

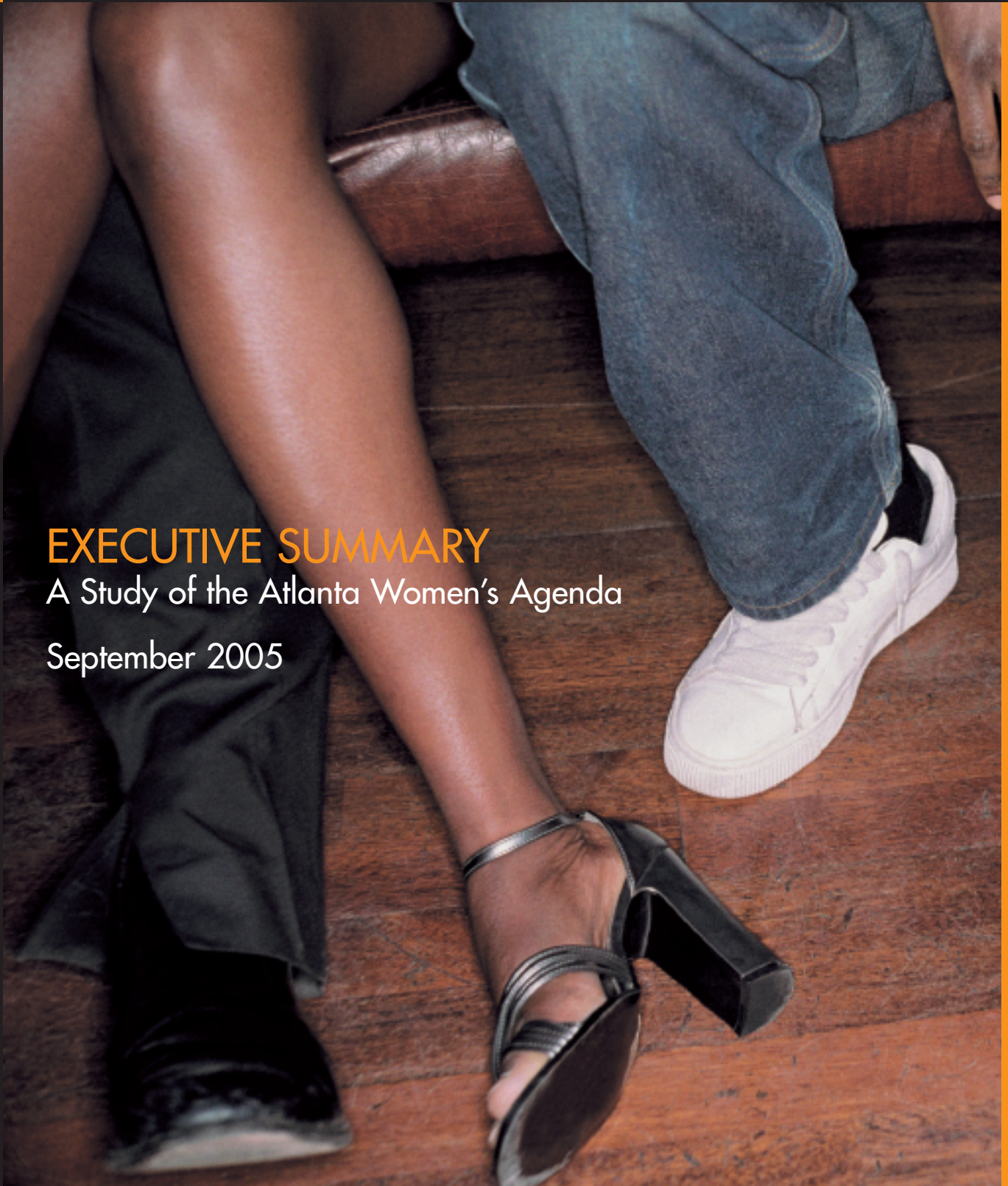
Hidden in Plain View:

The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Girls in Atlanta

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Study of the Atlanta Women's Agenda

September 2005



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Executive Summary

This report is presented to the Mayor of Atlanta in response to heightened awareness and concern about the commercial sexual exploitation of children, the commercial sex industry (including formal and informal prostitution), and trafficking of young women and girls into Atlanta for the purpose of prostitution. While boys are also victims of this appalling trade, the focus of this report is on the commercial sexual exploitation of girls. Data collection took place over a four-month period from March through June 2005. Several methods were used to triangulate the data: case file reviews; key informant interviews; case studies; field observations; service provider surveys; and spatial mapping.

