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Lost Boys

New research demolishes the stereotype of the underage sex worker—and sparks an outbreak of denial among child-sex-trafficking alarmists nationwide

By Kristen Hinman

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Details:



EDITOR'S NOTE: Village Voice Media, which owns this publication, owns the classified site Backpage.com. In addition to used cars, jobs and couches, readers can also find adult ads on Backpage; for this reason, certain activists and clergy members have called attention to the site, sometimes going so far as to call for its closure.

Certainly [we have a stake in this discussion](#). And we do not object to those who suggest an apparent conflict of interest. We sat quietly and did not respond as activists held symposiums across America—from Seattle to Miami—denouncing Backpage. Indeed, we were never asked for response.

But then we looked at the "science" behind many of these activists' claims, and the media's

Life is life, and you gotta do

what you gotta do. It's like everybody can't be a doctor, a teacher, or have rich parents take care of us. And it's gonna teach us, like—when we get older, we're gonna be stronger, 'cause we know life experience and stuff like that. And we're goin' to know what to do in certain situations because of what we've been through when we were younger. You gotta do what you gotta do to survive.

— female, age 16

The first night Ric Curtis and Meredith Dank went looking for child prostitutes in the Bronx back in the summer of 2006, they arrived at Hunts Point with the windows of Curtis's peeling Oldsmobile, circa 1992, rolled down.

Curtis, who chairs the anthropology department at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Manhattan, had done research on the neighborhood's junkies and was well acquainted with its reputation for prostitution (immortalized in several HBO documentaries). If the borough had a centralized stroll for hookers, he figured Hunts Point would be it.

But after spending several hours sweating in the muggy August air, the professor and his PhD student decided to head home. They'd found a grand total of three hookers. Only two were underage, and all three were skittish about climbing into a car with two strangers and a tape recorder.

Dispirited though they might have been, the researchers had no intention of throwing in the towel. They were determined to achieve their goal: to conduct a census of New York City's child sex workers.

willingness, without question, to regurgitate a litany of incredible statistics. In the interest of a more informed discussion, we decided to write.

For background articles go to:
www.villagevoice.com/sex-trafficking

Subject(s):

[John Jay College of Criminal Justice](#), [Ric Curtis](#), [Meredith Dank](#), [child prostitution](#), [U.S. Department of Justice \(DOJ\)](#), [Schapiro Group](#), [Juvenile Justice Fund](#), [Atlanta Women’s Foundation](#), [Harold and Kayrita Anderson Family Foundation](#), [sex trafficking](#), [Mary Finn](#), [Jay Albanese](#), [Center for Court Innovation](#), [respondent-driven sampling \(RDS\)](#), [David Finkelhor](#), [Crimes Against Children Research Center](#), [underage male prostitutes](#)

Even before they’d begun gearing up for the project two months prior, Curtis and Dank knew the magnitude of the challenge they had on their hands.

No research team before them had hit on a workable method of quantifying this elusive population. For decades, most law-enforcement officials, social workers, and activist groups had cited a vast range—anywhere from tens of thousands to three million—when crafting a sound bite pegging the population of underage hookers nationwide. But the range had been calculated with little or no direct input from the children themselves.

Over time, the dubious numbers became gospel.

In similar fashion, monetary outlays based on the veracity of those numbers began to multiply.

The \$500,000 the federal government had allotted for this joint study by John Jay and New York’s public-private Center for Court Innovation was chump change compared to the bounty amassed by a burgeoning assortment of nonprofit

groups jockeying to liberate and rehabilitate the captive legions of exploited and abused children.

Now Ric Curtis intended to go the direct route in determining how many kids were out there hooking: He and Dank were going to locate them, make contact with them, and interview them one-on-one, one kid at a time. If they could round up and debrief 200 youths, the research team would be able to employ a set of statistically solid metrics to accurately extrapolate the total population.

It took two years of sleuthing, surveying, and data-crunching, but in 2008, Curtis and Dank gave the feds their money’s worth—and then some.

The results of the John Jay survey shattered the widely accepted stereotype of a child prostitute: a pre- or barely teenage girl whose every move was dictated by the wiliest of pimps.

After their first attempt flopped, the two researchers switched tacks. They printed a batch of coupons that could be redeemed for cash and which listed a toll-free number that kids could call anonymously to volunteer for the survey. With a local nonprofit agency that specialized in at-risk youth on board to distribute an initial set of the coupons, the researchers forwarded the 1-800 line to Dank’s cell phone and waited.

