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RESEARCH

The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in New York City

Executive Summary

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About This Report

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As required by the original NIJ solicitation, this study involved two components: a population estimate and a formative evaluation of a citywide demonstration project intended to address the commercial sexual exploitation of children in New York City. The John Jay College of Criminal Justice implemented the population estimate and description of the exploited youth (see Volume One, Curtis, Terry, Dank, Dombrowski, and Khan 2008), and the Center for Court Innovation implemented the formative evaluation (see Volume Two, Muslim, Labriola, and Rempel 2008). This executive summary delineates the major themes and findings emerging from both components.

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Executive Summary

Few crimes are more abhorrent than the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), yet few are more challenging for communities to address. The United States Department of Justice estimates that the number of children currently involved in prostitution, child pornography, and trafficking may be anywhere between 100,000 and three million (ECPAT 2005). Since these children are often difficult to locate, reluctant to acknowledge their age and exploitation, and potentially engaged by multiple institutions that do not routinely share information (criminal justice, child welfare, educational, and others), it is extremely difficult to assess accurately the true nature and extent of the problem.

In response, the National Institute of Justice provided funding to study the problem in two large metropolitan areas, New York City and Atlanta. These cities were both believed to have a sizable CSEC population, and both had recently implemented demonstration projects funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). A research team from the Center for Court Innovation and the John Jay College of Criminal Justice collaborated on the New York City study, and a team from Georgia State University led the Atlanta study. This executive summary reports the emergent themes and findings from New York City.

Goals and Methods

The New York study had two primary goals. The first was to provide a reliable and ethnographically rich description of the local CSEC population, including its size, characteristics, experiences, and service needs (see Volume One). The second was to evaluate the local demonstration project, documenting its major initiatives, achievements, and obstacles (see Volume Two). In achieving these goals, the study also sought to identify lessons for other jurisdictions interested in replicating efforts like those underway in New York City.

Population Estimate and Description

To elicit a representative sample of CSEC youth, the study adopted a subject recruitment method known as “Respondent Driven Sampling” (RDS). This method has previously been effective in recruiting representative samples of hard-to-reach groups by taking advantage of intra-group social connections to build a sample pool (Abdul-Quader, Heckathorn, Sabin, and Saidel 2006; Heckathorn 1997, 2002; Heckathorn, Semaan, Broadhead, and Hughes 2002; Robinson et al. 2006).

In this study, the basic mechanics of RDS recruitment were as follows: With the assistance of a number of local service agencies, the research team identified a small number of initial subjects (or “seeds”). These subjects were interviewed, paid for their time and effort (\$20), and given sequentially numbered coupons to pass along to other friends or associates who also participate in CSEC markets. The coupons indicated how to contact the research team for an interview, and for each one redeemed, the referral source received an additional incentive (\$10). Subjects referred in this fashion were provided with additional coupons, spawning multiple waves of

research subjects drawn from an increasingly broad network. Although the subjects came from across the city, most of the interviews were conducted in a public park in lower Manhattan.

According to the previous literature, RDS can produce a representative sample of the population of interest (Heckathorn 1997; Heckathorn et al. 2002, Abdul-Quader et al. 2006, Robinson et al. 2006). Based on that literature, we initially planned to interview 200 youth. However, that number appeared to under-represent some portions of the CSEC population that were known to exist (especially girls with pimps). Partially for that reason, as well as because the youth were easier to refer than originally thought, the project extended its recruitment goal beyond the original target. More than 400 interviews were ultimately conducted with 329 youth (some were interviewed twice). The research team then excluded 80 of these youth (leaving a final N of 249) after becoming convinced that they did not meet one of the two eligibility criteria: (1) 18 years of age or younger and (2) participated in CSEC-related activities.

Formative Evaluation

The study implemented a multi-method evaluation designed to assess the work of the New York City demonstration project, known as the Coalition to Address the Sexual Exploitation of Children (CASEC). The study began with the development of a logic model that linked the CASEC mission and goals to specific strategies and outcomes. The logic model exercise yielded the following four project components.

