



October 6, 2010

SUBJECT: The Issue of Human Trafficking & Juvenile Exploitation in Kansas

There is a tendency to see the issue of human trafficking as important from a human rights perspective, but one removed from the concerns of the typical family or citizen. The purpose of this memorandum is to argue that human trafficking is urgently relevant to the mainstream of our society, and the conclusion is this: What we do on human trafficking should be seen as an integral part of a strategy to make Kansas safe for kids.

Part of the problem is perceptual: many people who are aware of human trafficking think it is something that occurs in foreign countries, and that to the extent it occurs here, it affects mostly victims from other countries. But because the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) deems any juvenile who engages in commercial sex to be a victim of trafficking, the vast majority of victims are in fact American kids: 250,000 American victims per year versus fewer than 20,000 victims from other countries (this is why we think juvenile exploitation is a more descriptive term than human trafficking).

Kansas' share of this human misery is 2,315 juvenile victims per year (who are exploited through commercial sex).

The American people are desperately concerned about the declining degree to which our society nurtures and protects children. Here is one datum: over 80% agree that it is harder to keep kids safe today than when they were going up. Parents have been made aware of the threat of sexual predators, and they are alarmed – but focused on the wrong threat. The snatching of a child from a neighborhood street or town park (parents' nightmare scenario) is exceedingly rare; much more common is the luring of a child into a situation of exploitation from which he or she cannot escape.

America has become a culture of exploitation. We have in the U.S. today a confluence of conditions making for a "perfect storm" of juvenile sexual exploitation. These conditions are:

CONDITION 1: The abuse of children in our homes. In 2008, 247,000 children suffered serious physical, psychological or sexual abuse in their homes. And these are just the cases we know about, the cases which were reported to state authorities. There were 1,047 cases in Kansas.

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One shelter and service provider told us 40% of the foster child population she sees have been victims of commercial sexual exploitation (there were 7,994 kids in Kansas in foster care in the past 12 months; this would translate into 3,198 juvenile victims, although this provider does not see kids placed with families.

We are creating future victims in our homes through this abuse. Denied the love a child rightfully expects from his or her family, he or she goes looking for love in the wrong places, telegraphing his or her vulnerability to recruitment. The trafficker/pimps have an amazing ability to detect the vulnerable kids, those who will be susceptible to their enticements, typically promises of love.

CONDITION 2: Throwaway Kids. This is the most dramatic demonstration of family breakdown I can think of: each year, something on the order of 2.5 million kids have an episode of being missing, meaning they spend one or more nights away from home without their parents knowing where they are. Happily, in the large majority of cases the child returns home safe. But in the most serious cases of a missing child, in the 1,190,900 cases in which the child was deemed to have been “endangered” during the episode of being missing, or in the 377,300 cases in which the child was missing for one week or more, only one out of five of these missing kids (21%) was reported to police (these data come from a federal study).

In Kansas, 4,735 runaway cases were reported to the police last year, while the actual number of missing child episodes was on the order of 14,500.

Think about that: your child is gone from home overnight, whereabouts unknown to you, and you don't tell the police? These are America's throwaway kids. The point is, the vast majority of juvenile victims of exploitation are not being looked for, either by their parents or the police.

CONDITION 3: The epidemic of pornography drives demand for victims. If there are ¼ million juvenile victims each year, then there must be literally millions of victimizers, people who are willing to pay to have sex with children. What sort of person is this? Overwhelmingly, someone profoundly addicted to pornography, driven by this addiction to escalation, to act out his fantasies with a live victim. We have a huge epidemic of pornography addiction in the United States today, and America's children are paying the price.

Incidentally, there are currently in Kansas 7,436 registered sex offenders. How many of them have a history of pornography addiction? I dare predict virtually every one. We will be able to trace the growth of the pornography epidemic by the increase in this number.

The crime of juvenile exploitation defies traditional American methods of law enforcement, since the victims of the crime will not or cannot call the police to report what has been perpetrated against them. And across the country, vice squads are being downsized or disbanded, resulting in fewer and fewer police officers enforcing solicitation statutes. The goal of abolishing the commercial sex exploitation of juveniles requires a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach, part of which is to develop new models of cooperation between law enforcement agencies and community organizations.