



Supporting Young Women Survivors of Commercial Sexual Exploitation: Long Term Solutions to an Age Old Problem

BACKGROUND

Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) in the United States, including domestic trafficking, is receiving considerable attention as an issue that warrants urgent response. While some have approached domestic sex trafficking as a new phenomenon, at the National Crittenton Foundation we know that this issue has been around for a very long time. For more than 129 years, Crittenton agencies have supported survivors of trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation reclaim their lives and their futures. While many who recognize the Crittenton name associate it with single mothers, in truth we were founded to support women seeking to leave lives of “ill repute” or violent situations.

Today, our network of 27 agencies provides services in 31 states and the District of Columbia to girls and young women living in rural, suburban, urban and tribal communities who have experienced violence, abuse and persistent neglect. From intensive residential treatment and transitional programs, to after school and wrap around community-based programs to in-home supports, services are provided using a social justice framework that demands a dual focus on symptoms and root causes.

The harsh reality is that **when it comes to the epidemic of violence against girls in our country we look away.**

- One out of every three girls in this country experiences violence and abuse as a child.
- Nearly 25 percent of all females raped here at home are 12 years old or younger and 61 percent are under the age of 18.

No question—we have a problem. But to be clear, CSE is a symptom of a much larger societal problem that continues to go unaddressed, namely violence and abuse against girls and young women. This violence is rooted in the way in which society views girls and women. Violence and the vulnerability, isolation and instability it causes are the reason girls enter the foster care and juvenile justice systems. It is why they run away, escape through drugs and alcohol, get pregnant and fall prey to traffickers. Regardless of the negative circumstances in which girls find themselves it is most often these conditions beyond their control that propel them into a life marked by self destructive cycles.

As of late we are often asked about the services provided, observations and thoughts on CSEC. This document is a compilation of ideas, thoughts and practices based on the experiences of Crittenton agencies.

CRITTENTON AND CSEC

During the past 24-36 months Crittenton agencies have experienced a significant increase in the number of young women who are under the age of 18 and are referred by child welfare and juvenile justice for services because they have been identified as being involved in domestic commercial sexual exploitation. This includes being trafficked for sex. While these formal referrals have increased, our experience suggests that CSEC is a symptom of the root causes (noted above) exacerbated by many larger challenges facing system-involved girls. As such, throughout the years many girls have come to Crittenton agencies with histories of exchanging sex for shelter, food, safety, etc. It is important to keep in mind that most of the needs of girls who are trafficked are similar to the needs of all girls and young women who are survivors of sexual abuse and/or other forms of violence. **In fact, they are the same girls.**

Girls who are vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation include those in the juvenile justice or foster care systems who move around frequently and do not have stable family environments. Some have been kicked out of their homes or run away because of inter-familial violence. Many have had multiple placements throughout their young lives. The absence of unconditional love in their lives and the abuse and betrayal they experience heightens their vulnerability to the manipulations and false promises of pimps involved in the commercial sex trade. Given their unstable histories, many do not want to “leave the life” and don’t realize that they are being exploited until it is far, far too late. Few have the knowledge of resources that can help them escape. They see the life they are living as better than and even “glamorous” compared to the living conditions they had before. While it is difficult to understand how girls can glamorize the abuse and exploitation they experience, it is essential to be sensitive to this perspective in order to create effective programs and services to address their needs and “get out” of the life.

Much progress has been made recently to highlight the importance of addressing childhood trauma. Yet there is much work to be done to identify trauma early on and to ensure that girls who have experienced sexual, physical and emotional abuse get the help they need before commercial sexual exploitation can take hold. Unaddressed trauma often causes girls to undervalue themselves and their worth, crave attention and material goods, and believe that the abuse and violence are a part of who they are. By the time they are referred to our agencies, it is a complex and long term process to help them build self-esteem, value themselves and their bodies, and believe that they have a future beyond their current exploitation.

TREATMENT

Many are searching for standards of care for supporting the needs, recovery and potential of girls who are survivors of CSE but there are none. Unfortunately, there are no uniform standards of care for supporting the needs girls who are survivors of violence and abuse in any system of care, let alone the specific population of girls who are victims of CSE. Gender and culturally responsive, trauma informed and specific, age appropriate, strength-based approaches essential to the healing and progress of system involved girls should be the norm but sadly is still the exception. Furthermore, current trends across the child serving systems make it difficult to provide girls and young women with the comprehensive services they need. Many child welfare and juvenile justice systems strive to achieve a reduction in residential treatment beds, shorter-term stays, and community and family based placements. These trends may be good for some children, but do not reflect what is needed for girls who have experienced complex trauma such as CSE. At least initially, these young women need individualized service and supports, a safe and protected environment (often away from the communities in which they were exploited) and longer term treatment to deal with complex trauma.

