

## **A Multidisciplinary Approach is the Key to Combating Child Sex Trafficking**

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The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) is often perceived as an international problem, happening in foreign countries like Thailand, Brazil or Mexico. For the most part, Americans are dismayed when they discover that trafficking in children not only occurs on foreign soil, but that foreign children are also trafficked into the U.S.

However, the most shocking part for many Americans is when they become aware that child sex trafficking is also happening to American youth within the U.S. at an alarming rate. The truth is, the general public has no idea that CSEC has become a serious domestic dilemma affecting juveniles across the nation, some as young as five years old.<sup>1</sup>

Each year, an estimated 300,000 children in America are at risk for commercial sexual exploitation, while the problem seems to be even more concentrated in communities near or bordering Mexico.<sup>2</sup> San Diego is considered an international gateway city for child sex trafficking, but children are also recruited at local schools, shopping malls and on the Internet. The situation has become so pervasive; the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) identified the San Diego region as a “High Intensity Child Prostitution Area.”<sup>3</sup> Only a dozen other U.S. cities share that unflattering distinction.

One of the biggest hurdles in tackling this problem is the undeniable lack of services and policies to help sexually exploited youth. No one agency or organization can solve this issue alone. A multidisciplinary approach is necessary in order to rescue and rehabilitate children who are prostituted. This approach must involve all key stakeholders interested in protecting children and incorporate a model established by the U.S. Department of Justice that focuses on prevention, protection and prosecution. This approach must include representatives from the following groups: local and federal law enforcement agencies; state and non-governmental social service agencies; local and federal prosecutors; representatives from the child welfare and juvenile justice system; mental health and health care providers focused on children and adolescents; faith-based groups, and public officials.

A comprehensive treatment plan is necessary to assist these children. Furthermore, it is crucial that all the key stakeholders working on this issue treat sexually exploited youth as victims, instead of criminals who “choose” the prostitution lifestyle. In the court of public opinion, many classify trafficked youth as willing participants in what is often erroneously called, “a victimless crime.” But through education and awareness, it’s possible to correct some of the negative and inaccurate perceptions surrounding prostituted youth.

## **Background**

In 2006, the ACTION Network (Against Child Trafficking in Our Neighborhoods) received funding from the California Endowment in order to develop a strategic, comprehensive plan to prevent the victimization of trafficked and sexually exploited children in the San Diego region.

As part of this pilot project, the ACTION Network joined forces with San Diego Youth Services (SDYS) and the Criminal Justice Research Division of the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) to conduct a community assessment which helped the ACTION Network implement its strategic plan.

As part of that assessment, SANDAG surveyed 200 homeless, runaway and vulnerable youth. This particular population was targeted because research shows this particular group faced a greater risk for sexual exploitation and prostitution.

SANDAG also interviewed 15 key informants (law enforcement, justice officials, healthcare, social service, and other providers who work with adolescents) and questioned 15 business and community members who live or work in areas around San Diego County that were identified as “high prostitution” areas.

The results revealed:

- 1 in 5 youth surveyed were approached to engage in acts of prostitution
- 1 in 3 youth surveyed had been sexually exploited

- Sexually exploited youth primarily traded sexual favors for basic necessities (food, clothing, shelter) and alcohol/drugs
- Sexually exploited youth were more likely than other vulnerable youth to have run away from home, or be victimized at home by others they knew
- Key informants reported serving more youth at their agencies that had been sexually exploited
- 9 in 10 key informants stated that the prostitution of children is a serious issue in the San Diego region, and that a comprehensive program is needed to tackle the problem<sup>4</sup>

#### **Developing Partnerships, Establishing a Multidisciplinary Team in National City, CA.**

Based on the assessment recommendations, the ACTION Network formed a Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) based in National City, California, consisting of professionals in the field of CSEC who provided a wide variety of perspectives and solutions to this multi-faceted problem.

The MDT model is nationally recognized as an evidence-based practice that is mandated in various states to address child abuse. In California, guidelines for the formation of a MDT are written into the Penal Code as well as the Child Welfare and Institutions Code.

The goal of the MDT is to provide a multidisciplinary approach in the treatment and investigation of child abuse cases. One of the top priorities is to reduce trauma to the child by minimizing the number of interviews the child must face. According to

research, by reducing the number of investigatory interviews that a child often endures, there is a reduction in “system intervention trauma.”<sup>5</sup>

The MDT also allows for increased communication between agencies that need to share critical information to treat child abuse but feel restricted due to confidentiality barriers. Children have lost their lives due to the failure between child protective and criminal justice agencies to communicate information that could have prevented the further abuse of a child.