1. *Coordination*: Increased communication and collaboration among CSEC stakeholders;
2. *Prosecution*: Dedicated resources to prosecute the CSEC exploiters;
3. *Programs*: Dedicated housing, counseling, and other services for CSEC youth; and
4. *Prevention*: Education programs targeting at-risk youth in group homes and schools.

To explore CASEC strategies within each component, qualitative interviews were conducted within the first six months of the evaluation and again one year later with representatives from more than 20 stakeholder agencies, including the Mayor's Office, local and federal law enforcement, district attorneys, public defenders, the criminal court, the family court, child welfare agencies, and service providers. In addition, quantitative surveys were administered to the same stakeholders examining: (1) the severity of CSEC-related problems in the four above areas, (2) the general frequency and quality of stakeholder communication, and (3) the specific frequency of communication among each pair of stakeholders in the citywide network. The study also included a quasi-experimental analysis testing whether exploiter prosecution outcomes changed after the implementation of an enhanced prosecution initiative in the borough of Queens. Finally, the study included a 25-year trend analysis of child prostitution, exploitation, and solicitation arrests and prosecutions citywide.

The CSEC Population in New York City

Population Size

Through application of RDS statistical techniques, we estimate that there are currently 3,946 CSEC victims citywide. This number does not include those youth that could not be referred via RDS methods (e.g., girls trafficked into the country that are tightly controlled by adults in indoor

environments and that have cultural and linguistic barriers that make it impossible for them to socialize with other youth). A method known as “capture-recapture” was used to derive the estimate, which was based on a comparison of arrest records in the final RDS-generated sample (N = 249) and official arrest records provided by the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS). A special seed component was added to the RDS recruitment process, which provided another way to estimate the overall size of the population. The mean value of the population estimate obtained by using the special seeds was 3,769, which is comparable to the population estimate obtained by the traditional capture-recapture technique.

Demographics

- *Gender and age distribution:* The final sample of 249 youth was 48% female, 45% male, and 8% transgender; and the average age of entry into the market was 15.29 years.
- *Race/ethnicity:* African-American and “mixed race” youth made up nearly half of the sample (48%), while just over a quarter of the youth were white (24%) or Hispanic (23%).
- *Place of birth:* The majority of the youth said that they were born in New York City (56%), and less than one in ten (8%) said that they were born outside one of the 50 states.
- *Living situation:* Many of the youth were currently homeless, with 32% characterizing their housing situation as “living in the street,” although girls were more likely to describe themselves as living in their “family home,” in a “friend’s home,” or in “another home.”

Interaction with Peers

- *Network size:* Some of the youth were involved in quite extensive CSEC youth networks; more than one quarter (27%) claimed to know 20 or more other CSEC youth, and an additional 20% said that they knew between 10 and 20 CSEC youth.
- *Peer influence at point of entry:* Girls, boys, and transgender youth all reported high percentages of their “friends” as responsible for their entry (46%, 44%, and 68% respectively), although some of these “friends” seemed to be acting as surrogate recruiters for pimps.

Interaction with Customers

- *Customer characteristics:* Almost all of the youth said that they served male customers, and a majority said that they predominantly served white males between 25 and 55 years of age, with a preference for older, wealthy White males. Eleven percent of the girls and 40% of the boys said that they had served a female client, but only 13% of the boys said that they exclusively served female clients.

- *Finding customers:* Almost three-quarters of the youth (approximately 70%) found customers on the streets. Only 37% said that they always or sometimes worked the “tracks” (specific streets or corners known for prostitution). Especially in Manhattan, working the streets was often coupled with trolling the internet or using a cell phone network to reach clients. How youth found their customers often varied on how long they had been in “the life”, their access to the internet and cell phones, and the size and reach of their CSEC peer networks.
- *Where youth go with customers:* The places where youth went with customers were extremely varied; more than half (51%) said that they went to customers’ apartments and almost half (45%) said that they used hotels throughout the city.

