly those who are in the most need of social and cultural reconnection.

By viewing Aboriginal youth involvement in the sex trade within a larger social context, and by acknowledging our collective social responsibility for the life circumstances of these young people, we can begin to offer solutions based on progressive economic and social policy rather than in repression by the law. There is overwhelming support for a number of initiatives aimed at helping young people who want to get out of the sex trade. Two out of three Canadians indicate that they would be willing to contribute money to support programs aimed at getting youth out of the trade. All levels of government, band councils, service providers, community leaders, and policy makers have the resources and the skills, and the youths have the experience. By working together we can build a future where no youth or child suffers from commercial sexual exploitation.

This document reflects the voices of Aboriginal youth who are, or have been, involved in commercial sexual exploitation. The written word cannot convey the anguish, despair and sadness expressed by the youth who participated in the consultations. Listening to them is an important beginning, but they also require our trust, our empathy, our support, and our help. If you see these youth only as victims, you have missed the point. The youth have given us the insight to stop this cycle. What they are asking for is the opportunity to work with communities to ensure that no other youth will be forced to experience their struggle for survival.

It is essential to understand that it is the sex trade which we must condemn, not

the youth who partake in it. After reading this document, there is no excuse to turn away from the reality and plead ignorance. Neither can we say that we don't know what to do in order to help them. In clear and simple terms they have shared their needs and desires with us, and we must ensure that this summary doesn't become one more piece of paper piled under all the others compiled over the past 25 years or more.

Developed with the help of Aboriginal youth, the purpose of the key recommendations is to create a 'map' of the basic services and programs needed for those who are still facing abuse, exploitation and death through their involvement in the sex trade. In spite of the obstacles that face them, the youth who participated in the Canadian consultations believe that together we can work to ensure that no other youth or child must suffer continued commercial sexual exploitation because of our inability to act. After everything that they have endured, Aboriginal youth involved in the sex trade have little that hasn't been taken away from them. But one thing that they still have is hope. They have hope that you will truly listen to what they have had to say, and that you will respond quickly and decisively to their recommendations. We must accept their expertise and first hand experiences in developing solutions. We must encourage and validate children and youth to work in partnership with those who have the funding, the resources, and the capacity if we are to build lasting, community-based strategies for meaningful and long-term solutions. If we hear them and do not help them, then we must share the guilt of those who have exploited and abused them.

Declaration and Agenda for Action

We, the sexually exploited child and youth delegates gathered in Victoria, Canada, for *Out From the Shadows: First International Summit of Sexually Exploited Youth*, declare the following:

WE DECLARE that the term child or youth prostitute can no longer be used. These children and youth are sexually exploited and any language or reference to them must reflect this belief.

WE DECLARE that the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth is a form of child abuse and slavery.

WE DECLARE that all children and youth have the right to be protected from all forms of abuse, exploitation and the threat of abuse, harm or exploitation.

WE DECLARE that the commercial exploitation of children and youth must no longer be financially profitable.

WE DECLARE that all children and youth have the right to know their rights.

WE DECLARE that the issue of child and youth sexual exploitation must be a global priority and nations must not only hold their neighbours accountable but also themselves.

WE DECLARE that governments are obligated to create laws which reflect the principle of zero growth tolerance of all forms of abuse and exploitation of children and youth.

Our Agenda contains actions that are based on our beliefs. Our beliefs have come from what we have lived. To understand why these actions will work, you must understand our beliefs and the life experiences that have led to these beliefs.

WE BELIEVE that education is vital in our struggle against the sexual exploitation of children and youth.

WE BELIEVE that the voices and experiences of sexually exploited children and youth must be heard and be central to the development and implementation of action. We must be empowered to help ourselves.

WE BELIEVE that we have a right to resources that are directed towards sexually exploited children and youth and our very diverse needs.

WE BELIEVE that as children and youth, we are vulnerable to sexual exploitation whether male, female, or transgendered.

WE BELIEVE that our laws must protect us as sexually exploited children and youth and no longer punish us as criminals.

WE BELIEVE that we are all responsible for our children and youth, yet the issue is not ours alone. Governments, communities and society as a whole must be held accountable for the sexual exploitation of children and youth.