Some MDTs are designed to be prosecution based and therefore require that investigators and prosecutors be an integral part of the team. Other teams have adopted hybrid models where they have focused more on treatment or policy development.

Although MDTs have traditionally been used to address child abuse, the MDT based in National City is arguably the first in the nation to use the model to specifically address the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC). Because experts in the field consider CSEC a form of child abuse, it made sense to operate under the umbrella of the MDT.

Since the MDT was dealing with prostitution, which is considered a criminal enterprise, the FBI and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) were also an integral part of the team. In MDTs that address traditional child abuse, the alleged perpetrators are the parents or care

takers of the child victims, whereas in the MDT based in National City, the alleged perpetrators are the pimps and gangs involved in child sex trafficking.

The National City Police Department was the first municipal law enforcement agency to join this team. Prostitution – including the commercial sexual exploitation of children – is a reoccurring problem in National City, the second oldest municipality in San Diego County. In its assessment, SANDAG identified the city as a prostitution “hot spot,”<sup>6</sup> because of “the track:” an eight block stretch in the city’s northwest corner which is littered with budget motels. In 1996, the city council passed the first hotel-motel ordinance in San Diego County requiring customers to show a valid picture ID before renting a room. Three months after the ordinance passed, police calls for service at six National City motels dropped by more than 66%.<sup>7</sup> But due to current budget cuts and staffing issues, the police department did not have enough manpower to constantly monitor all of the motels’ registration records.

Seeking a cost-effective way to address the issue, in 2007, National City received a grant from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to install surveillance cameras along the track. Two years earlier, the San Diego County Sheriff’s Department received another grant from the U.S. Department of Justice to form a Human Trafficking Task Force for the San Diego region. That grant provided the National City Police Department the necessary funds to conduct sting operations along the track.

Using female police officers as decoys, the police department arrested dozens of men on solicitation charges, while others were arrested on pimping charges.<sup>8</sup> Despite this success, the department struggled on how to adequately address juveniles detained for prostitution. It was not uncommon for a patrol officer to spend an entire shift trying to find a shelter and services to address the unique needs of a child who had been trafficked and sexually exploited.

Officers were reluctant to take the child to juvenile hall because she would most likely be back on the streets and under the control of her pimp in a matter of hours. Officers also avoided a local receiving home for troubled youth because this facility catered almost exclusively to the needs of children who are abused at home – often at the hands of a relative. Making matters worse, prostituted youth taken to the receiving home often tried to recruit other girls into the sex trade industry, according to experts in the field.<sup>9</sup>

### **Victim Protection Protocol**

Recognizing these unique challenges, the MDT decided to develop a Victim Protection Protocol focused on intervention, education, and the rehabilitation of sexually exploited youth.

At first, many police officers and first responders were apprehensive about the protocol. Given the nature of the crime, the public clings to numerous negative stereotypes regarding prostituted teens including the false perception that juveniles willingly enter

this so-called profession for monetary gain or for the “allure” of being a prostitute. Compounding these stereotypes is the fact that many of these juveniles often have a history of delinquency behavior including substance abuse, running away from home and going AWOL from shelters that are designed to protect them.<sup>10</sup>

To counter and correct these negative viewpoints, the ACTION Network held several training workshops and community forums designed to educate law enforcement and first responders about the socioeconomic factors that push children into prostitution.

### **Socioeconomic Factors**

Due to the lack of survival options, many runaway and homeless youth have no other alternative but to engage in survival sex, which involves selling their bodies in exchange for basic necessities like food, clothing and shelter.<sup>11</sup> Numerous studies show these juveniles often come from backgrounds steeped in sexual, physical and psychological abuse, which makes them more susceptible to the recruiting and grooming techniques employed by pimps.<sup>12</sup> Research reveals that pimps and traffickers frequently manipulate these mental, physical and financial vulnerabilities in order to foster a sense of dependency between the minors and themselves.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, pimps and traffickers sometimes provide drugs to these children as a way to further marginalize and criminalize their behavior.<sup>14</sup> This only solidifies the perception in the community – and among the minors themselves – that they should be considered delinquents, not victims. Many of these minors enter the juvenile justice system under what is commonly known



as “masking charges” including drug use, drug sales and curfew violations. These charges obscure the more pressing issue of sex trafficking, and they prohibit law enforcement and other first responders from placing the children in specialized shelters and programs designed to break the cycle of sexual exploitation.<sup>15</sup>

Once National City police officers and social service providers understood these underlying realities that contributed to the problem, the next step was developing and implementing the protocol, which served as a guideline on how officers and agencies respond to prostituted youth during their initial encounters out in the field.