Additionally, many older teens (15 and up) do not participate in services on a voluntary basis, thus the need for requiring mandated services that some courts are reluctant to order.

Beyond Screening and Assessment to Trauma Focused/Specific Interventions

Despite these hurdles, we are heartened by the increased focus on this population, particularly the movement to treat girls who have experienced commercial sexual exploitation as victims rather than criminals. In several of our communities, partnerships between law enforcement, child protection, juvenile justice and the courts have yielded promising results to ensure that police, prosecutors, public defenders, child protection workers, and probation officers can identify girls who are being sexually exploited and refer them to shelters and residential treatment facilities where they can be safe.

CSEC as an issue appears to be hitting a tipping point with wide spread involvement and coverage. **Our concern is that much of the attention is focused on “the rescue” and not on longer term needs.** Unfortunately, we know too well that recognizing girls as victims and referring them to safe havens are only short-term solutions to a long-term process. We must follow suit with a framework for intervention that can help these young women heal and lead productive lives. This would include:

- Providing the trauma focused and gender responsive services that they should have received prior to their involvement in commercial sexual exploitation,
- Recognizing that recovery from sexual exploitation is a long term process that will likely involve relapse, and
- Providing meaningful educational and job opportunities for young women so that the rewards they perceive they are getting while “in the life” (food, clothes, jewelry, cell phones, etc.) are not more attractive than a life in persistent poverty.

The Approach from the Crittenton Family of Agencies

In an effort to share what we have learned over the years in supporting the needs and potential of CSE survivors— as well as the broader population of “girls at the margin” – below is a brief summary of the services and supports that have worked to help young women transition to adulthood with the freedom, hope, strength, confidence, and resilience needed to succeed outside of “the life.” While Crittenton agencies use gender and culturally responsive, trauma informed and specific, age appropriate, strength-based approaches it is important to emphasize that despite a common philosophical approach to our work, there is no one ideal screening tool, one ideal curriculum, or one ideal program. Rather, each youth presents with their own complex history and issues. We have found that building a culture of high expectations, caring, nurturing, and understanding helps young people establish healthy youth-adult relationships they can trust, which in-turn creates the foundation for healing. **Finally, by delivering and reinforcing the message that, “their future is not determined by their past”, we can support the capacity of girls to empower themselves. We emphasize their worth, the importance of self-advocacy and finding and using their voice.**

Screening

Girls who have experienced CSE may show up in any system, including CPS, foster care, juvenile justice, runaway and homeless youth, and law enforcement. All systems must be prepared to screen for CSE: to know what to look for, understand how to build trust, and ensure safety. Building trust with young women who are being sexually exploited must be handled discreetly, as previous trauma has taught them to trust no one, particularly adults in authority. Training on screening practices is a must for all professionals who may come into contact with girls who have experienced CSE. Educating the

broader community about the importance of treating girls and young women as victims and not as “bad girls” is key so we do not re-traumatize young women whose self-esteems are already very low.

On a broader level, we believe that childhood sex abuse is too often unidentified and unaddressed in general, irrespective of CSE involvement. Efforts to more systematically screen for and provide services to victims of child sex abuse are critical to future efforts to prevent vulnerability to CSEC. Toward that end, we promote broader use of the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) survey in a wide range of health, mental health, public health and other settings to identify sex abuse at an earlier age.

Assessment

Assessment for young women who come to Crittenton agencies, whether commercially exploited or not, is geared toward understanding the root causes of their situations. We use a wide range of evidence based assessment tools, including but not limited to:

- Casey Life Skills Assessment
- Adverse Childhood Experience Trauma Indicator Scale
- Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths
- Child Welfare Trauma Referral Tool
- Social History Assessment
- Mental Status Assessment
- PTSD checklist
- Mental Health/Substance Abuse Functional Assessment
- Addiction Severity Index
- Substance Abuse Subtle Screening Inventory-A2

These and other assessment tools are critical to our ability to create plans that address the issues that are unique to each girl who comes through our door. They allow us to put in place clinical interventions that treat the whole child and her experiences, not just the child who has been exploited for sex. **It is important to note that many girls and young women have normalized the violence, abuse and dysfunction in their lives so deeply that even the most comprehensive screening and assessment will not reveal the true depth of the trauma they have experienced.** As such, flexibility and re-assessment are also essential to creating a plan for services and supports that work.

Safety

Increasingly, we find that our mechanisms for guaranteeing safety of the girls served in our agencies are insufficient for the population of girls who are at risk of or have been commercially sexually exploited. This is largely due to the determination of the exploiters, namely their pimps (who they might identify as “boyfriends.”). Security in group home facilities is particularly difficult to guarantee as most state contractual agreements prohibit agencies from locking doors and young people are encouraged to partake in community and school activities. Given the increasing prevalence of recruitment from within group home facilities, however, agencies are training all staff in what to look for as it relates to possible CSE activities. Training and education for the community in general is also critical to prevent future CSEC.