The importance of youth participation in community development:

A framework towards the eradication of the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth

Youth participation is a crucial component in advocating and implementing positive social change. Front line programs developed and delivered by experiential youth have a higher success rate than other programs and services. In order to create meaningful programs, policies, services, and strategies which address the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth, we must realize the importance, benefits, and unique perspective that experiential youth bring with their participation. The benefits of youth participation in community development must be taken seriously to ensure any long-term success.

Importance of Participation

Out from the Shadows — International Summit of Sexually Exploited Youth and the words of *The Declaration and Agenda for Action*, developed by the experiential youth delegates, has clarified the direction for both present and future initiatives involving youth. The direction for these initiatives lies through youth participation. All legacy projects, including local, regional, national, and international programs, policies, services, and strategies developed to address the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth should incorporate a true and meaningful process of youth participation.

Simply put, participation is the ability to define one's own issues and what is needed in terms of positive social change. Fostering youth participation means creating a supportive environment in which youth can realize their own potential and be instrumental in the development of public policy and programs that affect them. By putting a human face on the issues, it makes it possible to personalize the often-denied reality of the sex trade.

Front line programs developed and delivered by experiential youth have a higher success rate than other programs and services. Developing trust with youth in the sex trade is difficult. Experiential youth often communicate their needs and desires in ways which do not meet conventional expectations. Creating spaces where experiential youth can trust that their voices will be heard and respected is of fundamental importance.

Benefits of Participation

Benefits of participation are experienced both by the individual youth who has the opportunity to participate and the system that encompasses the delivery of strategies to address the issue.

Involving experiential youth accesses a wealth of diverse information for communities fighting for a viable and healthy future

for their children and youth. Youth involvement provides benefits for everyone.

1. It provides a way for children and youth with personal experience in commercial sexual exploitation to give voice to their experiences, their needs, and their recommendations.
2. It ensures that their voices are heard and considered by the individuals and organizations who are committed to eliminating the global sexual exploitation of children and youth.
3. It can provide an opportunity for personal empowerment, skill enhancement, and permanent, positive, and sustainable change.
4. Participation is a part of a growing worldwide trend to involve people in decisions which affect them.
5. It provides new and innovative solutions and strategies to address identified issues in situations where traditional approaches have not been effective.

How to Foster Participation

Participation cannot be defined consistently from project to project. It must be true to the individuals and the circumstances of each project. Below are principles for incorporation at the planning stage, during development and implementation, and continuously thereafter. Experiential youth must be included in developing the vision: they must be hired as the staff; they must have a significant decision making role in all Boards, advisory committees, or review panels; they must have the opportunity to become role models and mentors for other youth.

Any and all projects designed to address the commercial sexual exploitation of youth in Canada must adhere to the following principles of involvement:

Principles of Meaningful Participation of Sexually Exploited Youth

1. The principle of meaningful and visible decision making of experiential children and youth

Experiential children and youth (i.e. having personal experience in the sex trade) must play a meaningful and visible decision making role in the development of any and all efforts. Wherever possible they should play a role in the development of the participation process itself.

2. The principle of realistic participation

Opportunities, support, and resources for participation must be realistic and address the circumstances in which experiential youth live. Some ways to facilitate this process include: paying for youth expertise, using non-intimidating processes, interpreting the culture of government and law into plain language, listening and learning from the youth's experiences. There must be room to speak openly and a trust that support will translate into meaningful and appropriate action, such as covering the costs of transportation and day-care.

3. The principle of capacity building

Commitment to a capacity building approach in addressing the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth means that those who have personally experienced this exploitation will be supported in becoming a central part in the creation and delivery of services. Youth have asked again and again for the opportunity to connect with those who have successfully exited the sex trade. As well, those who have successfully exited the sex trade have repeatedly asked for the opportunity to play a meaningful role in providing outreach, support, public

education, and advocacy and in mentoring young people in the sex trade.

4. The principle of recognition of expertise

We believe that the real experts on the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth are those who have personal experience. They must be considered an integral part of all local, regional, national, and international dialogues, and be respected and supported by our cultures, communities, and families. They should be paid for their expertise, and seriously considered for any employment opportunities in strategies designed to address the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth.

5. The principle of meaningful exchange

All efforts to address the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth must include the opportunity for meaningful exchange. Professionals can learn from those with experience and youths can acquire skills beyond those of the sex trade. Processes that use the experiences and expertise of commercially sexually exploited youth must result in a better life for those youth, or they will perpetuate the exploitation.

