



# Adolescent Girls in the United States Sex Trade

Tracking Study Results for November, 2010

Report prepared for:



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# Introduction and Methodology

The commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is a societal phenomenon receiving growing attention from researchers, policy makers, and a wide array of advocates. Rightfully so, many wonder how it could be the case that children are sold for sex in the United States today. Unfortunately, it is an issue area fraught with mystery, misconception, and a general lack of scientific data.

One fundamental question looms over everyone who tries to put an end to CSEC in their community: how prevalent is the problem, anyway? This research is designed to answer exactly this question in states across the U.S. It involves a series of state-level scientific investigations into the incidence of CSEC among females under age 18.

Why state-level, why female only, and why victims under age 18?

- We measure CSEC incidence state-by-state because community and state-level factors appear to influence greatly the magnitude of the problem, particularly local permissiveness of the commercial sex industry.<sup>3</sup>
- This study focuses only on female CSEC victims for a variety of reasons, chief among them that it is far less common to encounter blatant advertisements for sex with boys than it is for girls. A different methodological approach might be necessary to estimate CSEC incidence among boys.
- There are several ways to define a “child” according to federal and state laws. Not only does “under age 18” align with important federal laws defining childhood, but it is a definition widely accepted among the general public.

## The Difficulties of Studying CSEC

To understand why it is difficult to study CSEC, it is instructive to define it, as CSEC is both simple and challenging to define. A simple definition of CSEC is when a person provides money or anything else of value in exchange for sex with a child. Practically, however, CSEC manifests in many different ways, ranging from survival sex—when a desperate child is forced to exchange sexual favors for basic necessities such as food or shelter—to instances where a child is kidnapped and pimped in underground sex trades. No single research methodology can measure victims of all of these manifestations of exploitation.

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<sup>3</sup> We are actively examining this issue as we work toward developing a national estimate of CSEC incidence based on patterns among state-level study results.

There have been documented attempts to quantify the problem of commercial sexual exploitation of children in the United States, however very few of these involve direct empirical investigations.<sup>4</sup> Most academic and government quantifications represent educated guesswork.<sup>5</sup> Several local victims services advocacy organizations have sought to measure the problem in their areas, yet many are forced to rely on second-hand information and estimates from social workers and other victims services providers, thus limiting their estimates to CSEC victims who have already come in contact with sources of help. A thorough review of this research is beyond the scope of the current report, but is readily available in the Estes and Weiner study.<sup>6</sup>

While the available evidence contained in these reports indicates definitively that the problem of adolescent girls' sex services being sold to men does indeed exist, none is designed to use measurable, empirical methodologies to put a hard number on how many girls it affects. There are many reasons why this is the case, not the least of which is the difficulty of ensuring the safety of researchers and subjects. Beyond concerns about safety, though, are methodological challenges related to the nature of the problem itself. One of these challenges in particular—properly identifying age—is important to address briefly at the outset of this report.

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<sup>4</sup> A noteworthy exception to this generalization is a recent scientific study in New York City that used respondent-driven sampling (RDS) to estimate the incidence of CSEC among boys and girls. While we believe the use of RDS will always systematically and significantly bias a sample of CSEC victims to the point that it is unfit for incidence estimation, we nevertheless believe this study yielded important findings about CSEC victimhood. For more information, see:  
Curtis, R., K. Terry, M. Dank, K. Dombrowski, and B. Kahn (2008). *The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in New York City*. Center for Court Innovation.

