

By Marie Smith

Sex trafficking is known to destroy the lives of women and children internationally, but it is also "homegrown" and devastates the lives of American youth from all economic levels. Summer is fast approaching and with it an increase in the number of children living on the streets at risk for increased commercial sexual exploitation.

Everyday between 1.3 million and 2.8 million runaway and homeless youth live on the streets. According to the Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section of the Department of Justice: "Although comprehensive research to document the number of children engaged in prostitution in the United States is lacking, it is estimated that 293,000 American youth are currently at risk of becoming victims of commercial sexual exploitation." Caught in this dehumanizing activity most frequently are homeless children labeled as "runaways" or "throwaways." Underneath the labels and misunderstandings there exists a repeated tragic story of sexual abuse inflicted primarily on young girls by those they counted on most — fathers, stepfathers, grandfathers, brothers, uncles or other trusted adults.

Desperate to escape the abuse, some young teens are lured away from home through e-mails or by a trafficker who appears to be well-meaning and concerned. Once on the streets, frightened and with little survival skills, a homeless minor is easy prey. According to the National Runaway Switchboard, one out of every three teens on the street will be lured into prostitution within 48 hours of leaving home. They also report the average age a girl enters prostitution is 14, with many victims only 11 or 12 years of age.

Homegrown sex trafficking

Combat the exploitation of American youth

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Sophisticated criminals earn the children's trust and then force them to participate in escort services, massage parlors, nude dancing, stripping, pornography and prostitution. For the abused this becomes "survival sex," where their basic needs are met only if they obey the controller's demands.

Traffickers may take children across state lines to avoid detection and to follow major sporting, cultural and recreational events. Cars, vans, SUVs, limos and buses

eat. These children are also ashamed and fear their families will find out what they have been doing. They fear the police and fear being returned home.

Victims suffer physically from many ailments and diseases, including STDs and HIV/AIDS. Emotionally, they suffer from such disorders as intense self-loathing, post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic bonding or Stockholm Syndrome, where the victim is grateful for any favor, including simply being allowed to live.

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transport these young victims to cities that attract large numbers of transient males, including conventioners, military personnel, seasonal workers and sex tourists.

Escape is often impossible. Fear maintains their victim status. Minors live in fear of sadistic acts by "customers," fear of being beaten and abused if they fail to bring in their quota (ranging from \$500 to \$1,800 a day/night), fear of losing their coping mechanisms (drugs and alcohol), and fear of losing a place to live and food to

Rescue and Restore, a project of the Department of Health and Human Services, is doing essential work by identifying victims of international sex trafficking and helping restore them to a free life. Child victims of prostitution also require special assistance.

The Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2005 includes a pilot program to house young domestic victims of sex trafficking as they are rehabilitated and restored to a life without sexual exploitation.

Just as we have had to educate small children about strangers, we must educate young teens about the dangers of trafficking and the methods and manipulations of sexual predators. The Paul and Lisa Program, an organization dedicated to the rescue and restoration of young victims, observes: "A fragile self esteem and limited resources lead some girls to believe they had no other choice but to enter the world of prostitution." A lack of emotional support and practical resources, are the same reasons women resort to abortion.

They deserve better. We need to prevent children from being coerced into prostitution, rescue the children who already are victims, prosecute the traffickers and reduce the demand. To protect our children from sexual predators, we need a coordinated educational and prevention efforts by parents, teachers, counselors, group leaders and producers of shows aimed at teens. Children need to know that they can refuse to choose a destructive life and that they can report both those who "sell" their bodies and those who "buy" them. They have the power to see that these abusers are prosecuted. Together, we can take the "business" out of sex trafficking.

Marie Smith is international director of the Washington-based Feminists for Life, which seeks to protect women and children from violence and exploitation.