It took almost a week, but the line finally lit up. Soon afterward, Dank met her first two subjects—one male, the other female—at a café near Union Square. Both were too old to qualify for the study, and the man said he’d never engaged in sex for pay. But Dank decided to stay and interview them.

The woman said she had worked as a prostitute and that she was confident she could send underage kids Dank’s way. The man said he was 23, just out of jail and homeless.

“Out of the two of them, I thought she would have been the catalyst,” Dank says now. “But his was the magic coupon.”

Within a day, her phone was “blowing up” with calls from kids who’d been referred by the homeless man. Almost as quickly, word got around that two professors were holding late-afternoon “office hours” at Stuyvesant Park and would pay half the going rate for oral sex in exchange for a brief

interview. Before long, the researchers found themselves working long past dark, until they'd covered everyone in line or the rats got too feisty.

Nine months later, Dank and Curtis had far surpassed their goal, completing interviews with 249 underage prostitutes. From that data, they were able to put a number on the total population of New York's teen sex workers: 3,946.

Most astonishing to the researchers was the demographic profile teased out by the study. Published by the U.S. Department of Justice in September 2008, Curtis and Dank's findings thoroughly obliterated the long-held core assumptions about underage prostitution:

- Nearly half of the kids—about 45 percent—were boys.
- Only 10 percent were involved with a “market facilitator” (e.g., a pimp).
- About 45 percent got into the “business” through friends.
- More than 90 percent were U.S.-born (56 percent were New York City natives).
- On average, they started hooking at age 15.
- Most serviced men—preferably white and wealthy.
- Most deals were struck on the street.
- Almost 70 percent of the kids said they'd sought assistance at a youth-service agency at least once.
- Nearly all of the youths—95 percent—said they exchanged sex for money because it was the surest way to support themselves.

In other words, the typical kid who is commercially exploited for sex in New York City is not a tween girl, has not been sold into sexual slavery, and is not held captive by a pimp.

Nearly all the boys and girls involved in the city's sex trade are going it alone.

Ric Curtis and Meredith Dank were amazed by what their research had revealed. But they were completely unprepared for the way law-enforcement officials and child-advocacy groups reacted to John Jay's groundbreaking study.

“I remember going to a meeting in Manhattan where they had a lot of prosecutors there whose job was to prosecute pimps,” Curtis recalls. “They were sort of complaining about the fact that their offices were very well staffed but their workload was—not very daunting, let's say. They had a couple cases, and at every meeting you go to, they'd pull out the cherry-picked case of this pimp they had busted, and they'd tell the same story at every meeting. They too were bothered by the fact that they couldn't find any pimps, any girls.

“So I come along and say, ‘I found 300 kids’—they're all perky—but then I say, ‘I'm sorry, but only 10 percent had pimps.’

“It was like a fart in church. Because basically I was saying their office was a waste of time and money.”

Jay Albanese, a criminologist at Virginia Commonwealth University who headed up the Justice Department's research arm for four years, says the findings of the John Jay study are among the most interesting he has seen.

“Whether you are a kid or an adult, the issue becomes: To what extent is this voluntary?” Albanese says. “Because you make more money in this than being a secretary? Or because you really have no choices—like, you’re running from abuse or caught up in drugs? The question becomes: If Curtis is correct, what do we do with that 90 percent? Do we ignore it? How hard do we look at how they got into that circumstance? You could make the case that for the 90 percent for whom they couldn’t find any pimping going on—well, how *does* it happen?”

“It’s a very valid question,” Albanese continues. “A policy question: To what extent should the public and the public’s money be devoted to these issues, whether it’s child prostitution or child pimping?”

The Federal Bureau of Investigation is the only agency that keeps track of how many children the legal system rescues from pimps nationwide. The count, which began in June 2003, now exceeds 1,600 as of April of this year, according to the FBI’s Innocence Lost website [http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/vc_majorthfts/cac/innocencelost]*—*an average of about 200 each year.

Through interviews and analysis of public records, Village Voice Media has found that the federal government spends about \$20 million a year on public awareness, victims’ services, and police work related to domestic human trafficking, with a considerable focus on combating the pimping of children. An additional \$50 million-plus is spent annually on youth homeless shelters, and since 1996, taxpayers have contributed a total of \$186 million to fund a separate program that provides street outreach to kids who might be at risk of commercial sexual exploitation.

