



Pathways into and out of Commercial Sexual Exploitation – Preliminary Findings and Implications for Responding to Sexually Exploited Teens

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This report includes preliminary findings that are currently undergoing review and development with our research partners, collaborators and youth advisory groups. Correspondence about this research should be directed to Linda M. Williams, Professor, Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology, University of Massachusetts Lowell, 870 Broadway Street, Lowell, MA 01854. linda_williams@uml.edu or 978-934-4118.

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We sincerely thank the many young people who have shared their stories with us in the hope that it will help others not to have to go through what they experienced.

Introduction to the Pathways Project

For the past two years the University of Massachusetts Lowell and Fair Fund, Inc., along with partners in Boston, MA and Washington, D.C., USA, have been conducting an in-depth, field-based study of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) taking a life course perspective in examining the lives of female and male victims with a focus on prostituted teens.

The Pathways Project is designed to examine pathways into and out of commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) via prostitution and to provide useful information to practice and policy communities (including juvenile and criminal justice systems, social service and public health providers, not-for-profit youth-serving agencies, and communities) to prevent CSEC and increase safety and well being of victims.

The goal of the research is to understand the victims' perspectives; to identify the factors (individual, family, peer, school, and community contexts) associated with the commencement of CSEC; to identify factors that surround its maintenance and escalation; and to identify factors that impede or empower exiting from or overcoming exploitative situations. Our research includes qualitative and quantitative methods with a focus on integrating researchers and grassroots organizers into the design, data collection, data analysis and dissemination.

In the Boston metropolitan area and in Washington, DC, we have, to date, interviewed more than 60 adolescents (aged 14-19) who have experienced sexual violence via teen prostitution or who are runaways at risk for such victimization experiences.

Our reading of the literature led us to the conclusion that there is a need for life course and community approaches to developing policy and practice responses to CSEC via prostitution. In addition, the literature on violence against women and sexual victimization suggested to us a need for qualitative research and has highlighted its utility as a tool for rich description of phenomena. Such detail and texture is useful both for understanding "the 'why' of human behavior" and for laying the foundation for further quantitative study. Despite important prior research, CSEC is understudied. This is, in part because of the secrecy of the behaviors and also often because the prostituted children are "throwaways," or are poor, minority, runaway or drug-involved youth who garner little sustained public concern or attention.

As we learn more from the victims of CSEC we have come to understand that theories of child traumatic stress and conceptualizations developed from research on other types of child sexual abuse, for example intrafamilial child sexual abuse, may not be sufficient for understanding the complexities of the social context of CSEC. Many CSEC victims are adolescents and this is a more challenging stage of the life course in many ways. In general, our observation has been that while the community can muster concern for pre-pubescent, sexually abused, children this concerned response is less often forthcoming when the victims are adolescents. Perhaps this is because of the challenges of dealing with adolescents who have begun to more clearly form their own

identities and desires and because, when compared to younger children, they have a greater level of integration into the community. This makes societal responses necessarily more complex and requires the involvement and coordination of more individuals, community groups and institutions. Seldom has the child sexual abuse literature addressed these special issues of interventions with adolescents.

We also have found that as was the case with the first years of addressing the problem of child sexual abuse (CSA) in the 1970s and 80s, our understanding of CSEC is changing and evolving as we learn more about the victims and offenders. As with CSA research several decades ago, we have learned that the language we use to describe the behaviors is critical and nuances in terms (prostitute vs prostituted, for example) are critical. With adolescents we face the difficulty of trying to find language that recognizes the vulnerability and victimization of those who are prostituted along with acknowledgment of the agency, volition and desires of the adolescent girl or boy. Refining and rethinking these terms is an on-going process. We also have to think more about the language used to describe and properly characterize “pimps” (3rd party exploiters?) and “johns” (rapists?). In conducting the interviews, our researchers encouraged the teens to define their own experiences and use the language that best served their needs and shared their personal narratives. The nuances of these and other terms and the meanings assigned by the interviewed teens themselves will be addressed in some detail in the final reports we produce.

