

# U.S. child-sex exploitation an 'epidemic,' study finds

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Between 300,000 and 400,000 American children are victims of the sex trade annually, according to a new study released yesterday.

"We project one out of every 100 American children is involved in sexually exploitative activities. This is an epidemic," the study's co-author Richard J. Estes told a news conference yesterday.

Authored by Mr. Estes and Neil Alan Weiner of the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work, the study is the first to track the growing problem of child pornography, street prostitution and trafficking in children for sexual purposes in North America.

While other studies have reported the nature of this problem overseas, the extent of these activities in the United States has been unknown.

"This is not a problem only in poor, distant, developing countries," Mr. Estes said. "It is a home-grown problem."

The research team interviewed hundreds of children and youth under the age of 18 in 17 cities in the United States, and met with some 800 officials at federal and local law enforcement agencies and human services departments during a two-year period.

They found that the problem was much more widespread than previously reported.

"Official reports of sexually exploited children in the United States have seriously underesti-

mated both their numbers and types," the report said.

The largest groups of children affected were runaways and homeless youths, many of whom "use 'survival sex' to acquire food, shelter, clothing and other things needed to survive on America's streets," Mr. Estes said.

The report found most of the sexual exploiters to be men, although some women and juveniles are involved.

Of the 300,000 to 400,000 children who are sexually exploited each year, the study reported that some 73,000 children resort to sex for material profit, as a way to buy better clothes and consumer goods, even drugs, while continuing to live at home.

Many of these children come from "secure" middle-class homes, although poorer children are at a somewhat higher risk of commercial sexual exploitation.

Another 30,000 children are trafficked as prostitutes, according to the report. Ninety percent of those children are U.S. nationals, who are trafficked across state lines and abroad to other economically advanced countries, while the other 10 percent are smuggled in from abroad.

"We discovered well-worn national trafficking circuits: the East Coast corridor and the West Coast corridors, for example," said Mr. Estes. "Customers are always looking for new, young faces, so many of the kids are transported to a new city every few weeks."

Twenty percent of the children

encountered in the study were trafficked by large and well-established criminal networks with backgrounds in prostitution, where child traffickers can earn up to \$30,000 in trafficking fees. The children have false identity papers, and the majority of them use and sell drugs.

Last year, Congress passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 to provide assistance to foreign victims of trafficking brought to the United States. It was signed into law by President Clinton.

Sen. Sam Brownback, Kansas Republican, was one of the bill's primary sponsors. His office said Friday that the staff had been waiting anxiously for this report and hoped now to draw attention to the problem of child sexual exploitation at home.

"The sexual exploitation of children is the dark side of globalization," Mr. Brownback said.

"To know that hundreds of thousands of children are being abused through trafficking, forced juvenile prostitution and child pornography is staggering. It's a tragedy that demands our attention and our intervention."

Mr. Estes said that the biggest problem was equipping local law enforcement, government agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with adequate resources and staff to combat the problem.

The report recommends that the government and NGOs start by de-emphasizing the arrest of prostitutes, with a greater emphasis on arresting customers of prostitutes and consumers of child pornography.