While some may argue that prostitution is a choice for adult women; that is not the case here. These young girls are psychologically manipulated and physically coerced by adults into a “trade” that is both illegal and dangerous. The fact is that under-age prostitutes are almost always controlled by a pimp. Therefore, the following two terms are used throughout this report: child sexual exploitation (CSE) and commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC). Men who buy sex from prostitutes have been traditionally called johns, tricks, and dates. Men who buy sex from minors, knowingly or otherwise, are child abusers, and are legally termed panderers.

The girls are not the only victims. The community bears the cost of criminalizing, sheltering, rehabilitating and reintegrating these children back into the community. Since these girls often bear children while they are very young, the community also bears the cost of their children, who are often born premature and often suffer not only from permanent disabilities but also from the chaos of their mothers’ lives.

In 2000, Fulton County Chief Juvenile Court Judge Nina Hickson noticed an increasingly common theme of sexual exploitation emerging in the cases of young girls appearing before her court. Hickson called this an epidemic of tragic proportions. Moreover, the age of first incidence for girls is getting younger. In the city of Atlanta the overwhelmingly majority of girls identified as victims of CSEC are African American.

Several factors have been identified as common risk factors among girls who have been victims of commercial sexual exploitation: conflicts at home, parental neglect, physical or sexual abuse, homelessness, poverty, housing instability, educational failure, emotional problems, and running away from home. Dysfunctional family life, combined with an unstructured and unsupervised childhood, characterizes the lives of prostituted girls and provides greater incentive for them to leave home. Parental neglect is a substantial factor regardless of socioeconomic status. Seventy-five percent of street youths in the U.S. are from working- and middle-class families.

Runaway and throwaway children are easy prey for pimps and their recruiters. Once out on the street, one out of every three teens will be lured toward prostitution within 48 hours of leaving home. The younger a girl is, the more likely she will be sexually victimized. In some cases, girls are kidnapped and detained for days and even months. They are even abducted by someone they know and then sold to pimps against their will. FBI debriefings of sex traffickers or pimps indicate that approximately twenty to forty percent of the victims forced or recruited into prostitution were juveniles.

Pimps are masters of the psychology of their victims and “groom” them in a two-stage process to prepare the girl to be “turned out.” In the first stage the girl is made to feel attractive and wanted. The pimp will spend money on her and give her special attention and validation. Drugs are also introduced during the grooming process to make girls more pliable and foster dependency. Sex between the pimp and girl is always part of the grooming process. In the second phase the pimp will attempt to break a girl’s will through physical and verbal abuse to prepare her for a life of prostitution and to separate her completely from her previous life. The pimp will move her around to break her ties to her family and community.

In an effort to understand the trends of CSEC in the city of Atlanta, geo-coded police data from 2002, 2003, and 2004 have been mapped. The following conclusions can be drawn from analysis of spatial data:

- There is a strong spatial correlation between areas of adult prostitution activities and juvenile prostitution-related activities. Juvenile activity is nested in established tracks such as Metropolitan Parkway, Moreland Avenue, Vine Street, Peachtree and North Avenue, and Pharr Road in Buckhead.
- Juvenile truants and runaways are often found in areas with heavy adult prostitution activities.
- There are prostitution-related activities around most public schools in Atlanta, especially in Zones 1, 3, 5 and 6.
- There is a spatial association between prostitution-related activities and legal adult sex venues.
- There is a spatial association between prostitution-related activities and hotels, including some of the finest hotels in Atlanta.

Even when girls are arrested, they may slip through the cracks unnoticed because they appear in juvenile court for status offenses and probation violations. Many girls provide false names and lie about their age. Pimps often provide girls with false identification. As a result, they are arrested as adults and released back to their exploiters without ever being identified as minors. These girls are often very angry, and because of their participation in delinquent or criminal behavior, they tend to be viewed as offenders rather than victims. These misperceptions may block or delay referral for appropriate services.

