Abused girls: what do we know?

Professor David Barrett, Professor of Applied Social Studies at the University of Bedfordshire, examines what we know about sexually abused and exploited female children?*

Learning from past times
During the last 15 years we have continued to learn more from empirically based evidence in relation to whom, why, what, where, how and when these children are both engaged and sexually abused and exploited by the commercial sex industry (see note 1). Alarmingly, some of the current “entry” and “exit” features of the sex industry for these young people are reminiscent of Dickensian descriptors of Victorian Britain.

The starting point for any consideration of young people’s involvement in prostitution at the beginning of the 21st Century has to be during the second half of the 19th Century. That was when the subject first attracted widespread media, official, and thus public attention (Brown & Barrett, 2002).

In July 1885, the attention given to child prostitution was exacerbated by a series of articles, referred to as the “Maiden Tribute” articles. These were written and published by WT Stead in the Pall Mall Gazette. Stead, who was the editor, an experienced journalist and a social reformer, deliberately used sensational and salacious language publishing, pieces such as “Buying Girls at the East End” and “Strapping Girls Down”. Some commentators have subsequently criticised this approach while others observe that little has changed since that period.

Stead orchestrated the purchase of a 13-year-old girl, Eliza Armstrong, in order to demonstrate that young girls could be purchased and subsequently put to work as prostitutes. Some were trafficked to Belgium and beyond. He was strongly criticised for his behaviour and as a consequence went to prison for his actions but his pioneering work did initiate social reform, including changes in the laws that protected children. He was vindicated but sadly he perished on the Titanic!

Insights from a more recent past
The raised awareness of the issue of young people exploited through commercial sexual exploitation has been intensified in the last 15 years primarily as a result of work undertaken by the major children’s charities such as the Children’s Society, the NSPCC and Barnardo’s.

This awareness triggered a variety of statutory agencies, voluntary organisations and professional groups to lobby for reform, resulting in the introduction of new government guidance, legislation (including the reform of a number of old Sexual Offences Acts), and the creation of some new government funded agencies such as the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP).

The issue of children abused through prostitution cannot be understood in isolation from the social and economic conditions that give rise to this phenomenon. These profound changes, that include labour market reorganisation and some welfare retrenchment, have inadvertently created the conditions in which the commercial sexual exploitation of children has been allowed to flourish (Melrose, 2004).
We know that young people become involved in commercial sexual exploitation for a range of complex and inter-connected reasons. It is seldom possible to pinpoint a single cause.

This complexity is played out in the interaction between push factors (eg previous abuse at home, poverty, grooming by an adult, drug abuse, the perceived excitement of street life, running from residential care), and pull factors (eg coercion by boyfriends/pimps, “free” access to a drugs by a pimp/drug dealer, the attraction of promised cash).

We also know that extreme care has to be taken when discussing the market place of such activity so that business locations do not receive the unwarranted attention of punters where a further expansion of abuse could take place.

Thinking about “Louise” – a case study
One of the most powerful case studies I have seen among the many hundreds I have encountered is that of “Louise” (Barrett, 1997). It starts with the haunting line: “Until I was eight years old my world was normal….” The remaining evocative elements of her subsequent life, which journeyed through all the familiar phases and indignities, are all too familiar to those who work in the field.

Child sexual abuse, violence, unsafe sex, unsafe families, unsafe helping professionals, drugs, pimps, punters… the list of unhelpful stakeholders and other influencing features is seemingly endless.

The scale of the problem
There still remains a consensus in the literature that the information about the scale and prevalence of the problem is methodologically difficult to accurately ascertain. In recent years a number of local and regional studies have been undertaken but generalising from such studies in order to create a national “guesstimate” would be methodologically and ethically unsound for such clandestine activity.

However, we can deduce from the activities of a variety of intervention services across a wide spectrum of activities eg policing, border controls, children’s charities, the UK Human Trafficking Centre (UKHTC), and other voluntary sector stakeholders, that the problem has yet to plateau before it is ready to fall, ie there is no evidence to suggest the problem is diminishing, on the contrary.

Remembering some principles about the Children Act 1989
In line with government guidance all interventions with commercially sexually exploited children need to take multi-agency and inter-disciplinary approaches.

This is easier said than done! I recollect a quote by the late Allan Levy QC, an acknowledged international authority on children’s rights, he asserted that “… prominent flaws…” existed in both the law and the application of the law. Some of these flaws still exist today.

The 1989 Act received all-party support in its drafting stages and enshrines “the welfare of the child shall be the court’s paramount consideration”; this implies it takes precedence over that of adults. The current “children versus adults” battles, regarding various forms of abuse cases, which are regularly played out in the legal system, have become a power see-saw which undermines this bedrock principle of the 1989
Act. Moreover, it also appears to give way to operational caveats such as wider issues of culture, politics and geography, because we continue to see regional variations in the application of the child protection laws despite ample safeguarding guidance to the contrary, which requires consistency and transparency.