The programs our communities have fashioned and responses of the systems that care for youth to date often have had to base their programming for CSEC on stereotypical cases that came to public attention perhaps because they were part of a major case with large numbers of victims in networks of exploitation and violent crime. What we know to date has often come from research and anecdotal evidence based on small samples of cases known to authorities. Mostly these are cases of CSEC that are “pimp” involved. From these we have learned how these offenders have an uncanny ability to identify and exploit the needs of girls with prior victimization histories. These have been important discoveries and observations. But any solutions based on these select cases may miss important issues for victims of CSEC. The Pathways study was designed to learn more about these often hidden issues.

Pathways Research Design and Sample

This research uses a mixed method and highly collaborative design with a strong qualitative research focus. A critical component of the project is that it integrates researchers, service providers, grassroots organizers and young women and men who have escaped CSEC into the design, data collection process, data analysis and dissemination. In the early months of the project we conducted focus groups composed of participating key agency partners who are representatives of law enforcement, social service agencies and non-governmental organizations that intervene in CSEC. We also conducted advisory groups of young adults who are currently or were previously involved in CSEC or at high risk for exploitation.

These focus groups were designed to assist us in refining participant identification, recruitment strategies, and the interview protocol. The youth groups assisted us in incorporating youth language and perspectives into our interview protocol. Before we complete our final reports we will return to our focus groups and youth advisors who will review results and assist in the interpretation and dissemination of findings so that they will be most useful for policy and practice communities. ***The materials that appear in this document, therefore, are preliminary and designed to be used for purposes of useful discussion.***

A critical component of this project is we have sought to listen to the voices of the youth themselves – through their narrative accounts of their lives and pathways to CSEC -- so that we could understand the perspectives of these adolescent victims. The adolescents we interviewed were not predominately involved in large cases known to law enforcement -- they were mostly runaway, homeless, or “thrown away” youth.

Our interview, though semi-structured, was open-ended, encouraging the participants to talk about their experiences in their own words and in the way they wanted to tell it. They were guided into discussions of important factors that shaped them into who they are today; family, peer, and community interactions and supports; risk/protective/resiliency factors; health, medical and other self-described needs; service access and impediments to access; juvenile/ criminal justice history and perceptions of interaction with juvenile justice systems; and recommendations for changes in systems. Analyses of these data are still underway and these and other themes emerging from the teens narratives will be the focus of future reports.

At the time of this preliminary report, we have interviewed over 60 teens in the Boston metropolitan area and Washington, DC. About half of the participants we interviewed have had some CSEC involvement either directly or through connection to others. As we have found in conducting research with other trauma survivors, most of these teens appeared to find it rewarding to tell their stories and to have their voices heard. The participants to date include females, males and transgendered youth and those who self identified as Black or African American, Hispanic, White, Asian American, Native American and many other ethnic and immigrant groups. In this preliminary report we are focusing on information from interviews with CSEC involved girls.

While our future reports will provide more detail on pathways in and out of CSEC some preliminary findings and implications are outlined below.

Life on the streets...

Teens at risk for CSEC often are runaways who are trying to survive life on the streets. They have told us about the time they spent searching for a safe place to stay, food and positive supports.

One teen told us:

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

Of course many communities provide some of the services they need, but teens may be reluctant to turn themselves over to adults, especially when they have in the past found adults to be untrustworthy. They need places to stay where they may be able to maintain some (appropriate) levels of autonomy and be empowered to make the situation work. If such is not available, as we have heard, they can be taken advantage of by unscrupulous adults.

One young woman told us that at age 12 she:

"ran away by myself. <so you met all new people?> The "gutter punk crew"... It's ... it's no good."

Pathways in...

Sometimes the entrance into the life of being prostituted was forceful and threatening, but more often in the experiences of the girls we interviewed it involved a gradual introduction of the teen to "the life." Runaways with no place to go may be taken in by people who have plans to turn them out on the streets. This can be a slow process as one former teen runaway told us:

"I spent the night over their house and then they took me to this other man's house and then that's when .. um .. we was over there and I had sex with that man and then he let me stay in his house for the rest of three weeks or whatever ... he was really nice .. he .. he didn't ask me for nothin' else or whatever. He was just like whatever I want to do I can do it and then that was it."

In a common scenario, after a short time the demand for sex gets more frequent and more uncomfortable for the teen... she may be asked and eventually required to have sex with others who are brought to the house or who make connection on the streets or over the internet. One teen told us:

"Like some time I just be like tired and I don't want to do it but it's like if I don't do it they gonna put me out so I just do it .."