That’s at least \$80 million doled out annually for law enforcement and social services that combine to rescue approximately 200 child prostitutes every year.

These agencies might improve upon their \$400,000-per-rescued-child average if they joined in the effort to develop a clearer picture of the population they aim to aid. But there’s no incentive for them to do so when they stand to rake in even more public money simply by staying the course.

At the behest of advocates who work with pimped girls, along with a scattering of U.S. celebrities who help to publicize the cause, the bipartisan Senate tag team of Oregon’s Ron Wyden, a Democrat, and John Cornyn of Texas, a Republican, is pushing for federal legislation that would earmark another \$12 million to \$15 million a year to fund six shelters reserved exclusively for underage victims of sex trafficking. (In an editorial published this past July, [Village Voice Media expressed its support for the initiative, now folded into the pending](#) Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act.)

Although the language of the bill is gender-neutral, some advocates point to the disproportionate influence wielded by groups who direct their efforts exclusively at pimped girls. They worry that anti-sex-trafficking funding might increasingly ignore boys and transgender youths, not to mention kids of any gender who aren’t enslaved by a pimp but sell sex on their own volition.

Jennifer Dreher, who heads the anti-trafficking program at Safe Horizon, a New York nonprofit whose Streetwork Project has targeted juvenile prostitutes and homeless youths since 1984, says if federal lawmakers took the time to read the John Jay report, they would better grasp the complexity of the issue.

“We have been seeing and talking about this population for so long, but that kind of tug-at-your-heartstrings narrative was the only one focused on,” Dreher says, referring to the stereotype of the pimped little girl.

Certainly those girls are out there, Dreher says, and they’re in need of help and compassion. But they’re only a small segment of the underage population commercially exploited for sex. If you want to eradicate the scourge, argues Dreher, “Then you have to recognize the 90 percent of other types of people that this John Jay College study found.”

Ric Curtis couldn't agree more. "All of the advocates are focused on girls," he fumes. "I'm totally outraged by that—I can't tell you how angry I am about that. The most victimized kids that I met with were the boys, especially the straight boys. I felt so bad for those who have no chance with the advocates."

More than three years after publishing his study, the researcher still smarts from the cold shoulder that greeted his work.

"[Initially] there were a lot of people enthusiastic in Washington that we found such a large number," he recounts. "Then they look more closely at my findings. And they see, well, it wasn't 300 kids under the yoke of some pimp, in fact, it was half boys, and only 10 percent of all of the kids were being pimped. And [then] it was a very different reception."

Dank, who now researches human trafficking and commercial sex at the nonpartisan Urban Institute in Washington, D.C., is equally baffled at the study's lack of traction outside the halls of the Justice Department.

"We're not denying that [pimped girls] exist," she emphasizes. "But if you were to take all the newspaper, magazine, and journal articles that have been written on this, you'd come away saying, 'Oh, my God! Every child-prostitution incident involves a pimp situation!' It's this huge thing. Where really, at the end of the day, yes, that is an issue, but we're at the point where we need to look beyond this one subgroup of the population and look at commercial sexual exploitation of children as a whole."

About a year after the John Jay study commenced, the Justice Department set its sights on Atlanta and awarded a \$452,000 grant to Mary Finn, a professor of criminal justice at Georgia State University. Finn's 2007 study had two goals: first, to calculate the population of the metro area's underage sex workers. And second, to evaluate the work of an assemblage of government agencies and nonprofits that had joined forces to combat child prostitution.

The coalition Finn was to assess had formed several years prior with \$1 million in Justice Department funding. Heading it up: the Juvenile Justice Fund, a child-advocacy agency allied with the Atlanta Women's Foundation, and the Harold and Kayrita Anderson Family Foundation. The trio of nonprofits had commissioned a child-prostitution survey whose alarming findings were destined to be regurgitated nationwide by an unquestioning media—and whose methodology, in turn, would be exposed as entirely bogus and discounted by a veritable who's who of child-prostitution researchers.

To kick off the project, Finn arranged a meeting with representatives of the collaborative and invited Curtis along to help break the ice. It seemed like a good idea: Curtis had accrued a wealth of experience thanks to his one-year head start, and the researchers would ultimately share their findings in a final report. But what was intended as an exercise in diplomacy quickly devolved into a debacle.

The get-together began to unravel when Finn explained that the Justice Department's guidelines required her team to gather its data without regard to gender or motive—in other words, that they would be calculating the prevalence of commercial sex among both boys and girls and that both trafficking and so-called survival sex were fair game.