Commercial sexual exploitation places girls at greater risk of health problems and health-compromising behaviors including drug and alcohol abuse and suicide attempts. Girls who experience CSE have a much higher chance of developing a psychiatric disorder, continuing to have one, or developing another episode after remission, than adolescents who do not experience CSE. A girl who is a victim of CSE also has a high risk of unplanned pregnancy, STD infection, and HIV infection.

Even after girls are out of exploitive situations, they are faced with a host of physical and emotional problems. They are often stigmatized, pushing them further into isolation. Some girls age out of the juvenile justice system and into the adult system. Many do not ask for help because the only “help” they have ever gotten is from their exploiter. Among those who do reach out for help, family support has been identified as an important factor for successful recovery. Appropriate and responsive services are equally as critical.

Atlanta is beginning to develop the infrastructure needed to respond to the needs of these girls and to suppress CSEC.

Law Enforcement

When the Atlanta Police Department’s Vice Unit targets prostitution related crimes, juveniles are sometimes picked up. When this happens, the Child Sexual Exploitation Unit receives a copy of the report and assigns an investigator. Minors who are arrested by Vice are detained at Metro Regional Youth Detention Center. The investigator immediately goes out and talks to the child. The Atlanta Police Department has also received a grant from the Office of Human Trafficking of the Department of Justice to establish an Anti-trafficking Unit. Three undercover detectives have been hired who are dedicated exclusively to locating and charging perpetrators of sexual exploitation of people who are trafficked into the City. The City of Atlanta has committed an additional \$150,000 to add to the \$400,000 grant from the Department of Justice.

In 2003, the FBI implemented a national initiative named “Innocence Lost” to address child prostitution. A strategy was developed to train personnel and establish task forces; share intelligence concerning pimps,

juveniles used in prostitution, and criminal enterprises; and support long-term investigations with the requisite personnel and financial resources. The Atlanta FBI office was identified as one of fourteen field sites having the highest incidence of children used in prostitution.

Human Services

The Fulton County Child Advocacy Center works to reduce the service fragmentation that often further traumatizes the children various agencies are trying to help. A new case tracking data base has recently been launched which will assist greatly in coordinating all of the services who come in contact with victims.

The Juvenile Justice Fund was established to facilitate the development of resources to provide comprehensive services to improve the lives of children and strengthen the families and youth served by the Fulton County Juvenile Court. JJF has oversight over CEASE and Angela's House among other resources.

CEASE (Center to End Abuse and Sexual Exploitation) advocates on behalf of victims of commercial sexual exploitation; makes appropriate recommendations for treatment and other services after reviewing court-ordered psychological evaluations, family assessments and child interviews; and conducts community education and awareness programs.

Angela's House, is a six-bed facility that provides girls ages 13 through 17 with protection from predators, physical and psychological assessments, and a long-range plan of care and treatment. It is the only such facility on the east coast.

Multisystematic Therapy (MST) is an intensive family-based program for the prevention of juvenile delinquency. In an effort to redirect a juvenile's trajectory away from incarceration or removal from the home, judges can mandate MST for the family. MST works to permanently change family dynamics through intensive in-home counseling; assisting parents in developing parenting skills and strategies to deal effectively with their children; and assisting children in learning to develop positive strategies to deal with problems at home and school without falling into antisocial or high-risk behavior.

Standup for Kids is a national organization whose mission is carried out by volunteers who find, stabilize, and assist runaway and homeless children in their efforts to improve their lives. Standup for Kids also works to deter children from running away and offers resource programs in schools and via the Internet.

Covenant House provides services to youth, ages 16 to 21. Every night, the outreach van leaves Broad Street seeking youth who are on the street from the hours of midnight to 8:00 A.M. to provide them with food and a referral to the community resource center for additional assistance. Covenant House plans to open a homeless shelter for youth this fall.