In some cases, girls had a "friend" who introduced them to prostitution. In the case of one girl, a friend at school recruited her into "the life."

"I mean the first time it happened I was kind of like scared, but at the same, I had to follow her move ... you know, whatever she did, I did; you know, wherever she went across the trick, whatever y'all call them, then I did, you know ... um .. and as the day start... started getting longer I started to learn more so I was able, when she did leave me .. I was able to do it by myself."

From one girl's narrative of running away the first time.

"I started running away. ... I've always watched my mom be abused... so I moved in with my dad and my dad was never home ... I met this (older) guy and he just told me .. he was like 'what are you doin'?"' And I said 'I don't have no curfew' – took me out shopping, took me out to eat. Did it for about .. probably about a month ... time came he told me he needed help with his rent and he's about to get put out and .. maybe I could do .. I could .. I could talk to this guy to get like \$50 from him – just by talking to him. So I thought it was okay but when I went to go do it he wanted somethin' else so I'm just looking and I went back to the guy that I had met and I'm like 'I'm not doing that.' He was like, 'it's a lot of money ... you really .. it's only one minute.' So I just on ahead and did it and then I ended up leaving home, moving in with him, and... ended up working for him."

Precursors to running away or being pushed out of house...

Teens were willing to tell us about how they left home or were thrown out. Many shared similar accounts of multiple experiences of running away or leaving home. Sometimes this started at a very young age (one girl told us she took her coloring books with her when she left home the first time.) Other youth left once and never went back. They spoke many times about leaving due to violence in the home.

As the teens talked about important events in their lives that shaped them into who (and where) they are today, they often mentioned experiences with family violence including physical, sexual and emotional abuse; abuse of siblings by parents or parent-figures; attempts they made to protect siblings from abuse; and witnessing violence between adults. Some spoke of perpetrating violence (sometimes in self-defense) against parents and parent figures. We learned from participants that this violence had resulted in a call to police that led to removal or relocation to unsafe or untenable situation and that this was the situation that led to them living on the streets, "couch surfing," or staying with friends.

One girl told us that:

"When my dad gets angry it's physical. ... It's not, 'well you can't go out for a week, you can't ...' It's .. it's physical and he is a big man. And I've watched my ma .. I grew up watching my mom be abused and being beat. I'd rather run away. I never thought about running away but I was .. I didn't want to go back to my mom's and the stuff started at my dad's and I was .. I'd rather be with people who, who showed me affection, got me things, just showed me attention."

These abused, homeless and runaway teens are at high risk for commercial sexual exploitation. Their trauma histories make them more vulnerable to exploiters and at times less likely to be able to function in youth programs. One young woman told us she met a guy through another girl in foster care and he put her on "the track".

More support is needed for programs that provide youth with a safe place to stay, nutritious food, positive support networks that address their needs and empower them to make safe choices; and intervention for trauma and for behavioral issues that make it difficult for them to function in traditional settings. Some told us they just needed someone who would listen to them when they want to talk.

Police interactions with teens were discussed often in the interviews. Their experiences highlight a need for a careful review of policies on how police respond to homeless teens, runaways, teens involved in altercations with their adult caregivers, as well as teens involved in prostitution. Specific policies, practices and training need to be developed so that police can intervene positively to reduce the risk that teens will be prostituted. As one participant told us:

“And I was only 17... and, you know, they’re like well, you know, ‘here’s fifty cents make a phone call.’ And I’m like ‘who am I supposed to call?’.... I don’t talk to anybody else, you know? ... and basically, you know, I’m stuck in the middle of downtown... with pajamas on and house shoes... not even no socks on.”

Why they stay on the streets or in the life...

One young woman who had been prostituted told us:

“I mean when you get the money it feels good... When you’re buying the stuff from the money it feels good when you have the cars, the clothes, the jewelry. All that feels good but at the point in time when you’re jumpin’ in and out of cars, sleepin’ with this guy and then goin’... to sleep with that guy you feel nasty... You feel like... like you’re not wanted ... and that’s when the pimp comes in to make you feel like you’re wanted... You know what I mean?”

Another young woman (recruited to prostitution at age 16) said (referring to the pimp’s initial behavior toward her):

“I felt like a queen.... I never felt like a queen before.”