<sup>5</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2005). *Youth Risk Behavior Survey*. Available at: [www.cdc.gov/yrbs](http://www.cdc.gov/yrbs). Accessed on 5/16/10.  
Clawson, H. J., M. Layne, and K. Small. (2006). *Estimating human trafficking into the United States: Development of a methodology*. Fairfax, VA: Caliber.  
Edward, J.M., Iritani, B.J., & Hallfors, D.D. (2005). Prevalence and correlates of exchanging sex for drugs or money among adolescents in the United States. *Sexually Transmitted Infections* 82(5): 354-358.  
Estes, R.J. & Weiner, N.A. (2001). *The commercial sexual exploitation of children in the US, Canada and Mexico*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania.  
Finkelhor, D. & Jones, L. (2006). Why have child maltreatment and child victimization declined? *Journal of Social Issues*, 62(4), 685-716.  
Gelles, R.J. (1980). Violence in the family: A review of research in the seventies. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 42(4): 873-885.  
General Accounting Office. (1982). *Sexual exploitation of children—A problem of unknown magnitude*. Washington, DC: General Accounting Office.  
Hammer, H., Finkelhor, D., & Sedlak, A. (2002). Runaway/throwaway children: National estimates and characteristics. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin – NCJ196469*, (pgs. 1-12). Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.  
United States Department of Justice, Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section. (2007). *Child prostitution*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved 5/16/10 from (<http://www.usdoj.gov/criminal/ceos/prostitution.html>).  
Snyder, H.N., & Sickmund, M. (2006). *Juvenile offenders and victims: 2006 national report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

<sup>6</sup> Estes, R.J. & Weiner, N.A. (2001). *The commercial sexual exploitation of children in the US, Canada and Mexico*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania.

While there are documented cases of girls as young as elementary school age involved in the sex trade, the majority of girls trapped in the industry are in their teenage years. Johns soliciting these girls are engaging in a despicable act, but typically *not* because the johns are pedophiles. It seems that most of the girls they solicit are, in a biological sense, sexually mature.

In fact, it is distinctly possible that johns looking for “young” girls sometimes do not know that the young woman they are soliciting is actually under age 18. One critical aspect of this study shows just how dramatically people fundamentally overestimate the ages of girls posing in mildly provocative ways. Adolescent girls still appear quite young—which we also document as central to their appeal to johns—but often do not appear to be unambiguously younger than 18. The current study involves methodologies that address this and other quantification challenges. The guiding principles of these methodologies are described next.

## Guiding Principles

The foundation of the study is comprised of the following guiding principles and assumptions:

- There is no way to study directly—to make contact with—girls being commercially sexually exploited. Even if it were possible to keep researchers safe, it would be absolutely impossible to ensure the safety of the child subject.
- Commercial sexual exploitation of children is, by definition, a commercial practice. Though it is crude to even make the comparison, it is methodologically important to recognize that its enterprises operate under basic rules governing all types of businesses: they must be accessible to current and prospective customers, they must advertise, and they are subject to the law of supply and demand.
- When children are commercially sexually exploited, they are regarded as nothing more than assets to their exploiters. For all intents and purposes, every girl who is being commercially sexually exploited is findable by johns; if not, a girl is no longer an asset to her exploiter.
- Therefore, it is safe to say that this research methodology is designed to count adolescent females who are acutely commercially sexually exploited, and actively marketed within the local sex trade.

Is there any way to ensure that the methodologies based on these principles yield perfect measurements? No, of course not. While the accuracy of the study results overall is helped by having multiple methodologies that approach different facets of the problem simultaneously, there are nevertheless some important caveats to bear in mind when evaluating the results.

One of these is that the study is unable to count organized, underground commercial sexual exploitation of children. This type of exploitation appears to affect Hispanic, Asian, and Native American girls at disproportionately high rates. Research suggests that Hispanic and Asian girls, particularly in ethnic enclaves, become trapped in commercial sexual exploitation of children differently altogether.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, we do encounter a comparatively small number of Asian and Hispanic females while monitoring internet service postings.

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<sup>7</sup> A report titled *DEMAND* by Shared Hope International provides an in-depth explanation of how young Hispanic and Asian girls get caught in the sex trade within the United States.

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The most important fact to keep in mind is that the study is a quantum leap forward in determining—objectively and in a replicable fashion—the magnitude of the problem of commercial sexual exploitation of children. Over time, as the study is replicated and the problem tracked objectively, the picture of the problem will become clearer.