**Acknowledging progress**
Recent legal reviews, new laws, practice initiatives and other reappraisals of existing and new evidence have caused a number of new activities to take place. Not only have the UKHTC and the CEOP been established, but the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) has emerged too.

In March 2008, the government published its National Security Strategy that acknowledged that organised crime has become "...more complex and professional..." with drug and gun smuggling, human trafficking, etc. becoming more prevalent.

Despite these initiatives that the government has introduced, we must remember that most of the pioneering work in this field continues to be undertaken by the charitable and voluntary sector. The large children's charities have undertaken this work, which they have funded, in an unsung way for many years.

Other agencies, for example the Coalition for the Removal of Pimping (CROP), Safe and Sound, Derby and the Terrence Higgins Trust, also support and deliver services to sexually exploited young people.

The government's own Poppy Project, which is funded by the Office of Criminal Justice Reform via the Ministry of Justice, also undertakes some very positive work – and has a particularly good website, specifically the section “key resources on human trafficking” in relation to this subject matter – but it is geographically isolated in the south.

**New patterns and wider influences**
Evidence suggests that illicit, cross-border activity is common both within the EU and at entry points into the EU; the increasing commodification of people in an increasingly globalised world underpins this. Europol and Interpol tell us about such activities in addition to our own border control agencies.

What is less commonly acknowledged is how young people are now moved around counties, regions or metropolitan areas within the UK – the first clear evidence of this in recent times was identified by a Home Office sponsored project, which was published in 1998, and focussed on the Midlands and the West Midlands.

Further positive interventions since then have, hitherto, little to show for themselves in an area of police activity where it is notoriously difficult to obtain convictions.

**What might the next steps be?**
More research based evidence is being created to support this internal trafficking phenomenon. For example, my own two colleagues, Professor Jenny Pearce and Dr Margaret Melrose at the University's International Research Centre, together with other researchers, continue to refine the empirically based picture of current activity.
We are also seeing new partnerships forming that include researchers, some of the new government agencies, the voluntary sector and the insights of young people themselves, working together in order to combat such dynamics.

Although I argue that we are far from turning the corner in relation to the commercial sexual exploitation of young girls we now at least have the central planks of intervention in place – as long as they trust one another and work well together.

This is a big step forward from the institutionalised denial of this subject material of just over 10 years ago.

As an informed critic on such matters however, I still want more change and progress!

For example, “place of safety” locations for children removed from abusive situations are still far from satisfactory; hardly any such fit for purpose resource exists in the UK. In 1996, I argued for urgent consideration to be given to the establishment of a network of safe accommodation… along with a number of other recommendations I made, some of which have been embraced by the government.

But without safe accommodation where exploited children can be removed to, where they do not run the risk of being targeted by pimps or other abusers, and thus remaining at risk, it makes some of the other initiatives pointless and uncoordinated.

The government still needs to heed its own mantra of joined-up activity!

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* Children, under the Children Act, 1989, are defined as those under the age 18.

**Note 1:** It is now widely accepted that young people’s involvement in prostitution does not result from a “free economic or moral choice” (DoH/HO/DfEE, 2000), therefore the following terms are now used interchangeably “abused through prostitution” “commercial sexual exploitation” “sexually abused and exploited” and “child prostitution”.
References


Other useful advice sources via websites

The larger children’s UK based charities
Barnardo’s: www.barnardos.org.uk
NSPCC: www.nspcc.org.uk
The Children’s Society: www.childrenssociety.org.uk
Terrence Higgins Trust: www.tht.org.uk

Smaller charities
Anti-Slavery International: www.antislavery.org
CROP: www.crop1.org.uk
Safe and Sound, Derby: www.safeandsoundderby.co.uk

International charities
ECPAT: www.ecpat.org.uk
Save the Children: www.savethechildren.org.uk
UNICEF: www.unicef.org

Government agencies
CEOP: www.ceop.gov.uk
SOCA: www.soca.gov.uk
Home Office: www.homeoffice.gov.uk
Ministry of Justice: www.justice.gov.uk
Poppy Project: www.eaves4women.co.uk/POPPY_Project/POPPY_Project.php
Department of Children, Schools and Families: www.dfes.gov.uk
United Kingdom Human Trafficking Centre: www.ukhtc.org

Local help
Every area in the country has a safeguarding panel; every school has a specially trained child protection teacher; also see the newly created National Working Group for Sexually Exploited Children and Young People
http://nationalworkinggroup.co.uk