Researchers expose market structure behind juvenile sex trafficking in Minneapolis

Findings reveal violent, sophisticated system of buyers, facilitators and recruitment tactics

MINNEAPOLIS, Sept. 10, 2014 -- Exploitation, violence and brutality play key operational roles in the juvenile sex trafficking business models in Minneapolis, according to a new study released today by Lauren Martin, director of research for the University of Minnesota Urban Research and Outreach-Engagement Center (UROC), and Alexandra Pierce, president of Othayonih Research.

Commissioned and funded by the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota, Mapping the Market for Juvenile Sex Trafficking in Minneapolis: Structures, Functions, and Patterns is a first-of-its-kind approach to understanding how the overall market for juvenile sex trafficking manifests within communities in one city, Minneapolis.

The study is the result of:
- Interviews with 89 adults who are knowledgeable about juvenile sex trafficking activities in Minneapolis and/or work directly with prostituted girls;
- City of Minneapolis Police Department case records (2008-2013);
- Hennepin County District Court documents (2008-2013); and

“The findings offer a birds-eye view of the ‘who, where, and how’ of juvenile sex trafficking in Minneapolis,” Martin said. “As we pulled the lens back away from the areas particularly affected by this, it became clear that this is a problem involving people of every background, in communities both in and around Minneapolis.”

Driven by buyers, the juvenile sex trafficking market in Minneapolis is fueled by systematic violence toward victims throughout the recruitment and retaining process. Buyers of wide-ranging backgrounds travel from around the metro area to access this complex system, which features varying business models and whose facilitators consciously place victims in different parts of their businesses, based on demand.
“The research is unique in that we integrated survivor and advocate voices with law enforcement and court records to illuminate the operational structures found within an illegal industry,” Pierce said. “There is much more to be learned through replications of this study in other geographic regions and cities across the country.”

“In order to end this horrific crime against our community’s girls, we must shine a spotlight on the predators (sellers and buyers), disturb and disrupt the market, and end the demand,” said Lee Roper-Batker, president and CEO of the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota.

How the Market Works
Facilitators (pimps, traffickers) rely on a “recruitment and capture” process to transform their supply of vulnerable youth into merchandise that they can sell in the commercial sex market.

The data revealed three distinct organizational structures: single-pimp operations; informal pimp networks; and the corporate model, the most organized and complex domestic minor sex trafficking operation.

The research also identified four key business models used by local minor sex trafficking operations in Minneapolis: escort; brothels and brothel-like establishments; street prostitution; and closed sex buyers’ networks. Victims are assigned to a particular business model and each model delivers a product to a specific category of buyer.

To generate profit, each operation must draw from a potential supply of girls. This includes targeting youth with vulnerabilities, such as being runaway and/or homeless, living in poverty and/or unable to meet basic needs, experiencing cognitive delays or mental health issues, past history of abuse (sexual, physical, neglect), using drugs or alcohol, and/or absence of supportive relationships with stable adults.

Primary Recruitment and Tactics
Recruitment of juvenile girls (the “supply”) takes place wherever juvenile girls gather, including schools, libraries, malls, parks, parties, bus stops, shelters and youth programming, and juvenile detention centers. Research found facilitators use three main recruitment tactics:

- “Lover-Boy” Pimping: A facilitator uses romantic relations, care and love alternated with violence to create a bond.
- Peer-to-Peer Recruiting: A facilitator enlists youth to recruit peers on his behalf through peer-pressure, bullying, insults, dating violence and more. Trafficked peers also recruit friends who are hungry, homeless, and/or in need of money.
- Strategic use of rape, gang rape and other types of violence to break a girl and trap her against her will in a sex trafficking situation. It is also used to form a “trauma bond” with a facilitator.

Other key findings:
- Poverty and purchasing power play roles in structuring the market. Within that framework, the study revealed a predominance of victims of color who are exploited by facilitators (pimps, traffickers), often
from within their own communities, and sex buyers that come from all communities (Minneapolis and Twin Cities metropolitan area).

- Victims range in age from 9-17; facilitators, 17-55; and buyers, 23-65.
- Boys under 18 are typically recruited to bring girls under 18 into the system through “trap” or party houses, which serve as a venue for sexual assault.
- Pregnant teens and young mothers are favorite targets, as children can be used as leverage by facilitators.

**About the Research Partners**

The research was jointly designed and conducted by Lauren Martin, director of research at the University of Minnesota’s Urban Resource Outreach-Engagement Center (UROC), and Alexandra Pierce, president of Othayonih Research. The research was commissioned and funded by the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota.

UROC’s work on this project is part of “Sex Trading, Trafficking and Community Well-Being,” its academic-based initiative that is on the forefront of addressing sex trading, prostitution, and sex trafficking through research. UROC connects the University of Minnesota in partnership with communities on critical urban issues and is a unit of the University’s Office for Public Engagement. More at uroc.umn.edu.

Othayonih Research is an applied research firm that has conducted survivor-led research on sex trafficking since 2008. More at OthayonihResearch.com.

The Women’s Foundation of Minnesota is a statewide community foundation that invests in social change to achieve equality for all women and girls in the state. The Foundation commissioned and funded this research as part of MN Girls Are Not For Sale, its five year, $5 million campaign to end the sex trafficking of Minnesota girls through grantmaking, research, public education, and convening. More at WFMN.ORG.