Project Safe Space – DeKalb County is a collaborative effort. Participating businesses and community organizations display diamond shaped Safe Place signs in their windows. Children in need can walk into any of these establishments and ask for help. The Safe Place location employee calls the Safe Place agency and makes the child comfortable until a trained volunteer or staff member arrives.

Barriers

There is a lack of systematic reporting and monitoring on the part of many agencies that work with at-risk and CSE girls. Agencies that serve domestic victims of CSE are often constrained financially. CSE is an extremely complex issue that requires long-term interventions and collaborative efforts on the part of the community, law enforcement, and human service agencies. Long-term interventions are not the type of programs that typically receive funding. Children from other counties and states often pass through the system with no procedure for following up on the outcome.

Safe spaces and housing for girls that have been victims of commercial sexual exploitation are lacking. Angela's House is the only safe house east of the Mississippi for such girls. As a result, girls often remain in the same neighborhoods as their exploiters.

Funding has also been identified as a barrier to care for girls who have been victims of CSE. This is particularly true for children who are not part of the juvenile justice system or in the custody of the State. Many working and middle class families lack the resources to find appropriate care for their daughters.

Law enforcement needs to focus on the pimps and panderers, but more often girls are criminalized and their exploiters remain free. Partly this is because without the victim's cooperation, it is very difficult to get a conviction. Victims of CSE are often terrified of their pimps and fear retaliation if they testify against them. In addition, children are intimidated by a system that criminalizes them. Finally, girls often deny that they are being exploited. This is why it is so important to provide girls with a safe refuge in which to work through their denial, and overcome the psychological and physical trauma.

Recommendations

Vulnerable girls will remain hidden in plain view unless the community gets involved to address CSE. The following are recommendations for assisting victims of CSE and preventing CSE:

- Creation of a community action plan with stakeholder buy-in (law enforcement, judicial services, human service providers, and community leaders) to facilitate better coordination, inter-agency communication, and continuity of care for victims of CSE. All sectors should be held accountable for implementing their area of responsibility and creating benchmarks for change.

Law Enforcement and Justice System

- Review current laws related to CSE and amend if necessary
- Facilitate the prosecution of panderers as child sex abusers and place them on sex offenders lists; prosecute pimps under law creating felony for pimping a minor
- Create a school for johns (e.g. First Offenders Prostitution Program). Research the models used in several other US cities that charge a fee to the john (to cover the expenses of the program and also help underwrite the services to victims)
- Enforce the crime of transportation for purposes of prostitution
- Re-institute policy of seizing vehicles of johns when they are arrested
- Create a social service resource book for APD that provides contact information for all available non-profit organizations that serves this population
- Change out vice unit cars to ensure security of undercover operations
- Deputize officers in Vice Unit to allow them to pursue people who recruit and solicit in Atlanta and then leave city limits
- Strengthen forensic interview process by staffing existing centers after 5:00 pm
- Target web-based recruitment, advertising and solicitation by funding undercover sting operations

Human Services

- Increase partnerships with and funding for agencies that have demonstrated success working with CSE children
- Establish and fund additional safe houses and residential treatment programs, based on the Angela's House model, for CSE children. Develop a true "continuum of care" so that girls can move from assessment to therapeutic care while feeling safe and secure throughout their re-entry
- Establish and fund runaway shelters in the city for all minors regardless of age or residence
- Establish and fund aftercare programs, including support groups for girls and their families
- Develop a standardized protocol that all agencies that work with victims of CSE follow to streamline services
- Support the new computer case tracking system, CACTIS
- Support the collaboration of organizations serving trafficking victims, no matter their age and country of origin, and those serving victims of CSE no matter their race or nationality

Prevention

- Conduct a metro-wide information campaign, targeting men, about the statutory consequences of soliciting sex from a minor and the impact of CSE on children
- Conduct a youth-oriented prevention campaign targeting adolescents and engage the music industry in Atlanta to participate in prevention activities
- Engage the Board of Education, the NPU's and various business organizations, including the Chamber of Commerce, in developing strategies to end the sexual exploitation of minors

Research and Data Collection

- Conduct a 5-year prospective study in the metro-Atlanta area to collect and analyze information about all aspects of the commercial sexual exploitation of children (male, female and transgender) including the trafficking of women and young girls into Atlanta