

## **Facts and figures: even one child is one too many**

How many children are victims of commercial sexual exploitation at any given time? How many more become entrapped each year?

Answers to these two questions can be found, but they will be approximate and anecdotal, calculated on the basis of the horror of field workers who have seen far too many children trapped in prostitution or suffering the consequences, and on the partial surveys and studies – all using different methodologies, sample bases and extrapolation formulae – that together show without a doubt that there are more than a million children caught in commercial sex though little hope of ever knowing exactly how many.

This is not surprising. By its very nature, commercial sexual exploitation makes children ‘invisible’. Removed from public view behind the doors of brothels or hotel rooms, in deserted shops in suburban malls, in cars and trucks on city streets and transnational borders, in upstairs rooms in massage parlours, go-go bars, ‘beauty’ salons or even in family homes, the children who are exploited for sex are hidden away so that they can be exploited at leisure and the perpetrators protected.

### **When the veil of invisibility falls**

The gathering of data therefore is conducted when some of the children ‘surface’: they may run away and live on the streets, in which case they may join the groups of children who seek a bed for the night in welfare shelters or halfway homes. They may be arrested on a corner when their pimp moves them onto the street, and so, in many countries still, join the ranks of re-victimized children who end up in crime statistics. They may be compelled to seek medical help for STDs or other maladies that stop them from ‘working’ so that even their exploiters are obliged to set them free for a time – or else throw them out as ‘useless’. Whenever the children are identified and their involvement in commercial sexual exploitation recorded, statistics are studied and informed presumptions are made to extrapolate the significance of the few concrete figures available.

But the very nature of these calculations mean that each different formula used will give a different answer. It is necessary, then, to collect as many different answers as possible for a given country or region at a specified time to produce a range of figures within which the truth probably lies.

### **Incertitude and best guesses**

Adding to the difficulty is the fact that definitions differ. There is little consensus in national law, across disciplines or in data gathering protocols on what constitutes a child. Even the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child allows for differences, Article 1 defining a child as “every human being below the age of 18 years *unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier*” (italics added).

Different countries, social and child welfare services in those countries, NGOs and intergovernmental bodies, judicial systems and legal frameworks not only collect data within different age ranges but, in many cases, do not disaggregate the data so that it can be re-sorted. This is one reason why the Stockholm Agenda for Action adopted at the first World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in 1996 called for concerted efforts not only to collect data but to agree on definitions, disaggregation parameters and comparability.

Despite this incertitude, however, figures are regularly quoted. An example from just one country illustrates how important it is to also quote the source and basis for calculation when figures are used.

This example is chosen for its illustrative value only and not to single out this country as otherwise exemplary:

### **An example: the Philippines**

The most comprehensive survey undertaken in the Philippines, jointly commissioned by the Philippines Department of Social Welfare and Development and UNICEF in 1998<sup>1</sup>, quotes a series of different estimates, from sources as varied as hygiene clinics and NGOs, of the number of child victims of commercial sexual exploitation in that country.

A figure of 40,000 prostituted children in the Philippines in 1992 is attributed to ECPAT, rising to between 60,000 and 100,000 in 1997. The Department of Social Welfare and Development also quotes the ECPAT figures, so presumably there is not major disagreement by this government department.

A 1997 University of the Philippines study also quotes a figure of 100,000 for 1997, 5,000 of these prostituted children being in Metro Manila. The same report estimated that 3,266 children between seven and 15 years of age entered the sex trade each year – clearly an extrapolated figure, since it is unusually unrounded. These figures, in fact:

*“...were drawn primarily from the approximate number of street children all over the country. Figures were largely derived from records of centres or institutions catering to this group of children. This must be considered with caution since there was high probability of double or triple counting as street children tended to go from one centre to another for services.”*

A further extrapolated figure is derived from local studies of prostitution in general: in 1993 this placed the number of prostituted people (not disaggregated) as between 400,000 and 500,000; since a number of different sources give the proportion of minors in prostitution as 18 per cent of the total, on this basis the number of under-18s in prostitution would be between 72,000 and 90,000.

In short, all the figures quoted are in the same general range, and 100,000 does not seem an exaggerated figure. Nevertheless this example clearly illustrates the many different approaches taken to the gathering of statistics and the caution that is necessary when data are quoted.

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<sup>1</sup> *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the Philippines: a situation analysis*, Department of Social Welfare and Development and UNICEF, Manila 1998