Interaction with Market Facilitators

- *Prevalence:* We did not find that market facilitators, or “pimps,” were key actors for initiating youth into the market (8%) or controlling them once they were in the market. Only 10% of the sample (6% of the boys and 14% of girls) reported that they had a market facilitator at the time of the interview.
- *Characteristics of the facilitators:* Of the 41 youth with a market facilitator, 37 (90%) reported that their facilitator was male.
- *Size of facilitator operations:* Of the 41 youth with a market facilitator, 31 (76%) reported that their facilitator had more than two other youth working for him.

Service Participation and Needs

- *Frequency of service contacts:* More than two-thirds of the youth (68%) reported that they had visited a youth service agency, and of those, most had experience with more than one agency.
- *Need for employment:* Virtually all of those interviewed (95%) reported trading sex for money. Many of the youth expressed deep concerns about finding legal employment and making as much money as they were currently making; more than half (60%) identified finding stable employment as necessary for them to leave their current life.
- *Other service needs:* Besides employment, 51% cited education and 41% cited stable housing as necessary for them to leave their current life.
- *Role of family dislocations:* Less than 10% of the youth said that they could go to a parent if they were in trouble. Furthermore, only 17% said that they could rely on other family members or family friends to help them out, and another 17% said that they had “no one” who could assist them in times of trouble or doubt.

Contacts with Law Enforcement

- *Police contact:* According to the youth in the sample, encounters with the police were frequent but rarely led to an arrest (suggesting significant law enforcement discretion).
- *Arrest history:* Even though most individual police encounters did not result in an arrest, 60% of the youth reported having been arrested at least once, and 37% reported an arrest within the past year. Drug possession was the most common charge, followed by prostitution and theft.

Reflections on “the Life”

- *Normalization of prostitution:* For many of the youth who were interviewed, the language of prostitution had been normalized. Although several said that they felt “peer pressure” to join in, their narratives were generally less about being “pressured” to participate in CSEC markets as they were about economic necessity, fascination, and curiosity with what appeared to be an emerging “lifestyle.”
- *Threat of violence:* Many of the youth reported contending with violence at the hands of customers, pimps, and other CSEC youth on a daily basis. Customers posed the greatest threat, as some told harrowing stories of being kidnapped and held hostage by customers.
- *Desire to exit:* Despite the normalization process referenced above, 87% expressed a desire to leave “the life” (but for the obstacles described in the previous section).

The Criminal Justice Response to CSEC

To explore the preexisting criminal justice response to CSEC, we examined 25 years of child prostitution, exploitation, and solicitation cases in New York City (1982-2006).

Child Prostitution

- *Arrest trend:* The annual number of child prostitution arrests fluctuated dramatically over the past 25 years – beginning at more than 600 in 1982, dwindling to less than 100 throughout the early 1990s, rising again to more than 500 in 2002, and finally declining to about 300 in 2006. The trends mainly reflect shifts in mayoral and police practices. (For instance, the mid 1990s-early 2000s rise coincided with the mayoralty of Rudolph Giuliani, who was known for focusing on “quality of life” crimes, such as prostitution.)
- *Prosecution:* In the past decade, of those handled in the adult criminal court (ages 16-18), 79% were convicted, of which 22% were sentenced to jail (usually for 1-10 days).
- *Youth characteristics:* In the past decade, more than three-quarters of child prostitution defendants were female citywide (77%), but in the borough of Manhattan, only 54% were female (36% were male and 10% transgender). Most were on the older end of the age spectrum (average = 17.2 years), and the vast majority (79%) were born in the U.S.

