



# Bought and Sold:

Helping Young People Escape from  
Commercial Sexual Exploitation



**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES**  
Administration for Children and Families  
Administration on Children, Youth and Families  
Family and Youth Services Bureau



**Bought and**



# Sold:

## Helping Young People Escape from Commercial Sexual Exploitation

**Prostitution. Pornography. Survival sex. Commercial sexual exploitation is more than just young people being sexually abused by adults.** Perpetrators victimize young people by paying, or promising to pay, money, goods or services to a youth—or a pimp—in exchange for sexual acts or entertainment.

The impact of commercial sexual exploitation on young victims is often devastating. Instead of attending school, they face violence, disease and jail. Before they are even old enough to vote, they lose their dignity and their freedom. They suffer emotional trauma that may never go away.

Helping young people escape from exploitation should be a top priority of communities and youth workers everywhere.



## Some Youth Are More at Risk

Victims come from cities, suburbs and small towns across the country, from all races, ethnic groups and walks of life. Still, certain young people are more likely to be victimized:

- Girls (though the proportion of boys who are victims of commercial sexual exploitation is growing)
- Youth with a history of abuse and neglect at home
- Runaway, throwaway and homeless youth

It's that final group that is particularly at risk. Surviving on their own, runaway and homeless youth—both boys and girls—may be forced to exchange sex for basic needs, like food or housing. One in three young people are approached or recruited by a pimp or exploiter within the first 48 hours of being on the street. According to one study, 70 percent of youth on the street eventually become victims of some form of commercial sexual exploitation, and 30 percent of youth living in shelters also fall victim, some recruited by other residents.

### What might count as, or lead to, commercial sexual exploitation of young people, both male and female?

- Modeling
- Stripping
- Escort and massage services
- Immigrant servitude
- Prostitution
- Pornography
- Survival sex

## No One Chooses to Be Exploited

To help these young people, it's important to remember that no one chooses to be exploited. Exploiters use violence, threats and manipulation to control their victims psychologically and financially.

## Signs of Sexual Exploitation

Identifying victims is often difficult. They move or are moved frequently. They don't trust adults and are particularly fearful of law enforcement. Often, they don't think of themselves as victims. However, some signs include:

- Highly controlled or restricted schedule, money or communications
- Unidentifiable source of income
- Unexplained absences of days at a time
- Unexplained source of new clothing and personal items
- Bruises or other physical signs of abuse
- A tattoo that the young person is reluctant to explain (for instance, being "branded" with an exploiter's name on the neck, chest or arms)
- Isolation from family, friends or other social networks
- Secrecy or vagueness about whereabouts
- Gaps in life story or defensiveness in response to questions or concerns
- Paranoia or lack of trust
- Self-blame or feelings of humiliation or shame
- Disassociation or lack of connection to the outside world
- Malnourishment
- Untreated health and dental problems



## What Victims of Sexual Exploitation Need

**An honest, nonjudgmental listener.** Victims of sexual exploitation are often fearful and ashamed. To open up, they need someone who can listen to the details of their life compassionately and respond honestly. Remember that relationships between victims and exploiters are often complex. Never badmouth the exploiter or tell the victim to “just leave.”

**A safe environment.** Talk to a potential victim away from others, particularly someone who seems controlling. Discuss safety issues upfront. Victims often know the best ways to keep themselves safe. Establish code words or signals they can use to let you know when to leave immediately or not approach.

**Culturally competent services.** Enlist the help of others who speak the victim’s language and understand his or her culture. Make sure that referrals you make are culturally competent as well.

**Safe housing away from exploiters.** Don’t assume that your facility or neighborhood shelter is secure. Pimps and other exploiters may hang out near homeless youth shelters, aiming to recruit new victims. Discuss safety concerns with your supervisor or the manager of your local shelter or transitional living program. Work to create a facility-wide safety plan for all victims of commercial sexual exploitation and relationship violence.

