



Abuse of trust: Children and youth in the sex trade

Introduction

It is estimated that more than 300,000 children and youth are involved in the sex trade in North America. Law enforcement officials, social service providers and the general public often think of these young people as 'prostitutes' who have 'chosen' their lifestyle, failing to recognize the extent to which children are abused and exploited in the sex trade. Two projects supported by the Crime Prevention Partnership Program have been developing tools and resources to raise public awareness of the issues, and to help exploited children and youth leave the sex trade.

Stolen Lives: Children in the sex trade

Stolen Lives: Children in the sex trade is a hard-hitting 46-minute documentary about children involved in the street sex trade in Vancouver and Calgary. Produced by Still Water Pictures of Vancouver, the film is intended to raise public awareness, help divert at-risk children from entering the sex trade and assist those in the trade to leave it.

This publication is part of the Caledon Institute's crime prevention series of community stories, produced in collaboration with the National Crime Prevention Centre. The series documents promising approaches to crime prevention through social development.

The Crime Prevention Partnership Program was one of many partners supporting the film, which was broadcast on CTV in March 1999. A Partnership Program grant to the Prostitution Awareness and Action Foundation of Edmonton (PAAFE) provided some of the funding for the film as well as additional resources to adapt it for use in education and awareness programs.

PAAFE is a collaboration of concerned individuals and groups working towards long-term solutions to sex trade issues. Among other activities, the organization runs a Prostitution Offender Program in collaboration with the Edmonton Police Service and community partners. This is a program for first-time offenders ('johns') charged with soliciting prostitutes: Men who pay a fee and attend the course can avoid going to court. (The fee helps to fund programs for those with past or present involvement in street prostitution.) Part of the one-day program includes the screening of a shortened version of *Stolen Lives*.

Bringing home the reality

PAAFE board members, front-line staff from community organizations and survivors of the sex trade were all involved in editing the film for use in the Prostitution Offender Program. The final editing choices were made by a street prostitution survivor. According to Kate Quinn

of the Prostitution Awareness and Action Foundation of Edmonton: “The film takes the men out of the meeting room and back to the street where they cruise and where they were arrested. It enables them to hear from young people about their experiences.” Most of the prostitution survivors who speak at the offender program are in their mid-20s to 30s, so the film is valuable in providing the perspective of children in the sex trade. The short version of the film is also being used in the Vancouver prostitution offender program.

Most ‘johns’ who have viewed the film have noted that it was effective in making them think about the impacts of the sex trade on the young people involved. When asked what was the most powerful part of the film, they replied with comments like “hearing about the way they are treated,” “what the girls really go through,” “[I] didn’t know it was so violent,” “[I] was very naïve as to what happens.”

Voices from *Stolen Lives*

Katie (entered the sex trade at age 14 after fleeing an abusive home): “*I was beaten up every day by my pimp. I was threatened ... it was scary. Whenever I got in a car with somebody, I didn’t know if he was going to hurt me.*”

Emily (forced into the trade at age 13): “*I was raped, and I was told that I was going to become a prostitute because I had to pay back [for shelter and drugs provided by ‘friends’].*”

A pimp: “*What’s underage, man? Kids grow up pretty quick these days.*”

Crystal (worked in the trade until age 17): “*I lost my childhood. That’s what you really miss ... your childhood that you couldn’t have.*”

National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention

The National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention aims to reduce crime and victimization by addressing their root causes through a social development approach. Social development is a long-term, proactive approach directed at removing personal, social and economic factors that lead some individuals to engage in criminal acts or to become victims of crime.

With an investment of \$32 million annually, the National Strategy enables the Government of Canada to help communities develop projects and partnerships that will prevent crime. The strategy focusses particularly on children and youth, Aboriginal people and the personal security of women and girls. It includes the Safer Communities Initiative, a Promotion and Public Education Program and the National Crime Prevention Centre. The National Crime Prevention Centre is responsible for implementing the Strategy.

The Safer Communities Initiative is designed to help Canadians undertake crime prevention activities in their communities. It includes four funding components: the Community Mobilization Program, which helps communities develop approaches to crime prevention and undertake activities that deal with the root causes of crime; the Crime Prevention Investment Fund, which aims to establish reliable information on what works and what is promising in reducing the risk factors associated with crime and victimization; the Crime Prevention Partnership Program, which supports the involvement of organizations that can contribute to community crime prevention through the development of information, tools and resources; and the Business Action Program on Crime Prevention, which involves national and provincial/territorial business and professional associations in helping communities prevent crime, share information and encourage community mobilization.

