Female Victims of Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Human Trafficking

The growing prevalence of the commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) and human trafficking (HT) flies in the face of San Diego’s reputation as “America’s Finest City” and in recent years has become a major focus of concern among law enforcement and community based organizations. The supply-demand for CSE/HT within the San Diego region is heavily influenced by several factors including proximity to Mexico, large military presence and the status of the area as a major center for conventioneers and tourists.

Local data confirms San Diego’s reputation as a nationally recognized “Hot Spot” for commercial sexual exploitation and human trafficking:

- In the past four years the San Diego Regional Anti-Trafficking Task Force (Task Force) has investigated 383 cases of human trafficking (both domestic and foreign). In **all but 3 of the 383 cases (99.2%) the victims were women or girls.** In eighty three case the victims were children.
- In fiscal year 2009/10, 63 girls aged between 12 and 18 were booked into San Diego Juvenile Hall for prostitution related charges, a 40 percent increase from the previous year (38 girls).

As disturbing as these numbers are they likely represent only a small percentage of the children and young women exploited for commercial gain in the region. They also fail to account for the large numbers of homeless and runaway youth in San Diego (both girls and boys) who engage in “survival sex” to meet their daily needs (e.g., for food, shelter, transportation and drugs).

**During the past four years, the Task Force identified and investigated 343 incidents of human trafficking and offered social services through victim service providers to 388 victims and potential victims of human trafficking**. The breakdown of victims and potential victims includes:

- Labor: Sexual Exploitation of Children: 2% (8)
- Labor: Domestic Servitude: 1% (5)
- Labor: Factory Work / Sweatshops 0% (1)
- Labor: Day Labor: 0% (1)
- Sex: Force Prostitution: 47% (191)
- Sex: Prostitution: 26% (106)
- Sex: Prostitution of a Child: 18% (73)
- Sex: Forced Escort Services: 1% (6)
- Sex: Child Pornography: 1% (4)
- Sex: Sex Tourism and Entertainment: 1% (2)
- Sex: Unknown: 0% (1)
- Sex: Child Sex Tourism: 0% (1)

An additional 173 trafficking suspects were identified, of which 107 were arrested and 64 convicted of various forms of human trafficking. A surprising 46% of those identified suspects were documented gang members.

**Suspects by Charge Type (Federal):**

- Sex Trafficking of Children: 47% (15)
- Sex Trafficking: 50% (17)
- Immigration Offenses: 3% (1)

**Suspects by Charge Type (State):**

- Human Trafficking Violations: 33% (36)

---

1 Source of statistical information - Human Trafficking Reporting System (HTRS) Task Force
• Prostitution Related Charges: 56% (60)
• Rape: 2% (2)
• Pandering 9% (11)

National research indicates that CSE of minors takes place at three levels: local exploitation by one or a few individuals, small regional networks involving multiple adults and children, and large national or international sex crime networks where children and young women are traded and sold as commodities.2

All of these forms of CSE are known to occur in San Diego County, including

• **Instances of CSE of children by family members**, with child pornography produced and distributed from their homes and cases of child sexual abuse escalating into forced prostitution. This form of CSE is most often identified by County Child Welfare Services, and the victims are placed in local group homes or foster families.

• **The growth in highly organized gang-led child and teen prostitution** has become a major concern in San Diego, with income from child prostitution second only to drug sales according to reports from local gang units. Gangs have learned that a child who is forced to work at a brothel can be used over and over making it relatively easy for a brothel to earn tens of thousands of dollars a year with only a few child prostitutes. Local authorities have also uncovered “reverse trafficking” cases where U.S. street gangs have transported American girls to Tijuana’s notorious “La Zona’ red-light district to exploit them. Forty-six percent of the suspects involved in human trafficking cases investigated by the Task Force have been known gang members.3 In a recent sting, Task Force investigators (the investigation included investigators from the Oceanside Police Department, Escondido Police Department, San Diego Police Department, Sheriff’s Department, FBI, ICE and the U.S. Attorney’s Office) identified twelve documented gang members prostituting juveniles in the northern portion of the County. As the investigation developed, investigators learned the suspects were from rival gangs (The Crips and The Bloods) and had formed a new gang (NWS), handling each other’s “girls” and money. These two rival gangs realized the vast potential for earning money and put aside their differences. All twelve suspects were indicted on federal charges for various forms of human trafficking. As this investigation continued to expand, the FBI took over as the lead agency. On April 18, 2011 the 18-month investigation concluded with the arrest of twenty-nine suspects and included thirty human trafficking victim minors – all females. According to the indictment, gangs conducted extensive online recruitment of the young girls via various social networking websites, including MySpace, Facebook and Twitter and then routinely provided them with controlled substances and alcohol in order to manipulate their loyalty and increase productivity as related to prostitution.4

• **Homeless and runaway youth are known to be especially vulnerable to commercial**

---

3 Source of statistical information - Human Trafficking Reporting System (HTRS), via Sergeant Jason King San Diego Regional Anti-Trafficking Task Force
sexual exploitation. Researchers estimate that 10–15 percent of children living on the streets in the United States are trafficked for sexual purposes\(^5\). Homeless, runaway and throw-away children in San Diego have reported to the SDYS shelter staff that they have been propositioned to travel to major cities like Los Angeles, Phoenix and Las Vegas to engage in prostitution or pornography. Homeless and runaway youth are well known to resort to survival sex – trading sex for food, shelter, alcohol or drugs and even transportation.

