

Richard Estes, Ph.D., is Professor of Social Work at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the Principal Investigator (with Neil Weiner) of a two-year study and co-author of the report, The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. The project involved a unique partnership among governmental and non-governmental agencies, universities, and child advocacy organizations and included interviews of more than 1,000 key informants (including street children, prostituted children, johns, pimps, and law enforcement and social service personnel). The report discusses the causes and scope of the problem of the commercial sexual exploitation of children and describes 11 recommendations to strengthen capacity for protecting vulnerable youth.



The Silent Emergency: The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the United States, Canada, and Mexico

Richard J. Estes

Child Sexual Exploitation: A Virulent Problem

The benefits of economic globalization, internationalization, and free trade have brought with them an unanticipated set of social problems. Among them is a dramatic rise worldwide in the incidence of child exploitation. Among the most virulent forms of this exploitation are *child sexual exploitation* (CSE), which includes child sexual abuse, and the *commercial sexual exploitation of children* (CSEC), which includes child pornography, juvenile prostitution, trafficking in children for sexual purposes, and child sex tourism. Today, child sexual exploitation is recognized as the most neglected form of child abuse in the United States.

Prostitution, pornography and even trafficking in persons for sex are not new phenomena in the United States. The increasing seriousness and extent of childhood prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation of children committed each year are new, however. UNICEF (1997) estimated that the number of children so exploited was in the tens of millions worldwide. In the United States, the number exceeds 200,000 children and youth between the ages of 10 and 17 years. Additional thousands of American children are known to be the victims of sexual abuse within their own homes.

The University of Pennsylvania/National Institutes of Justice Study of the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children

Because patterns of child sexual exploitation in North America had not previously been studied, researchers from the University of Pennsylvania partnered with the National

Institutes of Justice and several foundations to study the nature, extent and severity of the commercial sexual exploitation of children in the North American region.

Project Goals

The project had several primary goals:

1. Identification of the nature, extent, and underlying causes of CSE and CSEC occurring in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico;
2. Identification of the subgroups of children who are at the greatest risk of being sexually exploited;
3. Identification of subgroups of adult perpetrators of sex crimes against children—including pimps, traffickers, and adult “customers” of children for sex;
4. Identification of the extent to which organized criminal units are involved in CSEC, but especially in juvenile prostitution and trafficking in children for sexual purposes;
5. To the extent possible, identification of the modes of operation and other methods used by organized criminal units to recruit children into sexually exploitative activities;
6. Identification of local, state and national laws relating to CSE and CSEC;
7. Identification of international agreements, covenants and declarations pertaining to CSE and CSEC;
8. Identification of the strengths and weakness of the country’s current capacity for preventing, or at least protecting, children from sexual exploitation; and, with local, state and national governmental and nongovernmental representatives, framing recommendations designed to strengthen the nation’s capacity to prevent, or at least protect, the nation’s and region’s children from such exploitation.

Study Methods

The project involved a unique partnership between: (1) leading governmental and nongovernmental organizations located in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico; (2) three universities (one located in each country); (3) two international child advocacy organizations; (4) the leading national child welfare organization in the U.S; (5) a major professional association (the National Association of Social Workers); (6) the federal government; (7) private foundations; and (8) two universities that contributed to the project’s financial backing.

To investigate the problem of the commercial sexual exploitation of children, from January 1999 to March 2001 the researchers used a multi-strategy approach to data collection, including:

- Reviews of published and unpublished literature
- Focus group meetings in 28 specially targeted cities in North America, including 17 U.S. cities: Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, El Paso, Honolulu, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, New Orleans, Oakland, Philadelphia, San Antonio, San Diego, San Francisco, San Jose, and Seattle
- Interviews with nearly 1,000 key informants, including:
 - 124 sexually exploited runaway and “throwaway” street children;
 - 86 sexually exploited children in the care of local human service and law enforcement agencies;
 - 164 representatives of Federal law enforcement agencies;
 - 146 representatives of state, county and local law enforcement agencies;
 - 93 representatives of public human service agencies;

- 196 representatives of local private human service agencies;
 - Adult customers of child sex
 - Adult traffickers in children for sex
 - 51 representatives of international nongovernmental organizations; and
 - 60 members of a tri-national research team (U.S., Canada, and Mexico) and International Advisory Board
- Statistical surveys
 - Analysis of each country’s laws, legal codes, and procedures relating to child victims and perpetrators of CSEC
 - Analysis of international treaties and documents that address the issue of child sexual exploitation

What Are the Study’s Major Findings?