## Age Identification

When researchers count events that occur at varying degrees of uncertainty, they typically count probabilities rather than discrete cases. For a simple example, consider a drawer of 40 identically-shaped red and blue marbles. Imagine trying to count the number of red marbles while wearing a blindfold. This, obviously, is an impossible task. If we knew from previous experience, however, that 25% of the marbles are red, we would count each marble—without seeing its true color—as .25 red. We count each of the 40 marbles in the drawer this way, and sum up the red probabilities to arrive at a red count of 10 marbles.

Instead of trying to determine precisely whether or not each individual marble was or was not red, which is impossible while blindfolded, we arrive at the most precise count by acknowledging that—while we cannot know exactly the color of any one marble—each has a 25% chance of being red. This, in essence, is how we count the number of girls under 18 in each of the study’s individual methodologies; it is the most scientifically sound way to deal with the inherent uncertainty of estimating girls’ ages.

The key to the technique described in the marble example comes from the phrase “if we knew from previous experience.” The problem is, there is no scientifically reliable previous experience on which to base the probability that a girl selling sex who looks quite young is, indeed, under 18 years. Therefore, we conducted a separate study to serve as this previous experience.

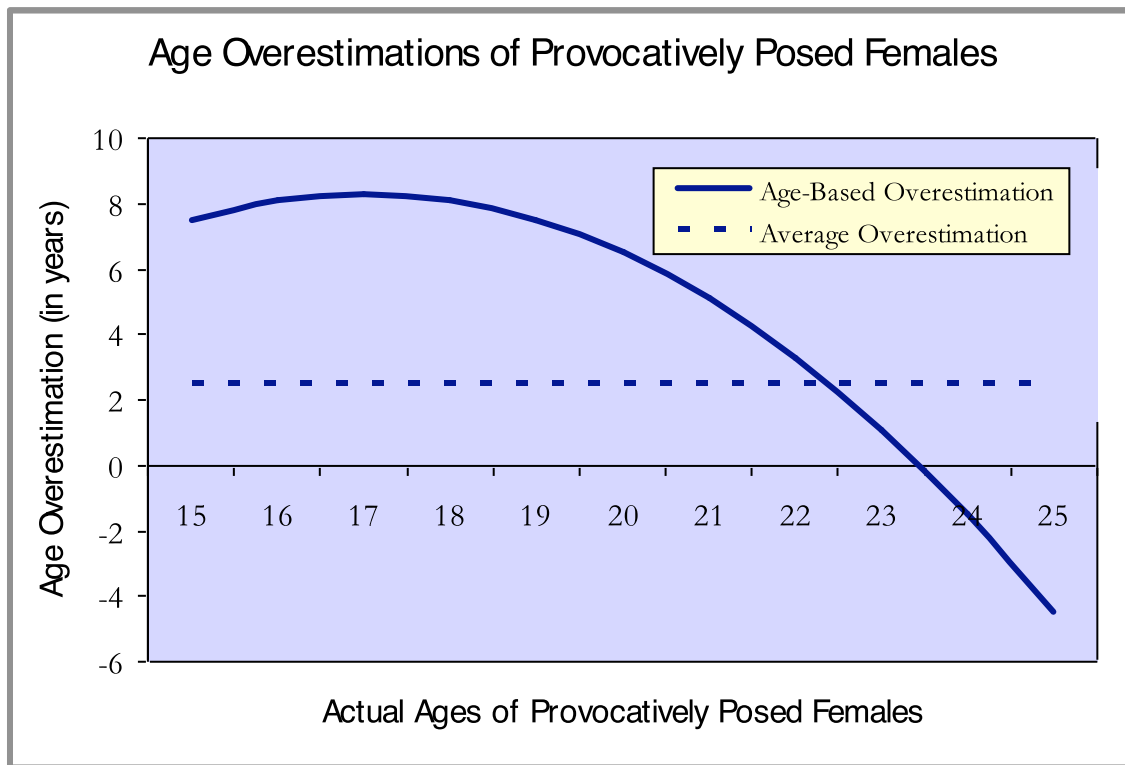
Basically, the study involved asking a random sample of 100 adults to guess the ages of a variety of females in photographs. Some of these pictures were of females whose ages were known (teenagers to young adults), and some were not. Half the pictures were of Black females, the other half White. The pictures of unknown girls came from erotic services postings on the Atlanta Craigslist web site. All pictures were of shoulders and above. Each picture was decent, though subjects were posed provocatively (e.g., a picture of a female licking her lips). Pictures of females of unknown ages were selected because the subject appeared “young.” In selecting the pictures, multiple reviewers agreed that there was at least some chance that each of the females of unknown ages in the pictures was actually under 18. This is how we operationalize “young” throughout the study.