Girls reported that at some point they felt that it was unsafe to try to leave. The level of control, both physical and mental, was so intense that many girls felt they could not leave for fear of future abuse or not knowing who to turn to for help.

“Several times day... guys would, you know, call me ...and it was just the most terrifying thing ever... it just... I can never show my fear and I’m the type of person that doesn’t like to show fear cause I don’t cry often but several times, you know, a night I would pretend that I was in the shower but I was actually crying because I didn’t know what else to do... cause I wasn’t really allowed use the phone or nothing like that and I like to eat and he didn’t really feed me that much and it’s just I really didn’t know what else to do.”

There are many factors associated with not exiting CSEC and themes in prostituted teens’ narratives that will be discussed fully in later reports. Clearly (and despite evidence that many good programs exist) the teens in their narratives gave us evidence

of a stunning lack of resources and supports for them in their families and on the streets.

Two stories about leaving...

We asked the young woman, “tell me a little bit about like what you made you start thinking about.... getting out of this life.” She replied:

“Because it was bringing down my self-esteem. I didn’t feel good no more. I wasn’t ... I didn’t feel connected with my family and I missed my family and I just kept getting more and more into trouble, and I’m not the type .. and I wasn’t the type of person who got into trouble.”

Another told us about how the violence she witnessed against another young teenage girl who “worked” for the same pimp got her to leave:

“And she was in the tub and I went in the bathroom; the whole tub was filled with water. She was bleeding from her eyes...she was bleeding from her lips. She was bleeding from her nose. She had scratches on her neck. I was just like ‘oh I can’t, I can’t go through this. I can’t.’ And after I seen her I had to leave him (the pimp) ... even if I didn’t have no place to go...”

Complex challenges presented to those who want to develop programs to help victims of CSEC

There are unique aspects of CSEC that are challenging for most systems that have been developed to provide services for youth. These challenges include:

- Youth victimized by CSEC and those at high risk frequently reside in and cross multiple jurisdictions even on a daily basis (many hundreds of communities were mentioned by the interviewed teens). The multijurisdictional nature of the problem calls for innovative coordinated responses by all parts of the system (social, legal, medical, etc.) in multiple jurisdictions and willingness to cross jurisdictional boundaries to provide services for youth;
- Many of the teens involved in CSEC are “thrownaway” and disconnected youth. This complicates the process of identifying children in need of services in any jurisdiction. It also complicates treatment planning because often the youth have no adult family members who are prepared for or capable of caring for them;
- Youth who have been victimized via CSEC have often experienced complex trauma—including witnessing violence, neglect, abuse, and sexual violence that results in traumatic behavior responses that may inhibit their ability to reach out for or trust in the support being offered. Furthermore, a lack of trust or sense of worthlessness may lead teens to runaway from assistance and supports. Special care must be taken devising programs that will draw youth in rather than

recreating for them the distinct feeling that they are once again being abused, neglected or violated.

Preliminary Recommendations -- for further discussion

- Training of law enforcement (not just those in special units) to identify and assist at-risk and prostituted teens and to improve skills for communicating with them and connecting them to service providers;
- Training for social service providers, therapists, teachers, and other adults who frequently may come into contact with CSEC involved youth so they can better understand the issue of CSEC and develop the specialized services these youth need;
- Developing programming designed to confront social norms that support CSEC;
- Enhancing peer support for preventing sexual exploitation;
- Developing social networks for teen survival including positive uses of the internet for outreach and services for youth and social networking for positive change;
- Rethinking and helping to build communities of support for teens;
- Making sure in the U.S. we provide the comprehensive types of services we expect other countries to provide for internationally trafficked victims. These include rehabilitation, health care, locating communities of support, and reintegration;
- Funding and support for both emergency and transitional shelters with personnel who are qualified to help prostituted and sexually exploited children.

In conclusion:

Community based and governmental organizations are participating in further analyses of the themes emerging from the narratives of the interviewed teens and, along with our youth advisors, will assist in refining recommendations for policies and practices for juvenile and criminal justice systems, social service and public health providers, not-for-profit youth-serving agencies, and communities to prevent CSEC and increase safety and well being of victims. We invite those reading this preliminary report to provide feedback and suggestions to the authors.