

## **Youth Involvement in the Sex Trade: A National Study**

By Rachel Swaner; Melissa Labriola; Michael Rempel; Allyson Walker Franklin; and Joseph Spadafore

Prepared by: Teresa Gomez & Melina Flanders

In this report, approximately 1,000 underage youth were interviewed in six major cities throughout the United States to increase knowledge concerning youth involved in the sex trade. In addition to providing a view of characteristics, experiences, and health/social service needs, this report also addressed youth's reasons for involvement and encounters with the criminal justice system, including arrest patterns and recidivism. Based on interview results, youth felt that their basic [survival] needs were more important to address in seeking assistance than therapeutic/counseling services, indicating a disconnect between the focuses of this population and social service providers. The report highlights the importance of including the youth in developing programming of services, with increased support for meeting the needs of male African American, and Trans-Youth communities.

### **Information at a Glance:**

- Only 12% of youth respondents identified counseling as a “needed” agency service.
- 40% of youth (36% male and 4% trans-female) are not targeted in most social service resources efforts which focus on cis female, using terms like “girls/young women”.
- 70% of the participants identified as Black/African American, following research in other areas around the disadvantages of this population, even among other minority groups.
- Almost 1/3 of interviewed youth had children, with ages 18-24 more likely to be parents.
- Arrest rates were low at 16% for prostitution, but 65% were arrested for other offenses.
  - Of those, 82% were nonviolent offences including shoplifting, drugs, trespassing.
  - Of the 73% reporting use of at least one drug, almost ¾ of had been arrested.

## **Proposed Program Solutions:**

Throughout this report, it is repeated that establishing targeted prevention programs prior to average age of leaving home (15 years old in this report) is important to cut off the relationship between abuse to commercial sex market. To assess the impact that current prevention programs are having, it is also suggested that increased attention to evaluation of service effectiveness is needed for reliable data collection, as 68% of youth interviewed reported having visited at least one service agency. In identifying safe housing, youth (especially LGBT youth who are more likely to leave home and to be/feel unaccepted) shared that housing “must feel like a home”.

Language changes are also needed in programming, including bilingual programs/staff and changing terms like “exploited”, “trafficked”, or “victimized” to better reflect the way youth think about/refer to themselves and their experiences. Reflecting other research on homelessness needs, it is highlighted that focus needs to first be on “survival” items, which many youth in the report identify as primary reasons for becoming involved and/or remaining with “the life”.

Additionally, a push for client-centered programming is suggested, involving youth in what programs should be focused on with outreach and in the language used. More research needed around the support and circumstances that assisted youth to exit. Additional research needed to explore the emerging “youth and market facilitator” relationship seen in many areas, including “pay for protection” patterns.

Swaner, R., Labriola, M., Rempel, M., Walker, A., & Spadafore, J. (2016). Youth Involvement in the Sex Trade: A National Study. Center for Court Innovation, March Report. Retrieved from <http://www.courtinnovation.org/research/youth-involvement-sex-trade-national-study>