Exploitation and Solicitation

- *Arrest trends:* CSEC exploitation arrests averaged only 28 per year from 1982 through 1996, but rose to 90 per year in the past decade (1997-2006). Solicitation arrests averaged only 36 per year throughout the past 25 years, with little fluctuation. Stakeholders confirmed that solicitors have never been a focus of law enforcement.
- *Prosecution:* In the past decade, 73% of those arrested for exploitation and 63% of those arrested for solicitation were convicted; of those, almost half of the exploiters (49%) but only 15% of the solicitors received a jail or prison sentence. (Exploitation charges are felonies, whereas the most common charge for solicitation of a minor is a misdemeanor.)
- *Defendant characteristics:* Most of those arrested for exploitation or solicitation were male (81% and 95%), born in the U.S. (74% and 63%), and in their late 20's or older (average age = 30.8 and 35.7 years).

The New York City Demonstration Project

In the fall of 2002, the Mayor's Office of the Criminal Justice Coordinator (CJC) convened a working group to identify gaps in the city's response to CSEC. The areas of gravest concern were in the respective areas of housing, social services, prevention, prosecutor of exploiters, and prosecution of solicitors. In June of 2003, the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) provided the Mayor's Office with the first of several funding awards, enabling a wide-ranging demonstration project to proceed.

We organize the major evaluation findings under each of the city's four overarching project components: (1) coordination, (2) prosecution, (3) programs, and (4) prevention.

Coordination

- *The CASEC taskforce:* The Mayor's CJC Office hired a dedicated project director, who convened a multi-disciplinary taskforce composed of representatives from more than 20 city and federal agencies as well as several community-based service providers. Monthly taskforce meetings were well attended. They incorporated information sharing, with different agencies providing updates on their work, and future project planning.
- *Operational leadership:* The Mayor's CJC Office led the planning process, convened the taskforce, and administered OJJDP funding. As a direct agent of the Mayor, formally charged with coordinating criminal justice policy citywide, the CJC Office was arguably the only stakeholder with the institutional authority necessary to create, manage, and elicit tangible results from a multi-agency initiative of this kind.
- *Consensus diagnosis:* Both the smaller planning group that met in 2002 and the full taskforce arrived at a consensus diagnosis regarding all of the major CSEC needs; hence, minimal time had to be devoted to an ongoing debate and discussion of key priorities.

- *Network-building:* A communication analysis revealed that by early 2006, all of the frontline city stakeholders in regular contact with CSEC youth and their exploiters—the police, prosecutors, defense counsel, and service agencies—had instituted regular (at least weekly) lines of communication amongst themselves and served as communication hubs, with varied connections to other, less central stakeholders. Interestingly, the CJC Office was not a central hub; through the taskforce, the CJC Office brought the other parties together but did not itself become an intermediary for all future communication.
- *Dependence on the project director:* CASEC relied heavily on the project director to make tangible progress. During an eight-month period after the first project director left, the position was vacant, the taskforce did not meet, and all initiatives went on hold.
- *Restructuring of the taskforce:* When the second project director left in July 2007, the taskforce merged with a separate human trafficking taskforce. Although this change was efficient, because many members had previously served on both taskforces, it led CSEC-specific issues to receive significantly less attention during taskforce meetings. However, the communication analysis demonstrates that by this time, many CSEC stakeholders had formed separate connections to facilitate ongoing information sharing and smaller collaborations independent of the main taskforce.

Prosecution

- *Specialized initiative in Queens:* CASEC funded a dedicated prosecutor and paralegal in the borough of Queens to streamline and improve evidence collection and other prosecution protocols related to exploitation cases. The initiative, known as “Operation Guardian,” began in July of 2005, enhancing a similar initiative that began in 2000 and involved dedicating five assistant district attorneys to handle exploitation cases.
- *Stakeholder satisfaction:* Stakeholders from Queens reported that the specialization of exploiter cases under a small number of assistant district attorneys, and elaboration of CSEC-specific prosecution protocols, led to better case screening, background investigations, and collaboration with the New York City Police Department.
- *Impact on case outcomes:* An exploratory impact analysis suggested that beginning in 2000, when Queens first initiated a specialized approach, there was an increase in the conviction rate ($p < .10$) but no effect on sentencing outcomes. Instead, sentences were strongly predicted by the specific nature of the charges (e.g., exploiting children younger than 16 led to more severe outcomes), the defendant’s criminal history, and the defendant’s sex (male defendants received more severe outcomes).
- *Reduction in the initiative:* In the second half of 2007, when the local police began referring exploitation cases to federal rather than county prosecutors as part of new human trafficking initiative, the number of cases handled by the Queens District Attorney’s Office sharply decreased, and remaining prosecution funds were reallocated to other CSEC initiatives.

