



Children Are Being Bought and Sold for Sex in the U.S. in Overwhelming Numbers

- ❖ **Every year, thousands of kids, 85% of which are girls and 67% of which are African American, end up as the victims of sexual exploitation in New York City.** A majority of these kids have already run away from abusive situations or homes and have a history of sexual abuse. But instead of finding a better place, they are trafficked by pimps and coerced and manipulated into a life of prostitution. Nationwide, estimates of the number of sexually exploited children range from *several hundred thousand to three million*.
- ❖ **Children are exploited for sex across New York State**, although there are key distinctions between exploited kids in New York City versus other areas of the state. According to a report conducted by WESTAT for the New York State Office of Child and Family Services that examined NYC and seven Upstate counties, it was found that most exploitation in NYC takes place in a hotel or outside (74%) while 52% of abuse Upstate occurred in a child's home. 75% of the "exploiters" in NYC were strangers, while 58% of the cases Upstate involved an adult friend or acquaintance, and 17% of the sex acts were used in films, photos, and pornography.
- ❖ **Selling sex is a harsh reality for girls as young as 13 and 14, which is the average age of entry into prostitution in the United States.** In New York City, the standard is that these girls are bought and sold by eight men per night. Advertised on Craigslist or in the back pages of local newspapers, sex with children is rampantly marketed and readily available in New York City and State. Although girls make up the majority of kids affected in New York City, the WESTAT report indicated that the city was the only place that included exploited kids identifying as being transgender and a majority of those who identified as gay.
- ❖ **Children under the age of 17 are not old enough to legally consent to sex, yet under current New York State law child runaways caught in prostitution are prosecuted.** Children who have been sexually exploited are victims of rape. These children are in dire need of medical attention, counseling, and a safe, trusting environment. Instead, many face juvenile detention facilities of wire and cinderblock. It is clear that the current system is broken: the recidivism rate for kids placed in juvenile detention is 80%, and about 85% had prior child welfare involvement.
- ❖ **New York needs to develop sufficiently funded, targeted programs to address the specific needs of sexually exploited kids.** The reality is that girls caught in prostitution are placed in juvenile detention because there are not sufficient alternatives in place. Kids who end up in prostitution have tremendous needs. At least 80% of exploited children have previously been sexually abused and two-thirds to three quarters experience mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder. These children are in clear need of help, but there are currently very few programs that can specifically address their needs.

We Need to Address Demand

- ❖ **As long as the huge demand for commercial sex persists, children will continue to be manipulated into the sex trade** and girls will be sold like commodities and forced into a harsh life where they face inexplicable violence, rape and abuse, disease, and drug abuse.
- ❖ **New York's newly enacted anti-human trafficking law stiffens penalties for johns** (from a B to an A misdemeanor), but it's not yet clear if this will have a substantial impact. Currently, the arrest ratio of prostitutes to johns is four to one in New York City.

- ❖ **Many men who buy sex are aware of the harms of prostitution.** A study of 113 men who solicited prostitution in Chicago reveals that 42% believed that prostitution causes psychological and physical damage to women and 57% believed that a majority of women in prostitution experienced some type of childhood abuse. However, only 22% reported feeling guilty or shameful about soliciting prostitution.
- ❖ **Deterrents to johns have the potential to work.** In this same study, 83% said jail time and 87% said that some form of public exposure would deter them from buying sex. In New York City, there are some “john schools” that men can attend in lieu of conviction. The Manhattan school focuses on personal risks and health of the john himself, and does not address the prevalence of child prostitution and trafficking.

What’s Happening in New York State

- ❖ **Advocates and lawmakers in New York are working to address the needs of sexually exploited youth. The Safe Harbor Act (A05258/S03175B)** is one proposal that aims to direct exploited children to safe houses instead of detention centers, where they can obtain needed medical treatment and counseling specific to their needs as victims of sexual exploitation. The law would also aim to recognize children arrested for prostitution as victims, and help them avoid prosecution. Several versions of the bill have been circulated over the past three years, but an agreement has not been reached.

The Safe Harbor Act in its current form would:

- ❖ **Treat sexually exploited youth as children in need of supervision and services.** Under current law, sexually exploited kids are arrested and prosecuted in Family Court as juvenile delinquents. The Safe Harbor Act would change the way teens caught in prostitution are treated. The Safe Harbor Act will require Family Court to designate sexually exploited youth as “persons in need of supervision” (PINS). This designation aims to connect abused children with specialized services, rather than incarcerating them as juvenile delinquents. However, very few specialized services exist. Also, a majority of girls caught in prostitution repeatedly run away and return to the streets and/or their pimp, and there is an ongoing debate about whether a “locked” facility is essential to their retention.
- ❖ **Create a range of specialized, community-based programs to help sexually exploited children reclaim their young lives and get them off the streets permanently.** The Safe Harbor Act would require the state to provide sexually exploited youth with immediate access to supportive residential services. The new law would create short-term safe houses, long-term residential facilities, and a range of services, including crisis intervention. It’s important to note, however, that the Safe Harbor Act in its current form is not a funded mandate. This means that although the bill sets forth the clear need for services, there is not any guarantee that these services will be included within the state’s budget. While there is still debate about the best way to connect sexually exploited kids with services, either through the juvenile detention system or outside of its constraints, there is strong agreement that special services are needed. If we want to have a real impact on helping sexually exploited children, we need to advocate for expanded services that will be funded. Considering that the state currently spends \$200,000 per year to keep one young person in a juvenile detention for that period, there should be ways to utilize existing funding, agencies, and facilities to reduce costs, reallocate funds and make services a priority.

Get Help

Report trafficking crimes or get help by calling the Trafficking in Persons and Worker Exploitation Task Force Complaint Line at **1-888-428-7581** (voice and TTY). Live multi-lingual help available Mon.-Fri. 9am-5pm

Girls Educational & Mentoring Services **212-926-8089**

New York County District Attorney’s Office, Sex Crimes Unit **212-335-9000**