Whether we learn that they have experienced CSE before they came to us or identify the problem after they have been with us for some time, we can develop individualized safety plans and put mechanisms

in place to guarantee campus security. Depending upon the prevalence of CSE in the individual agencies, they may have numerous cameras in the facility to monitor unauthorized visits.

Finally, agencies that serve a high volume of CSE girls have created policies that allow girls to return to the facility if they run away and/or return to the life. If they run away, we believe it is critically important that girls receive a message that they have made a bad choice, not that they are bad people.

Services

Services provided to young women who have experienced CSE must begin with an **acknowledgement of the underlying trauma that caused them to become vulnerable in the first place**. Again, these services are geared toward treating the whole individual and her experiences and are not unique for girls with CSEC involvement. These services generally have the following components:

- Trauma focused mental health and rehabilitative services – for CSEC girls this includes an in-depth and personal examination of how their childhood trauma led to sexual exploitation
- Survivor mentorship, drawing on the resilience of survivors to motivate girls currently experiencing CSE
- Motivational interviewing
- Trauma focused cognitive behavioral therapy, dialectical behavioral therapy and structural family therapy, depending upon each individual assessment
- Addiction counseling
- Art and other approaches that use creativity as an approach to therapy
- Exercise that makes a connection between mind, body and spirit, i.e. Yoga
- Healthy relationships and building trust
- Visioning oneself outside of the life – goal setting and action plans
- Building a support system

Transitions into the Community

Girls who transition back into the community face an uphill journey of survival out of the life. They must use new skills they have learned in treatment and put them to use in the real world, while also understanding that relapse is common. As they prepare to leave the protected environment of the agencies, it is critical that they understand where to turn if they need community resources and how they can get help if lured back into a life of sexual exploitation that is more familiar to them than the life of a “normal” adolescent. Depending on the age and circumstances of each individual, transition services may include:

- Community based mental health trauma treatment
- Family therapy, if appropriate
- Peer support, if appropriate
- Mentorship, particularly by other survivors of CSE
- Meaningful educational opportunities, typically in alternative schools where their experience is understood and in some cases, shared
- Opportunities for education and living wage employment
- Sexual reproductive health services
- Stable placement or housing
- Community-based programs that continue to emphasize healthy choices, healthy relationships, physical health and self-esteem

Collaboration

Crittenton agencies have facilitated the development or been involved in the creation of local collaborations/coalitions on human trafficking designed to increase awareness and the coordination of services to survivors of human trafficking. Members should include the District Attorney's office; County Sheriff's Office; local Police Department; the City; US Attorney General's Office; FBI; ICE; child welfare, juvenile justice, homeless and runaway public agencies and nonprofit service providers; non governmental agencies and other interested organizations and individuals in the local community. The relationships developed through a community-wide approach will facilitate training, funding and service provision.

CONCLUSION

As Rachel Lloyd, Founder and CEO of Girls Education and Mentoring Services (GEMS) and a survivor of CSEC stated in her TED speech on trafficking, the issue has hit a tipping point. People are rallying to take action, express their outrage and support survivors. This is all well and good but much of the focus is on rescuing girls and young women from their exploiters. While this is important, one thing we know for sure is that rescue is not enough. As outlined above, girls and young women who are survivors of CSE experienced trauma before entering "the life" as well as while in it. Rescue alone does not trigger the healing that is necessary for them to build healthy lives. If we are truly committed to eradicating CSEC then we must care equally about addressing sexism and racism and waging war on the epidemic of violence against girls. This begins by eliminating the sexualization of girls and eliminating the double standard of "bad girls" and "boys will be boys" in our society.

The National Crittenton Foundation and the family of agencies will continue to refine our knowledge base, services and supports for girls, young women and women who are survivors of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking. Yet we will also continue to address and raise broader awareness about the epidemic of violence and the millions of survivors of violence that are not commercially sexually exploited. Through the development and replication of our own assessments, service models, sharing experiences and working as partners with survivors we will add knowledge to the field(s) as well as blaze some new trails.

We believe that if girls involved in the juvenile justice, child welfare, and runaway and homeless youth systems were properly assessed and treated for childhood trauma at the front door, commercial sexual exploitation would be significantly diminished. Until then, girls who have experienced commercial sexual exploitation need to be treated as victims not criminals. Their complex trauma must be identified early and supports for healing provided over the long haul. We must convey to them that their future is not determined by their past and that they are courageous, women warriors with the power to change their lives and the world.