- *Technology enhancement:* CASEC initially planned to implement a citywide technology enhancement to improve case-level information sharing between police and prosecutors. However, due to resistance among the relevant stakeholders, this plan was abandoned. Despite an identified need in this area, the city does not yet have a shared information system for tracking or pooling CSEC-related cases; nor do individual agencies currently use a CSEC flag to facilitate case identification, tracking, or reporting.

Programs for CSEC Youth

Stakeholders identified critical needs in the areas of housing and social services; in particular, 13 out of 16 stakeholders were very dissatisfied (10) or dissatisfied (3) with current housing options.

- *Dedicated housing:* In two separate sites (one 60 miles north of New York City and one on the borough of Staten Island), CASEC worked for six years to couple dedicated residential beds with onsite services for exploited girls. Neither site opened during the formal evaluation period, but in the summer of 2008, the taskforce announced the opening of the Staten Island housing facility. The delay in securing dedicated beds resulted from staff turnover in the project director position, a series of protracted, bureaucratic delays related to city contracting and procurement rules, and concerns over sustainability once OJJDP funding expired.
- *Short-term emergency housing:* CASEC helped to establish emergency short-term housing for CSEC youth ages 16 and older who come through the city's shelter system. (The new Staten Island facility will provide housing options for other CSEC youth, in particular those ages 15 and younger.)
- *Crisis intervention program in Queens:* As an adjunct to the specialized prosecution initiative, CASEC funded certified crisis intervention counselors from a local service provider to be on call 24 hours a day to meet with CSEC youth in Queens. Referrals came primarily from the Queens District Attorney's Office and from a specialized child prostitution calendar run out of the Queens Criminal Court. From July 2005-December 2007, the program served 35 youth, assisting with ongoing counseling, school enrollment, family reunification, trial preparation (on exploiter cases), and other needs. The program demonstrated the feasibility of collaboration between prosecutors and service providers in an effort to identify and assist CSEC youth.

Prevention

- *Group home-based prevention strategy:* CASEC contracted with a local service provider to pilot four 12-week prevention sessions with girls and staff at several group homes overseen by the city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS). In addition, the provider developed a peer training initiative, training select girls and group home staff to lead future sessions. The sessions received consistently positive participant evaluations. Despite an original intention to achieve sustainability through the peer training initiative, the sessions have not resumed since the end of pilot funding.

- *School-based prevention strategy:* The CJC Office, the city’s Department of Education, and a community-based service provider planned to pilot a school-based prevention curriculum in a particular school known to have a high number of girls at risk girls for involvement in prostitution. The curriculum was neither developed nor implemented due to a lack of follow-through by one or more of the key agencies.
- *Public service announcements:* CASEC initially explored the possibility of posting public service announcements targeting at risk youth in locations where exploiters were known to recruit CSEC youth, such as the city’s Port Authority Bus Terminal. However, CASEC abandoned this idea in early 2006 in response to a request by the OJJDP grant manager to pilot future initiatives exclusively in the borough of Queens.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

This study sought to lift the veil over the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), a problem that currently afflicts about 4,000 youth ages 18 and younger in New York City. Interestingly, a number of the youth conveyed a perception of what they did as a curious and fascinating lifestyle, normalizing their participation in a child prostitution market. On the other hand, nearly all of the youth (87%) expressed a desire to exit, highlighting the need to provide services and support. The youth identified employment, education, and housing services as particularly important. Their frequent portrayals of family dysfunction, coupled with reports of daily violence and fear in their current lives, suggest a need for intensive counseling services as well. The kinds of needs that the youth expressed in research interviews largely mirrored those that were assumed to exist by the city’s policymakers.