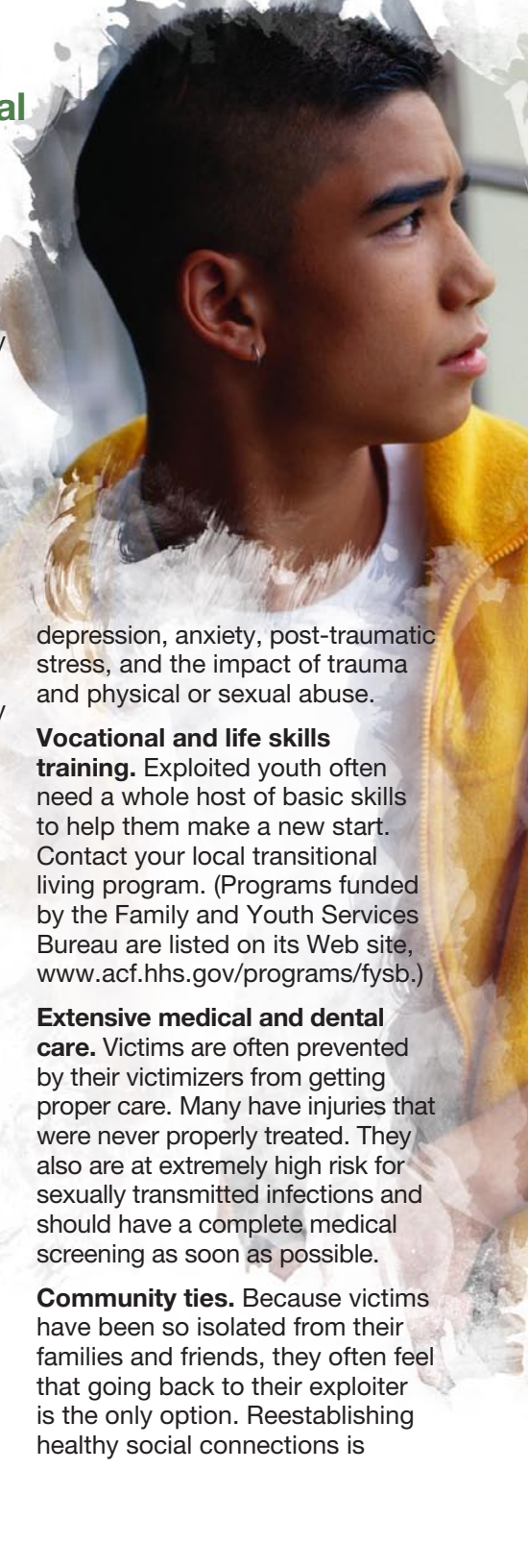
**Mental health services.** Find professionals trained to deal with

depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and the impact of trauma and physical or sexual abuse.

**Vocational and life skills training.** Exploited youth often need a whole host of basic skills to help them make a new start. Contact your local transitional living program. (Programs funded by the Family and Youth Services Bureau are listed on its Web site, [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb).)

**Extensive medical and dental care.** Victims are often prevented by their victimizers from getting proper care. Many have injuries that were never properly treated. They also are at extremely high risk for sexually transmitted infections and should have a complete medical screening as soon as possible.

**Community ties.** Because victims have been so isolated from their families and friends, they often feel that going back to their exploiter is the only option. Reestablishing healthy social connections is



crucial. Be aware, however, that exploiters often use victims to recruit other youth.

**Time.** In some cases, it takes months or even years to convince sexually exploited young people

to get help. They might need even longer to begin to heal and establish stable lives for themselves. Don't expect victims to suddenly be "fixed." Let them know that you will offer support as long as they need it.

## When to Involve the Police

**If the client gives permission,** you can involve police any time. As you are building the young person's treatment plan, include steps that will involve the appropriate law enforcement agencies and the courts.