The investigators confirmed that:

1. Although the precise number of commercially sexually exploited children in the United States could not be determined, approximately 240,000 to 325,000 American children are believed to be “at risk” of sexual victimization each year.
2. As a group, sexually exploited children are quite heterogeneous. They include children living in their own homes—even middle- and upper-middle-class homes—as well as children who are runaways and “throwaways.”
3. Sexual exploiters consist mostly of men, but some women and juveniles (including older siblings) sexually exploit children as well.
4. Criminal networks are actively involved in the sexual exploitation of children and profit significantly from that exploitation.
5. Substantial numbers of foreign children are trafficked into the U.S. for sexual purposes.
6. Significant numbers of American youth are trafficked for sexual purposes across the U.S. and, in some cases, to other economically advanced countries.
7. Some forms of child sexual exploitation are more common, whereas others occur relatively infrequently.

FORMS OF CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION	
<i>More Common</i>	<i>Less Common</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Molestation by acquaintances • Molestation by family members • Pornography • For boys, gay sex • For girls, nude dancing, stripping and modeling • For girls, pimp controlled prostitution • For boys, more entrepreneurial pornography and prostitution • For girls, sex as contribution to gang economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “White” slavery • Servitude and indenturing • Participation in national or international organized crime networks that include child sexual services in their “portfolio” of services

The Plight of Street Youth

The investigation also provided evidence that children living on America's streets are subject to an extraordinary range of social, emotional, physical, health and economic risks not experienced by other children. Poverty is rampant among these children, as are hunger and malnutrition. Children suffer from illnesses caused by exposure to the weather, eating garbage from restaurant dumpsters and sleeping in vermin-infested areas. Sexually transmitted diseases are also rampant among street youth and are especially high among those street youth who engage in prostitution. Street youth also fall victim to violence inflicted by peers, pimps, "customers," and others. Street youth suffer disproportionately from serious mental illnesses.

Recommendations

The recommendations that follow were distilled from the many shared with us by sexually exploited children, and law enforcement and human service professionals with whom we met. They reflect six basic priorities:

1. Focus on prevention as the first priority.
2. Reduce harm.
3. Attend to gender issues as factors that contribute to child sexual exploitation.
4. Provide systematic public and professional education on child sexual exploitation.
5. Focus on early identification and more intensive supervision of sexually offending adults and juveniles.
6. Fund and conduct more in-depth research into other societal factors that contribute to child sexual exploitation.

Recommendation 1: Protect the Children

Efforts at protecting children from sexual exploitation must emphasize prevention as the first priority. Accordingly, we recommend that:

- A lead federal agency, or consortium of agencies, be given primary responsibility for protecting children from sexual exploitation.
- Sexually offending adults and juveniles must be given the unequivocal message that "it is not okay" to sexually molest children.
- Children must be empowered to report incidents of illicit sexual contact to law enforcement and human service authorities.
- Local and state human service and law enforcement agencies must have access to the resources needed to investigate fully all reported cases of child sexual abuse and child sexual assault.
- Local and state human and law enforcement agencies must have access to the resources needed to adequately supervise all case of substantiated or indicated child sexual abuse over the long term.
- Local and state human service and law enforcement agencies must have the resources needed to assist runaway, thownaway and homeless youth from becoming victims of child sexual exploitation.
- Local and state human service and law enforcement agencies must have access to resources needed to serve transient runaway and homeless youth who enter their communities.

- States and other jurisdictions must have access to the resources needed to cooperate fully with one another in monitoring the presence, location and activities of convicted child sexual offenders.
- Parents, schools, child advocacy organizations, and youth groups need to work together in developing and disseminating messages related to the protection of children from sexual exploitation.
- Public media, especially television networks and the movie and music industries, share a heavy responsibility for disseminating age-appropriate and accurate messages concerning the nature, extent and seriousness of child sexual exploitation in contemporary American society.