At the same time, other results posed a greater challenge to conventional wisdom. Although it is likely that most CSEC youth are female, the evidence obtained in this study suggests that there is a significant male population as well, especially in the borough of Manhattan. Yet, this population remains almost invisible in the shadow cast by the stereotypical CSEC victims: pimped girls. In fact, several CASEC initiatives targeted girls exclusively.

The results also indicate that most CSEC youth were not trafficked into the country. Foreign-born youth accounted for less than 10% of the interview sample and only 22% of those arrested for child prostitution in the past decade. The actual percentage of foreign-born youth may be higher, since our figures are likely to under-represent girls who are trafficked and then tightly controlled by adults in indoor environments. Nonetheless, the results raise questions concerning the true extent of overlap between CSEC and international human trafficking.

The evaluation also yielded interesting implications regarding the roles of pimps and customers. To our surprise, only 8% of those interviewed were initially recruited into “the life” by a pimp, and only 10% reported that they currently had a pimp. Conversely, customers appeared to pose a universal and often dangerous threat, described by many youth as prone to kidnapping and other forms of violence. These findings raise implications regarding the general policy, expressed by stakeholders and apparent in official arrest data, not to target the solicitors of child prostitution for enforcement.

In response to CSEC, New York City demonstrated that the Office of the Mayor was well situated to lead a broad-based coalition (CASEC). The Mayor's Office of the Criminal Justice Coordinator formed and led a highly inclusive multi-disciplinary taskforce; brought the group to a consensus diagnosis of the major needs to be addressed; and hired a dedicated CSEC project director whose role was pivotal in moving from discussion to action. The four central needs of coordination, prosecution, programs, and prevention may serve as a useful template for other jurisdictions. The same applies to several of the specific strategies that were pursued, from the specialized prosecution of exploiters in Queens to referral mechanisms linking the Queens prosecutor to a dedicated service provider to dedicated CSEC housing to prevention sessions targeting group homes.

Instructively, the efforts in New York City also encountered multiple obstacles. The first and most obvious was that the project was implemented without clear statistical information regarding the local CSEC population—for example, regarding the meaningful involvement of boys, the predominance of domestic-born youth, and the absence of pimps in the lives of many youth. The capacity to report and analyze CSEC-related data is crucial to designing remedies and targeting populations effectively.

Despite the identification of housing as the most pressing single need in New York City, CASEC experienced substantial delays securing dedicated beds due to a combination of staff turnover, bureaucratic delays, and concerns over the future sustainability of funds. Sustainability was again a critical theme in reflecting on the group home-based prevention strategy. Prevention sessions were successfully implemented, and participant feedback was extremely positive, but CASEC was unable to induce the homes to continue with the sessions after the pilot funding ended.

An additional obstacle related to the growing intersection of CSEC and human trafficking policies. For instance, when a human trafficking grant led the police to refer exploitation cases to federal prosecutors, it meant that cases did not continue to reach the specialized prosecution unit in Queens—despite the high level of stakeholder satisfaction with this specialized prosecution initiative and an apparent positive effect on the conviction rate.

A final obstacle was staffing. CASEC work relied heavily on the project director, meaning that when the project director position went unfilled, fewer meetings were held, and momentum was slowed. Even the best ideas and strategies will fail to yield results without sustained and effective leadership at the staff level.

This study represents a first attempt to understand the CSEC population in a major metropolitan area and to examine a concerted institutional effort to meet its needs. Combined with the forthcoming results from Atlanta, we hope that the emergent themes and findings can be of some use to federal and local policymakers nationwide, as they expand their efforts to combat this devastating problem.

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