6. The principle of safe, voluntary and confidential participation

The safety of youth who participate in the development and implementation of solutions and strategies must be a primary concern. Their anonymity must be respected if they so choose, confidentiality must be explicitly acknowledged, and all involvement must be voluntary. If any disclosure laws apply to their participation they must be told before any disclosures are made.

7. The principle of self-help

Acknowledge the value and importance of the youth's ability to help themselves and each other. Recognize that considerable time, effort, and resources of state, culture, community, and family will be required to help heal the traumatic effects of commercial sexual exploitation. Recognize that opportunities must be created for youth to gather together, and to talk to each other without expectations.

8. The principle of accountability

Young people must be allowed a role in monitoring and evaluating the actions of government and the community in addressing the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth.

9. The principle of flexibility

Times, locations, and the manner of meeting must reflect the needs of the youth, and not solely that of facilitators or the community organizations. For example, it may not be necessary that the same youth participate in every step of the process. It must be recognized that the need for continuity can have more to do with institutional culture than with the actual needs of the project. As well, everyone must be willing and able to change their approach when necessary.

10. The principle of commitment to outcomes

Remember that experiential youth are engaging in this process because they believe it will make a difference. Everyone involved in the process must be committed to change. It is important to recognize that everyone involved is challenging the status quo by engaging in this process.

11. The principle of a long-term vision

Recognition that this process takes time and that deeply rooted change can be slow. It requires focusing on underlying factors and not merely surface symptoms.

12. The principle of meeting people where they are

This can mean literally going to locations where youth feel safe and comfortable. It can also be taken figuratively, in finding ways to accommodate the needs of experiential youth so that the process belongs to them.

Youth participation is a specific community development approach. It may be useful for people and organizations who are committed to youth participation to be aware of the following lessons of successful community development.

It takes time.

Whenever possible we have to influence those in positions of power to allow enough time for a genuine process to take place.

It has to be genuine.

If the decisions have already been made and the 'consultation' is merely tokenism, nothing has changed. This will quickly become obvious and is disrespectful of all involved.

It takes resources.

Sufficient resources must be provided for people to genuinely engage in the process. Everyone has a right to be paid for their time. Appropriate supplies have to be available. All basic costs must be covered.

It takes trust.

Trust is a two-way street. We must support others and trust that they will make the right decisions.

It takes support.

Sometimes it is assumed that once the resources are in place we can walk away and leave the process to its own fate. This is neither fair nor realistic. Bridge builders, facilitators, and animators play an important role which must be sustained.

It requires risks.

Success depends on people being willing to try new things, taking risks, and pushing the edge of the envelope. It is necessary to build links with the people inside the institutions who are the risk takers.

It takes vision.

Believing in and supporting decisions are essential if a vision is to be actualized.

It requires parallel processes.

We must engage in both parallel processes of community development and fundamental ground-work in order that conclusions will become a reality when the time comes for action, whenever and wherever needed.

It takes flexibility.

Change of direction, focus, and format are inevitable. We cannot predict the outcome of the process and we must recognize this from the outset, rather than set ourselves up for frustration as things change.

It works.

Other strategies often have very limited results but genuine community development can have a major impact on the lives of many and on the health of the whole community.

Resources

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Youth Prostitution Tracking Program
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Ministry for Children and Families

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Fraserhouse

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Mission Community Services Society

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Prince George Friendship Centre

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BRITISH COLUMBIA continued

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START

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Downtown Eastside Woman's Centre

44 East Cordova St., **Vancouver**, BC V6A 1K2
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DEYAS-Downtown Eastside

Youth Activities Society

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Dusk to Dawn

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HEYWAYNOQU

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justiceforgirls@hotmail.com

PACE-Prostitution Alternatives

Counseling and Education

Bethan, Advocate-Char &
Alex, Outreach Workers: P.A.C.E Society
PO Box 73537, 1014 Robson St. **Vancouver**, BC
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The Native Courtworker and Counseling Association of British Columbia

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Royal Canadian Mounted Police

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ALBERTA

CCASA-Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse

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Child Find Alberta

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Canadian Native Friendship Centre

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Crossroads (House)

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Prostitution Awareness and Action Foundation

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Lethbridge Community Health

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Native Woman's Transition Home

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Street Ties

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SASKATCHEWAN

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The Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan

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Selected Readings

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Notes

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