Out from the Shadows and Into the Light

Out from the Shadows and Into the Light is another project that addresses the commercial sexual exploitation of children in Canada. Sponsored by Save the Children Canada, and funded by the Crime Prevention Partnership Program and other partners, it evolved from *Out from the Shadows*, a 1998 international summit on sexually exploited youth. The ground-breaking summit brought together young people who had been exploited in the sex trade throughout the Americas, to tell their stories and develop a Declaration and Agenda for Action.

Lessons from the summit influenced the direction of *Out from the Shadows and Into the Light*. These lessons included the importance of having ‘experiential youth’ (youth who are or were in the sex trade) lead the initiative and play a central role in its implementation. Whenever possible, project staff positions have been filled by experiential youth, and all initiatives are developed with youth participation. Another lesson from the summit was the importance of tailoring solutions to community needs by involving people at the local level.

Raising awareness, building links

A variety of public awareness materials have been produced, including posters, a brochure, and a video and accompanying educational guide. An extensive media campaign has been raising awareness. Staff and volunteers – most of whom are experiential youth – have been providing workshops across Canada to law enforcement personnel, government employees, social service providers and the general public. The goal of the workshops is to increase sensitivity towards commercially sexually exploited youth in order to make it easier for youth to leave the sex trade.

“We want attitudes about sexually exploited children to change, the way attitudes



One of the hard-hitting images from the publicity materials for ‘Out from the Shadows and Into the Light,’ developed by Save the Children Canada in cooperation with the British Columbia Ministry of Attorney General. The messages for the materials were developed by young people in the sex trade.

have changed about drunk driving and spousal abuse,” says Bill McElroy of Save the Children Canada. “We want to get to the point where men say: ‘Yes, it is wrong to buy sex from children.’ There are areas where kids selling themselves on the street are seen as a threat to law and order – a destabilizing influence that needs to be moved along and moved out. We need to shift attitudes so that they are seen as victims who need our help.”

Agencies that work with youth across Canada were surveyed to determine which have services for sexually exploited youth. Save the Children Canada has developed a partnership with the Kids Help Line so this information will be readily available to those who call for help. “Hopefully, this will enable a more instantaneous response, so kids will have a place to go *tonight*,” says Bill, noting that the major barrier to children who want to leave the sex trade is the lack of somewhere to go.

Another priority is the development of a national network of sexually exploited youth: Sexually Exploited Youth Speak Out. The network focusses on promoting education; linking programs and strategies; connecting experiential youth with community organizations to create mentoring relationships; and teaching skills for advocacy, peer support and public speaking. Already there have been successes: In Winnipeg, a network member involved the city and social agencies in establishing a safe transition house for Aboriginal women seeking to leave the sex trade.

Work has begun on ‘Exit Routes,’ a program to help youth leave the trade. A manual on services available to youth in Vancouver will be developed, and then tested by youth seeking to leave the sex trade. Their feedback will be provided to social agencies to help improve services for those who want out.

In the early stages of *Out from the Shadows and Into the Light*, Save the Children Canada commissioned a national survey of public attitudes to children in the sex trade. At the end of the three-year project, an identical survey will be conducted to determine if there has been any noticeable change in attitudes and awareness.

Bill McElroy credits the Crime Prevention Partnership Program for getting the ball rolling, and notes that the three-year funding provided the continuity needed to hire staff and build momen-

tum. “We’ve been able to identify places where these young people are falling through the cracks,” he says. “As we identify those, we’re finding other funding sources and other people who want to get involved. It is happening a lot faster than we thought it would.” For the children and youth in Canada’s sex trade, it is happening not a moment too soon.

Ann Simpson

Ann Simpson works on the community stories series for the Caledon Institute.

For information on PAAFE, contact Kate Quinn, Executive Director, at (403) 471-6137, e-mail paafe@telusplanet.net. To order or find out more about the *Stolen Lives* documentary, contact Lori Roth, Still Water Pictures by e-mail at lori@imag.net, or Nathan Neumer by telephone at (604) 261-7975. Additional information about *Out from the Shadows and Into the Light* is available from Bill McElroy at (604) 437-5881.

For more information on the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention, call (toll-free) 1-877-302-6272, or visit the website at www.crime-prevention.org.

Limited quantities of this publication are available in alternate formats (Braille, disk and audio-tape).

Cette histoire communautaire est également disponible en français.

© 2000 by the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

1600 Scott Street, Suite 620
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
K1Y 4N7

Ph: (613) 729-3340 Fx: (613) 729-3896

e-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org

website: www.caledoninst.org