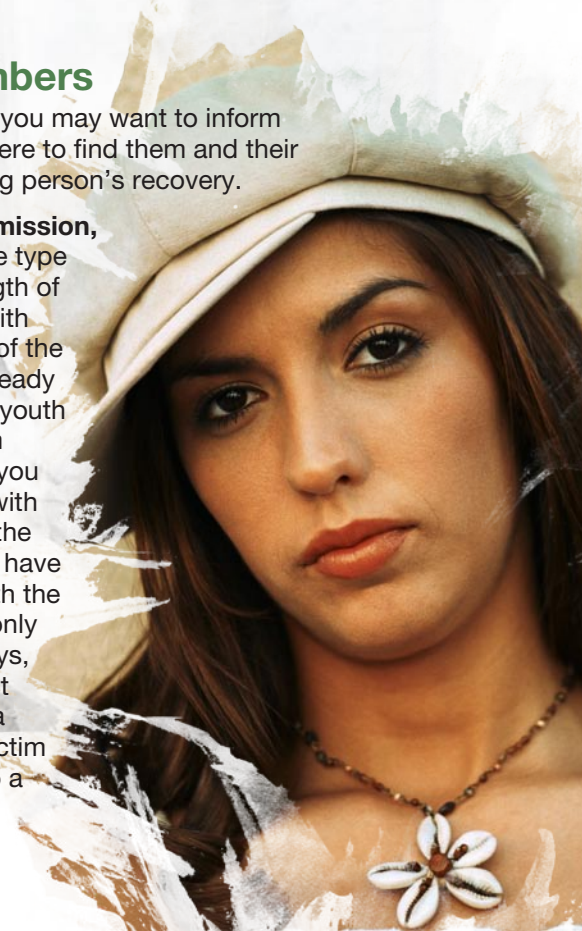
**If the client does not give permission,** what you do may depend on

his or her age. For minors who are victims of a crime, the situation may mean that you are legally required, if you are a "mandatory reporter," to inform the police if you have enough information for local law enforcement to file a report. For older youth, if the client does not want to go to the police, it may be hard to get police or the courts to help.

## When to Tell the Youth's Family Members

**If the client gives permission,** you may want to inform family members if you know where to find them and their involvement would aid the young person's recovery.

**If the client does not give permission,** what you do may depend on the type of program you run and the length of time the young person will be with you. If contacting family is part of the treatment plan the client has already agreed to or a condition for the youth to continue to receive long-term services from the agency, then you might still want to get in touch with family members who could aid the young person's recovery. If you have only had a short relationship with the young person or he or she will only stay in your shelter for a few days, you might choose not to contact family or to wait until you have a stronger relationship with the victim and he or she has committed to a treatment plan.



## Learn More

### **National Center for Missing and Exploited Children**

[www.ncmec.org](http://www.ncmec.org)

### **Girls Education and Mentoring Services, or GEMS**

[www.gems-girls.org](http://www.gems-girls.org)

### **Federal Bureau of Investigation's Innocent Images National Initiative**

[www.fbi.gov/publications/innocent.htm](http://www.fbi.gov/publications/innocent.htm)

### **Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: What Do We Know and What Do We Do About It? A report by the National Institute of Justice**

[www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/215733.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/215733.pdf)

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### **Salvation Army – PROMISE Initiative**

[www.salvationarmyusa.org](http://www.salvationarmyusa.org)

### **ECPAT International (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes)**

[www.ecpat.net](http://www.ecpat.net)

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## Get Help

### **Children of the Night 24-Hour Hotline**

1-800-551-1300

### **National Human Trafficking Hotline**

1-888-3737-888

### **National Runaway Switchboard**

1-800-RUNAWAY

### **Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network, or RAINN**

1-800-656-HOPE

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## Report the Exploitation of a Young Person

### **CyberTipline**

1-800-843-5678

[www.cybertipline.com](http://www.cybertipline.com)

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For more information about commercial sexual exploitation of young people, contact NCFY.

### **NCFY**

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