## **Implementing the Protocol**

To fully address the complex needs of these juveniles, service providers and law enforcement implemented a crucial component of the MDT: the Children’s Emergency Response Team (CERT), which accompanied police officers on sting operations and interviews with prostituted youth. CERT members could not be with officers on every patrol in National City, but they were always on standby, ready to mobilize in a moment’s notice.

If called by police, CERT immediately conducted a thorough assessment to evaluate the placement options and services required for each juvenile. When appropriate, CERT would meet with the parents of the child victim, or make referrals to shelter services. At times, shelter services were necessary, not because there was abuse in the home but due

to safety issues concerning pimps or gangs who preyed on children within their neighborhoods. In one case, CERT discovered that the mother and boyfriend of two sisters, one 12-year-old and one 13-year-old, were acting as the young girls' pimps. In this case, Child Welfare Services (CWS) also became involved.<sup>16</sup>

In cases where medical assistance might have been warranted, CERT knew to transport victims of CSEC to Rady Children's Hospital, which was also a member of the MDT and available to provide forensic exams in potential cases of sexual assault. An exam is critical in order to collect any physical evidence that could later help prosecutors win convictions on cases of rape, forcible oral copulation and/or sodomy.

CERT members were trained to show compassion and sensitivity to all of the juveniles they encountered. Like their law enforcement counterparts, CERT responders experienced a paradigm shift in their thinking and treated these minors as "victims" instead of "suspects." Some responders accompanied and advocated for the minors in juvenile court, or visited them at juvenile hall if they were detained on previous arrest warrants.

### **Interview Guidelines**

If the minor did not have a prior warrant or was not on probation, police officers were careful not to Mirandize the child. To do so would only imply that the child was not a victim. Once the child was rescued from the street and from the threat of her pimp, she

was transported to the National City Police Department and interviewed in a comfortable setting as opposed to a cell or holding tank. CERT interviewed every child in a non-judgmental and non-threatening manner, an approach that was effective with most youth because it refuted misconceptions they had about law enforcement. Those misconceptions were created and fostered by their pimp's indoctrination.

Law enforcement immediately saw the benefit in teaming up with social service providers and how it created an even greater rapport with the victims. During these assessments, the children were reassured of their safety and were offered counseling and shelter services as a way to escape their pimp's captivity.

### **Case Management & Treatment**

Adhering to the protocol, the MDT was instrumental in developing and implementing a treatment plan that addressed the unique physical, psychological and spiritual needs of these victims. As a member of the multidisciplinary team, San Diego Youth Services (SDYS) provided a significant level of assistance including: emergency shelters; drug, alcohol and mental health counseling; and programs and support groups geared to address teen pregnancy and parenting. SDYS provided case management services and staff members manned a toll free 24-hour crisis hotline, night shelter and daytime drop-in center for the youth. Alliant International University's Center for Forensic Studies provided case consultation in meetings and leadership and expertise in the design and structure of the MDT/CERT protocol. Other agencies and organizations also participated

in the MDT by providing victims with the following resources: counseling; medical and dental care; legal assistance; job training and workshops focused on independent living skills; school placement; mentorships; and chaplain services.

The MDT trained the staff at the Storefront Teen Shelter about CSEC and developed a shelter protocol on how to respond to and work with victims of child sex trafficking. The shelter protocol was similar to the protocols used in domestic violence shelters. For example, youth were not allowed to have contact with anyone outside the facility without written authorization, which meant that access to cell phones and the Internet was restricted. Youth had to sign a contract agreeing to not disclose the location of the shelter. They were also forbidden to discuss their case or involvement in CSEC with any other youth at the shelter. Recruiting other youth for outside activities was strictly prohibited.