Study participants viewed each of these pictures and estimated the age of each pictured female. Importantly, study participants rated the average age of females from Craigslist (whose ages we did not know) the same as the average age of pictured females whose ages we did know. Study participants were balanced by race and gender, though the results indicated conclusively that participant demographics did not have an impact on age estimations, nor did the demographics of the pictured females have an effect.

Figure 1 shows how study participants tend to overestimate the ages of provocatively posed females. The dotted line represents the average overestimation of 2.5 years. That is, across all ratings of known-age females, participants tended to assume the females were 2.5 years older than they actually were. This is not the whole story, though.

There are other ways to describe this overestimation bias than as a constant overestimate of 2.5 years. What if, for example, people overestimate the ages of adolescent girls more so than they do women in their 20s? The data showed convincingly that this was exactly the case. The solid line in Figure 1 shows how this bias manifests. When a girl under 18 poses provocatively, participants tended to overestimate her age by 7-8 years, whereas when the subject was closer to age 22 or 23, the age estimate was much more accurate than the average overestimate of 2.5 years. In fact, women age 24 and over tend to be estimated as younger than they actually are when posed provocatively.

Figure 1.



This effect, which is represented by a curvilinear mathematical equation, allows us to speak definitively about the probability that a female of a given estimated age is actually under age 18. In fact, the study showed that any given “young” looking girl who is selling sex has a 38% likelihood of being under age 18. Put another way, for every 100 “young” looking girls selling sex, 38 are under 18 years of age. We would compute this by assigning a value of .38 to each of the 100 “young” girls we encounter, then summing the values together to achieve a reliable count.

With this “previous experience” in hand, we can reliably determine how many of the “young” girls we record through the various study methodologies are actually under age 18, and thus victims of commercial sexual exploitation of children.



## CSEC Research Description

The Schapiro Group has developed a scientific, replicable methodology aimed at determining the number of young females being commercially sexually exploited through both internet classifieds sites and escort agencies around the US. The methodology is based on a series of tenable assumptions regarding the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC), and it will produce conservative estimates of the number of young females being exploited at any given time. The methodology works within a “marketplace” framework of the issue—that is, there is a supply side and a demand side to CSEC, with the supply being the young females, and the demand coming from the men who pay for sex. In this framework, we are limited to measuring the young females who are advertised and whose services are available to be purchased. As such, the estimates only account for the young females advertised on internet classifieds sites or working for escort agencies, but not the CSEC activity taking place at other locations such as on the street or within ethnic communities, for instance. The major components of the methodology are listed below.

