Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: A Network of Underground Players in the Midwest

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 Trafficking of domestically born children in the United States into the sex trade has been recognized by the U.S. government under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2005. The Midwest has been exposed as a recruitment site for traffickers. Children who have been trafficked into prostitution often experience mental health problems, suffer physical and sexual assaults, have low self-esteem, and are put at risk for HIV/AIDS and other health problems. This article is based on qualitative interviews with 13 trafficked children from the Midwest. Findings reveal the experiences of victims and the network of players involved in trafficking in the Midwest.

**Keywords** trafficking, prostitution, human trafficking, sex trafficking, child prostitution, pimps, traffickers, domestic trafficking

**Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: Framing the Issue**

Child sex trafficking involves the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person under the age of 18 for the purposes of a commercial sex act (Wilson & Dalton, 2007). The number of U.S. victims of the child sex trade remains elusive, given the illegal and hidden nature of the activity. Some estimate the numbers to be in the hundreds of thousands (Estes & Weiner, 2001).

When speaking of international trafficking there are recruitment countries, where victims are manipulated or forced into trafficking, destination countries, where victims are sent to work in the sex trade, and bidirectional countries where victims are both recruited and working (Farr, 2005). Similarly, in the United States there are recruitment cities, destination cities, and bidirectional cities. While recruitment of victims and selling of sexual services can take place in any city in America, smaller cities in the Midwest have been identified as recruitment areas (Davis, 2006), both manipulating and forcing youth into prostitution and then moving them around to various destination and bidirectional cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and Las Vegas (Wilson & Dalton, 2008).

Numerous factors contribute to the commercial sexual exploitation of children including individual, family, and peer-related factors as well as other environmental factors. Individual
Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking

factors include criminal or deviant behavior, immaturity, poor sexual decision making, and engaging in survival sex to obtain basic needs (Cates, 1989; Cates & Markley, 1992; DuRant, Krowchuck, & Sinal, 1998). Family factors include family dysfunction such as parental instability, substance abuse, and serious mental illness (Cauce, Stewart, Rodriguez, Cochran, & Ginzler, 2003; Ferrara, 2001; O’Brien, 1991; Paradise et al., 2001), promotion of prostitution by family members (Faugier & Sargent, 1997; Muecke, 1992), a history of child abuse (Boyer & Fine, 1992; Brannigan & Van Brunschot, 1997; Briere, 1988; Briere & Runz, 1988; Gelles & Wolfner, 1994; Silbert & Pines, 1983; Simons & Whitbeck, 1991), and poverty (Azaola, 2001; Cauce et al., 2003). Peer factors include being introduced into the sex trade by friends or boyfriends. Environmental factors that influence child trafficking include the existence of available adult sex markets in a community and having a community with a large population of transient males such as military personnel, truckers, tourists, and conventioneers (Azaola; Estes & Weiner, 2003; Farley & Kelly, 2000; Hofstede, 1999).

Children who have been trafficked into prostitution often experience mental health problems, suffer physical and sexual assaults, have low self-esteem and are put at risk for HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. They are at increased risk of suicide as well as homicide (Flowers, 2001; U.S. Midterm Review, 2006; Volkonsky, 1995; Wilson & Dalton, 2008).

The passing of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 and its revisions in 2005 and 2008 has done much to change the perception of child sex trafficking at the federal level. According to the TVPA, anyone under the age of 18 who is trafficked into prostitution by someone economically benefiting from them is a victim of child sex trafficking. Understanding that children are manipulated into trafficking and may be perceived as willing participants, the federal law determined that children do not have to be trafficked against their will. Courts do not have to prove that any force, fraud, or coercion took place in order to prosecute traffickers. Simply, any child under the age of 18 that is trafficked into prostitution is a victim of child sex trafficking.

The TVPA helped to change the language of child sex trafficking in the United States. What was often referred to as juvenile prostitution prior to the passing of this legislation is now referred to as commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC). The act of manipulating a child into prostitution is now called child sex trafficking and those who were once pimps are now referred to as traffickers. This shift in language has helped to create the beginning of a paradigm shift to reduce the tendency to blame the victim and to view the trafficker as someone committing a serious crime.

Some organizations have always been enlightened and have indeed helped to shape the new law and new way of thinking about trafficking. Studies and reports from the Polaris Project, founded in 2002, Shared Hope International, founded in 1998, and End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography, and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT), founded in 1991, have chronicled the abuse of children through both labor and sex trafficking worldwide. Each has acknowledged trafficking in Ohio. More recent studies and reports on child sex trafficking in the United States have surfaced from these organizations. Of particular interest to this article were the works of Davis (2006), from the Polaris Project, and Wilson and Dalton (2007; 2008), all of whom have focused their work at some point on the child sex trade in Ohio.

Davis’s (2006) report described pimp-controlled prostitution in Ohio and the practices of pimps who seek to economically benefit from children. She provided reasons why human trafficking, both labor and sex, flourishes in Ohio by describing the presence of structural influences such as major highways and waterways that run through vulnerable areas. Davis