**Effects of CSE/HT:** Virtually all victims of sexual exploitation suffer long term physical and emotional harm that pose complex service challenges for those organizations working to support them. Data on San Diego Youth Service’s current program aimed at child victims of CSE - Surviving Together, Achieving and Reaching for Success (STAR), along with national research indicates that juvenile victims of CSE/HT have increased likelihood of the following impacts:

- **Mental health issues** including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depression – 39 percent of adult victims of childhood sexual exploitation have a diagnosis of PTSD and 24 percent with social phobia\(^5\). The young women that SDYS have worked with through the STAR Program often experience acute feelings of shame and guilt as well as a sense of loss and violation. They almost always lack the skills and maturity to deal with such feeling and frequently resort to flight or fight behaviors. The problem is exacerbated by a system that treats young girls who have been coerced or manipulated into a life of prostitution as criminals as opposed to victims (many of the girls in the STAR Program were convicted of juvenile prostitution and spent time in San Diego Juvenile Hall or other correctional facility).
- **Sexually transmitted infection** (STI) – 38 percent of the girls in the STAR Program self-report that they have an STI, the actual number is likely to be higher.
- **Suicide/self-harm** – 24 percent of the girls in the STAR program have attempted suicide and 27 percent have a history of cutting or other forms of self-harm.
- **Substance abuse** – 90 percent of the girls in the STAR Program have a history of drug abuse.
- **Teen parenting** – 25 percent of the girls in the STAR Program are parents
- **Struggles with academic success** – 28 percent of the girls in the STAR Program had an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) indicating significant learning difficulties.
- **Struggles with economic success** – the stigma of CSE/HT combined with mental health, learning difficulties and substance abuse histories make it extremely challenging for these young girls to integrate into mainstream society.

**Current Attempts to Address the Problem**
San Diego County is at the forefront of efforts to address the problem of CSE and DST of children. These efforts include:

- **San Diego Regional Anti-Trafficking Task Force** – established in 2004 through a grant from the U. S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Assistance ("USDOJ BJA"), the Task Force works as a multi-jurisdictional, multi-disciplinary, victim focused organization whose collaborative efforts have resulted in multiple rescues of human trafficking victims.
- **The ACTION Network (Network)** – Established in 2005 with grant funding from The


California Endowment, the Network brought together a multidisciplinary group of some 40 plus governmental and nongovernmental organizations to address child trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) in San Diego County. San Diego Youth Services SDYS was the grant recipient/fiscal agent), Among the Network’s accomplishments is the establishment of a Children’s Emergency Response Team (CERT) through which SDYS accompanied National City Police Department on their sting operations or emergency calls involving prostituted children. The Network has transitioned to be a part of the Regional San Diego Human Trafficking Commission (see below).

✓ **Regional San Diego Human Trafficking Commission (Commission)** – in November 2010 the San Diego County Board of Supervisors voted to create a commission that would work across disciplines and jurisdictions to create long-term, systemic change to address Human Trafficking and CSE. The Commission will be based upon the U.S. Department of Justice Four P’s – Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Partnership.

✓ **San Diego Innocence Lost Task Force** – Established in 2009 as part of the Innocence Lost National Initiative, this task force works to address the issue of domestic trafficking of children for prostitution. Locally, the Innocence Lost Task Force is investigating 2 to 3 new cases of DST a week and works closely with the Anti-Trafficking Task Force.

✓ **STARS Program** – SDYS initiated the STARS Program in 2008 using leveraged and volunteer staff and a small amount of grant funding from private foundations. To date, the program has served 77 teenage girls between the ages of 13 and 18, all of whom were commercially sexually exploited. One of the challenges with the current STARS Program is that it does not provide any individual services such as case management, mentoring, individual advocacy or counseling. Further, in its current form the program lacks capacity to serve males.

✓ **Direct Services to Victims** – As a result of community planning efforts, a small group of San Diego community based organizations have begun to develop focused services to CSE and DST victims, these are: SDYS, Bilateral Safety Corridor Coalition, Generate Hope, Sisters of Survival and Center for Community Solutions. These partners are currently providing limited access to shelter, advocacy, case management, legal and counseling services to victims of human trafficking.