### Internet Classifieds Sites

- The TSG research team counts the postings that advertise sex for sale on various websites, depending on what websites are available in each state.
- A panel of research associates independently rates the pictures in each clear, unique ad as possibly being underage.
  - We cannot know with absolute certainty that the pictures on internet classifieds sites accurately depict the females whose services are for sale. We assume, though, that most of the pictures are accurate representations because, in the open market, the product advertised should match the product delivered, or else the buyer will not buy it. There are times when the research team encounters a picture of a female who clearly is not the person actually behind the ad (e.g. a well known actress or model), and those ads are purged.
- To increase the accuracy of the ratings, the research team applies a multiplier to the ads rated “young” by a majority of the panel in order to calculate the number of pictured females who are likely to be *actually* underage.
  - The multiplier is derived from a separate scientific empirical study conducted when this approach was first developed. A stratified random sample of 100 people was asked to determine the ages of pictured “young” females, and those answers were then compared to the females’ actual, known ages. The multiplier represents how often respondents correctly rated an underage girl as being so.
  - The analysis proceeds with this empirically-derived multiplier, and it is assumed to be consistent over time. We further assume that the panel of experienced raters is correct as often as the sample of 100 people.
- The research team then enters that number, along with other factors from the classifieds ads (e.g. number of duplicate ads, unidentifiable ads, etc.) and the most tenable assumptions as to how often each pictured female appears in an ad, into an equation to calculate the number of unique young females on internet classified sites in a given month.

### Escort Agencies

- The research team searches online phonebooks and message boards in order to collect a list of escort agency names, locations, and phone numbers advertising in each state.
- Research associates call each listed number in random order and engage each agency in conversation as if our caller was a potential customer. They do NOT schedule an actual meeting.
- Research associates complete a questionnaire for each completed call, including whether or not the agency offers “full service,” how many females work for the agency, and the age range of the females available.
- Based on the most tenable assumptions as to the number of “call centers” (multiple listed phone numbers being answered by a single agency), the research team calculates the number of young females working for escort agencies in a given month.

Together, the two methodologies provide a meaningful look into the world of CSEC as it manifests itself in the internet “marketplace.” The quarterly counts are an accurate, and admittedly conservative, estimate of CSEC activity at that point in time. Basing our estimates on a series of consistent assumptions makes the data perhaps most useful as a tool for tracking the prevalence of CSEC, particularly as the landscape of that marketplace changes and new sources of “supply” emerge while others fade away. Over time, our quarterly counts have found both increases and decreases in the number of young females being prostituted.

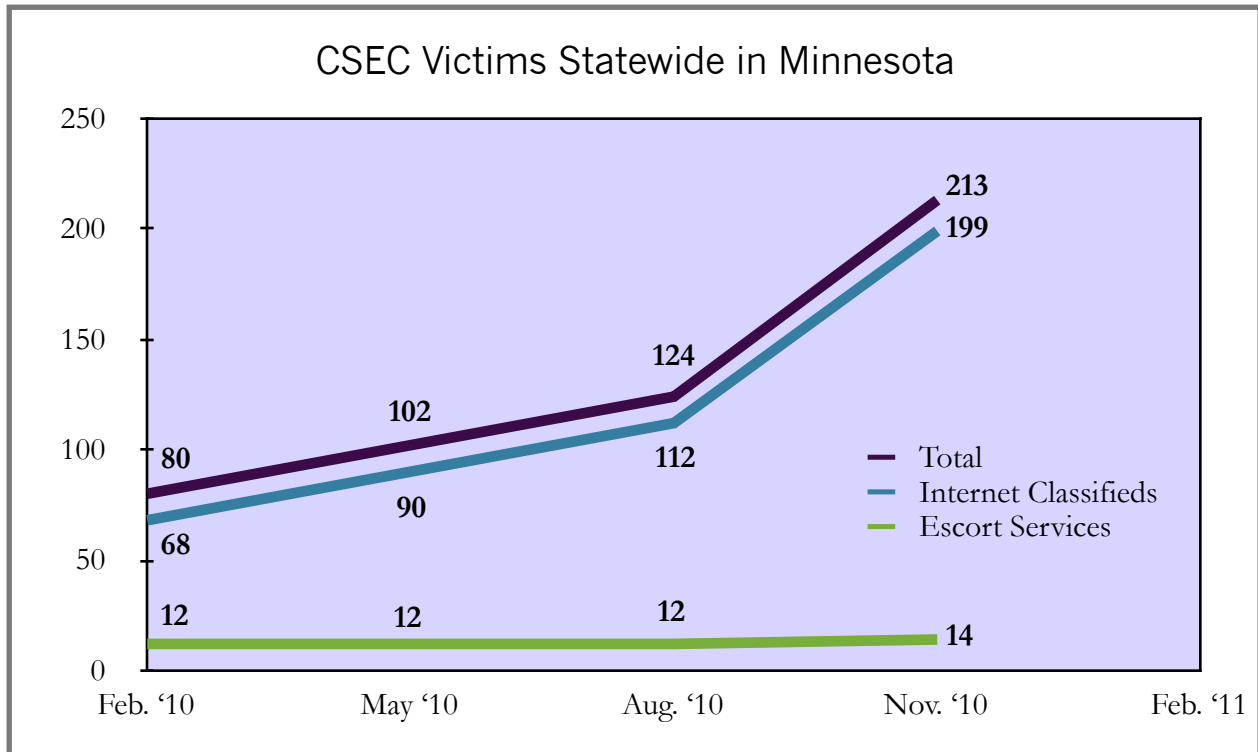
The assumptions we make throughout the research process are also intended to be transparent in order to open doors for further research in this field. If future research findings reveal that any assumptions need to be tweaked, we will certainly do so. In the meantime, we consider our assumptions to be reasonable ones, and we are confident in the counts they yield.