Recommendation 2: Target Adult Sexual Exploiters of Children for Punishment, Not the Children

Sexually exploited children often are re-victimized by the very agencies that have been designed to assist them. We therefore recommend that:

- Local and state law enforcement agencies shift their priorities away from the apprehension of sexually involved street youth to the apprehension and punishment of adult perpetrators of sex crimes against children — pimps, traffickers and customers.
- Federal law enforcement agencies become more involved in the identification and prosecution of adults involved in national sex crime rings that include child sex in their “portfolio” of services.
- Appropriate mechanisms be found for local and state human service agencies to work more cooperatively with law enforcement authorities in the apprehension of sexually offending adults who commit sexual crimes against children.

Recommendation 3: Enforce More Fully Existing National and State Laws Relating to Child Sexual Exploitation

This investigation has confirmed a pattern of “benign neglect” on the part of many law enforcement and human service agencies vis-à-vis exploited children and youth. Therefore, we recommend that the federal government assume a leadership position in encouraging both its own agencies and those of state and local governments to implement fully all national and state laws pertaining to the protection of children from sexual exploitation. Specifically:

- All federal, state, and local agencies whose mission includes the protection of children should develop strategic plans for implementing federal laws related to the sexual exploitation of children.
- The federal government should create financial incentives for state and local governments to implement all laws related to the sexual exploitation of children within their jurisdictions.
- Federal, state, and local governments should develop a system that holds accountable governmental agencies that fail to comply with relevant laws pertaining to the sexual exploitation of children.

Recommendation 4: Increase the Penalties Associated With Sexual Crimes Against Children

While no one can forecast exactly the net impact of greater or enhanced criminal penalties in reducing child sexual exploitation, there is an important logic for doing so. We therefore recommend the following:

- Make current statutes relevant to child sexual exploitation more consistent in severity with other acts of commensurate seriousness, like drug and arms trafficking.
- Convene a multidisciplinary group of legal and advocacy experts to draft a model penal code to inform and shape legislation related to child sexual exploitation.

Recommendation 5: Support Local Communities in Their Efforts to Strengthen Local and State Laws Pertaining to Child Sexual Exploitation

At the same time that work is done by governmental and nongovernmental groups to change the penalty structure and hierarchy of statutes pertaining to child sexual exploitation, work also needs to be done in strengthening the statutes that already exist. Accordingly, we recommend the following:

- Apply current statutes in a more consistent manner by taking steps to adopt sentencing guidelines, such as those used at the federal level and in many states.
- Develop sentencing guidelines for child sexual exploitation, mounting a multi-state review of actual sentences meted out.

Recommendation 6: Establish a National Child Sexual Exploitation Intelligence Center

This investigation has demonstrated the need for a full-time intelligence gathering and strategic planning apparatus for monitoring national trends related to child sexual exploitation. To that end, we recommend that a National Child Sexual Exploitation Intelligence Center be established. The goals of the Center would include:

- To support national policy makers and law enforcement decision makers with strategic domestic intelligence regarding child sexual exploitation;
- To support national counter-exploitation efforts; and
- To conduct and report on a timely basis regional, national, and state child sexual exploitation threat assessments.

Recommendation 7: Expand Federally Funded Multi-Jurisdictional Task Forces on Child Exploitation Into All Major Federal and State Jurisdictions

Federally-initiated multi-jurisdictional task forces on child sexual exploitation have demonstrated great promise in the communities in which they are located. Therefore, we recommend that federally-funded multi-jurisdictional task forces on child sexual exploitation be established and systematically evaluated in all major federal and state jurisdictions.

Recommendation 8: Expand Federally-Funded Internet Crimes Against Child Units Into All Major Federal and State Jurisdictions

Federally-initiated units on Internet crimes against children have demonstrated great promise in the 30 communities in which they have been implemented. We therefore recommend that federally-funded Internet crimes against children units be established and systematically evaluated in all major federal and state jurisdictions.