These restrictions worked; the staff experienced no recruitment problems during the four-month pilot project. The youth responded well to the shelter protocol and appreciated that the staff were aware of their particular issues and were available to discuss them when appropriate. Six of the ten girls who were rescued decided they did not want to return to their pimps. Three were even willing to testify against their captors.<sup>17</sup>

## **Positive Results**

Given the myriad of services and resources provided, several minors experienced a paradigm shift of their own. They gradually began to trust the police officers and social service providers – no small feat considering pimps spend a considerable amount of time indoctrinating these children into thinking that these agencies and law enforcement are the enemy and not the solution to their problems.<sup>18</sup> As a result, law enforcement had more opportunities to build stronger cases against the pimps because the youth who had received MDT services - instead of punitive consequences – were more cooperative. Thanks to this approach, the youth also became helpful witnesses in court. In any child trafficking case, it is always beneficial when the youth are regarded as cooperative witnesses as opposed to “prostitutes” who are not willing to change their lifestyle.<sup>19</sup>

The MDT - which not only involved service providers but numerous law enforcement agencies - was also instrumental in uncovering a big child sex trafficking ring in the city of San Diego. The MDT brought the case to the FBI, who worked it closely with the San Diego Police Department. As a result, on January 20, 2009, three defendants admitted to a federal judge to recruiting, persuading and employing teenager girls to perform acts of prostitution two years earlier, in 2007.<sup>20</sup>

Thanks to the four-month pilot project, the ACTION Network rescued 10 girls who had been commercially sexually exploited.<sup>21</sup> National City Police Lieutenant Randy Triviz says the project was so successful, several juveniles actually called his department to find out when certain patrol officers were working so they could to turn themselves in and receive services.

“We offered them something other than a set of handcuffs and a room with a set of bars in front of it. We offered them a way out, a way to recapture themselves,” said Triviz. “The girls eventually realized they were being used, that their pimps were not taking care of them.”<sup>22</sup>

According to Triviz, many of the pimps that used to work in National City thought their girls were “bulletproof” because officers didn’t have a place to take the minors. But with the implementation of the protocol, Triviz claims that mindset changed, and pimps stopped bringing their girls into National City over fear they would essentially “lose their product.”

As a result, police calls regarding prostitution dropped 75% in the city’s northwest corner, an area notorious for prostitution.<sup>23</sup>

## **The Future**

Funding for the pilot project ended in late 2007, but in December 2009, the ACTION Network was reactivated as part of the Safe Border Community Project (SBCP), a program implemented by the Institute for Public Strategies (IPS) thanks to a two year, \$2.8 million dollar Edward Byrne Memorial Grant awarded by the Department of Justice.

Even though the National City Police Department has made huge strides in reducing the commercial sexual exploitation of children within its boundaries, the problem continues to persist in other parts of San Diego County.

There are at least nine governmental and nongovernmental organizations working to tackle this issue on a variety of fronts but the San Diego region currently lacks a united approach in addressing the problem. In conjunction with the SBCP, the ACTION Network is committed to tackling this issue by working to implement the Victim Protection Protocol with every law enforcement agency, child welfare and juvenile justice institution in San Diego County.

The ACTION Network and the SBCP are also behind the creation of a CSEC Council, a coordinating body designed to facilitate the sharing of research, resources and strategies to combat child sex trafficking at a countywide, interdisciplinary level. A steering committee has been formed to examine the need to potentially increase penalties for those who traffic, prostitute and solicit children for sex. The committee is also exploring the possible implementation of a Hotel/Motel Ordinance in the unincorporated areas of San Diego County. Similar to the law passed in National City in 1996, the ordinance would require hotels and motels to maintain adequate registration records that can be accessed at any time by law enforcement, and prevent more than one room rental over an eight hour period.

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- <sup>9</sup> Lt. Randy Triviz National City Police Department, face-to-face interview, October 2010
- <sup>10</sup> Burke et al (2007).
- <sup>11</sup> "The National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: America's Prostituted Children," Shared Hope International. May 2009
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- <sup>15</sup> Shared Hope International et al (2009).
- <sup>16</sup> Triviz et al (2010).
- <sup>17</sup> Dawn Griffin, Alliant University, telephone interview, December 2010
- <sup>18</sup> Triviz et al (2010).
- <sup>19</sup> Triviz et al (2010).
- <sup>20</sup> "Three Plead Guilty to Sex Trafficking of Children," FBI-The San Diego Division: Department of Justice Press Release (January 20, 2009) <http://sandiego.fbi.gov/dojpressrel/pressrel09/sd012009.htm> (accessed December 2, 2010).
- <sup>21</sup> Triviz et al (2010).
- <sup>22</sup> Triviz et al (2010).
- <sup>23</sup> Karen Abruscato, National City Police Department, Crime Analyst, face-to-face interview, February 2011.