## Statewide Results: Minnesota

Figure 6 summarizes the latest CSEC tracking study results for Minnesota.

Figure 6.



### Girls Per Typical Weekend Night

- While it is important to quantify this problem over the course of a full month, it is also valuable to estimate how many girls are victimized through CSEC on any given weekend night—the time when activity peaks. This calculation involves re-examining each methodology and its assumptions to see which computation most closely aligns with a one-day count. For Minnesota, the latest data suggest **45 girls under 18** are commercially sexually exploited on a typical weekend night via Internet classifieds websites and escort services.
  - Since our Internet classifieds methodology is derived from a collection of one-day counts, our research indicates that **on any given weekend night, there are 42 girls under age 18 commercially sexually exploited through ads posted on these websites.**

- Absent an empirically-derived method of determining a daily count from escort service results, we are compelled to assume that the pattern governing daily counts on Internet classifieds websites applies to escort services as well. Using this method, our count indicates that **on any given night, there are 3 girls under age 18 commercially sexually exploited through escort services.**

## Observations and Considerations

- The closure of the Craigslist “adult services” website appears to have had a minimal, if any, impact on the number of adolescent females available via the Internet for paid sex services in Minnesota. In fact, we observed a marked increase in the number of CSEC victims across all websites in the month following the Craigslist closure.
- Minnesota advocates have amassed strong evidence that Native American girls are victimized by CSEC at high rates in the state.<sup>11</sup> While we did encounter some females advertised as being Native Americans, there may well be Native American CSEC victims we were unable to count in the study.
- The overall number of ads on Minnesota websites increased yet again during this study period, but more important to the analysis is that the percentage of advertised females in Minnesota who are “young” continues to rise.
- A problem like CSEC is abhorrent and intolerable regardless of its incidence. Nevertheless, it can be helpful to compare CSEC incidence to other social problems in Minnesota for an improved sense of scope of the issue.<sup>12</sup> For example, more adolescent girls are commercially sexually exploited *in one month* in Minnesota than...
  - ...there are teens girls who died by suicide, homicide, and accidents combined in one year (29)
  - ...there are women who died from complications due to AIDS in one year (11)
  - ...there are female infants who died from SIDS in one year (6)
  - ...there are women of all ages murdered in one year (37)

Each of these problems is widely regarded as too prevalent to ignore. By prevalence alone, the commercial sexual exploitation of children in Minnesota belongs in the same category.

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<sup>11</sup> See *Shattered Hearts*, a 2009 report commissioned by the Minnesota Indian Women’s Resource Center.

<sup>12</sup> All Minnesota comparison data are from the Minnesota Department of Health, Center for Health Statistics, 2007—the latest year for which data are available.