Recommendation 9: Enlarge the National Pool of Child Sexual Exploitation Experts and Specialists

A serious shortage exists nationally in the number and types of specialists in child sexual exploitation. These shortages are most apparent in the forensics area but also are manifest in judicial and prosecutorial agencies. An urgent need also exists for more social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, educators, physicians, lawyers, police officers, coroners and others with special expertise in child sexual exploitation. We therefore recommend the following:

- Federal and state governments should significantly expand programs of continuing education focused on increasing the pool of legal, correctional and human service professionals with specialized expertise in the nature, extent, dynamics and impact of sexual exploitation of children and their families.
- Federal and state governments and agencies should pay increased attention to child sexual exploitation content and practices in the curricula and training programs of all professional disciplines that share responsibility for assisting sexually exploited children and their families.
- Agencies should promote increasingly levels of interdisciplinary and inter-agency education and cooperation in the field of child sexual exploitation.

Recommendation 10: Promote Effective Public/Private Partnerships for Combating Child Sexual Exploitation

A successful national campaign to combat child sexual exploitation will require active participation of all public and private stakeholders working with and on behalf of sexually exploited children and their families. We recommend that the stakeholders:

- Develop local, state and national councils (coalitions and task forces) of public and private stakeholders committed to the elimination of child sexual exploitation.
- Ensure that these councils develop multi-year strategic plans that include specific goals and timetables for measuring and reducing the prevalence of child sexual exploitation within their communities.
- Develop nationally linked coordinating mechanisms whereby local and state strategic plans for the elimination of child sexual exploitation can be integrated into a comprehensive national plan of action.

Recommendation 11: Fund More Specialized Studies of Perpetrators of Child Sexual Exploitation and Their Victims

The present investigation represents a unique "first generation" inquiry into the nature, extent, dynamics and seriousness of child sexual exploitation in the U.S. Many surprising and unsettling facts have been uncovered concerning child sexual exploitation in contemporary American society and we have reported these findings in considerable detail in our full report (Estes & Weiner, 2001). Even so, additional research is needed.

We recommend that additional research be undertaken in the following areas:

- Understanding more fully those aspects of American collective life that appear to contribute directly to the commercial sexual exploitation of children—i.e., changing societal values and mores, weakening family structures, the persistence of male dominance over females, and the apparent confusion on the part of many adults concerning the right of children not to be physically, emotionally or sexually violated;
- Development of more detailed profiles of adult sexual exploiters of children;
- Development of more detailed profiles of juvenile sexual offenders;
- Development of more detailed profiles and modes of operation of “pimps” and others who systematically promote the commercial exploitation of juveniles;
- Development of more detailed profiles and modes of operation of national and international “traffickers” of children for sexual purposes;
- Understanding more fully the nature and extent of the commercial sexual exploitation of youth who self-identify as sexual minorities (e.g., gays, lesbians, bi-sexuals);
- Exploring the nature and extent of commercial sexual exploitation of girls associated with gangs;
- Understanding the nature and extent of the commercial sexual exploitation of American youth who cross international borders in pursuit of cheaper drugs, alcohol and sex with child nationals of other countries;
- Comprehending the nature and extent of commercial sex activities among middle income and other comparatively “well-off” youth living in their own homes;
- Understanding the nature and extent of the commercial sexual exploitation of youth living in poverty;
- Investigation of the international dimensions of the commercial sexual exploitation of children with a U.S. nexus;
- Understanding the near- and long-term impact of sexual exploitation of children and youth as they mature into adults; and
- Determining cost (and profit) estimates associated with the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

The Need for Policy Development

The road ahead to protect America’s children and youth from sexual exploitation and commercial sexual exploitation is long, and success is uncertain. The results of this research effort elucidate the need for collateral policy development and strategic planning in dealing with these issues. Policy development must occur at the local, state, national, and international levels because of the mobility involved in the commercial sexual exploitation of children. Policy development must engage the talents and resources of all those persons and organizations working to protect children from child sexual exploitation, and these efforts must be adequately financed. Nothing short of a comprehensive and well-coordinated approach to enhancing the nation’s capacity for preventing and protecting children from the horrors of child sexual exploitation will succeed.