At that point, Finn recounts, a Juvenile Justice Fund board member angrily objected, insisting that no child would engage in prostitution by choice. Throughout the debate that ensued, not a single representative from the Atlanta advocates' contingent uttered a syllable of support for Finn's approach.

Curtis stepped in, noting that Finn's methodology made sense in light of his preliminary findings.

The group wasn't having any of it.

"The members of the collaborative felt the data couldn't be accurate—that maybe that's the case in New York, but it's certainly not how it is here in Atlanta," Finn recalls. "That's when I sensed that they had far more invested—that there was a reason to be so standoffish, to resist so aggressively or assertively, that I wasn't privy to. What was clear to me was the silence of everyone else: There was some issue of control and power."

To this day, Finn says, she's not sure what was behind the hostile reception. But she does provide some compelling historical context.

Back in the late 1990s, she explains, Atlanta women had galvanized to prevent child prostitution. One juvenile-court judge in particular provided a catalyst when she instituted a screening process in her courtroom that was aimed at identifying kids who were engaging in prostitution.

The only children who were questioned about sex work were girls. Boys were never screened.

"The problem was very narrowly defined from the outset," says Finn.

"I'm a feminist scholar," she goes on. "I understand the importance of these advocates—who are predominantly women, predominantly concerned about the plight of girls—wanting to retain that focus on that issue. But as a researcher, knowing that this is labeled as 'child exploitation,' and knowing that there are numbers in other cities showing boys are being victimized, I had to argue that this was maybe a small but significant population we had to look at."

Finn soon found herself facing a dilemma on the research front as well.

When Curtis and Dank put out the call for underage sex workers in New York, they were confident they'd be able to find space in an emergency shelter if they encountered an interview subject who appeared to be in immediate peril. Atlanta, on the other hand, was equipped with no emergency shelters for homeless youths. In the absence of any such backstop, Finn concluded, it would be unethical to go hunting for kids to interview.

So she went with Plan B: interviewing law-enforcement agents and social workers; examining arrest records; and mining a countywide database of child-sexual-abuse cases.

Despite the less-than-satisfactory secondary-source approach, Finn figured she'd have plenty of data to mine. After all, she'd seen breathless media reports of trafficking in Atlanta. "The overall market for sex with kids is booming in many parts of the U.S. In Atlanta—a thriving hotel and convention center with a sophisticated airport and ground transportation network—pimps and other lowlifes have tapped into that market bigtime," blared a 2006 *New York Times* story.

"I walked in thinking: This is going to be a huge priority for any agency that is dealing with at-risk youth. I mean, goodness, this must be at the top of their agenda for training, protocol—all of it."

On the contrary, Finn found that most organizations, whether nonprofit or government run, were not systematically documenting cases of child prostitution. Apart from 31 juvenile arrests police had made over a four-year period, there were virtually no numbers for her to compile.

"It was almost like nobody wants to document their existence," Finn says. "Whether it's because they don't want to label the youth, or they don't want other agencies to know they're aware of them because then the call comes—'Well, what are you doing about it?'—I just don't know. It was very odd. The environment we were seeing in the media just looked so different from the environment we walked into."

In September 2008, just as Finn was preparing a summary of her scant findings, the Juvenile Justice Fund announced an ongoing statewide study based on “scientific probability methods,” whose results to date pointed to “a significant number of adolescent girls being commercially sexually exploited in Georgia, likely ranging from 200 to 300 girls, on the streets, over the Internet, through escort services, and in major hotels every month from August 2007 to May 2008.”

Published in 2010, the final report was nearly as ambiguous, though there were more—and even bigger—numbers. According to the Justice Fund’s “scientific research study,” underwritten with money from the Anderson Family Foundation, each month in Georgia, 7,200 men pay underage girls for 8,700 sex acts, “with an average of 300 acts a day.” The report’s authors updated their 2008 stat, increasing their underage-hooker count to 400.

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* trumpeted the report’s findings under the headline “City’s shame remains; despite crackdowns, Atlanta is still a hub in selling children for sex.”

The *Journal-Constitution* did not, however, inform its readers that the “scientific study” was undertaken not by researchers adhering to rigid academic standards, but by the Schapiro Group, an Atlanta public relations firm hired by the Justice Fund.

Despite the claims to the contrary, there was nothing remotely “scientific” about the research. In order to gauge the number of men who pay for sex with underage girls, the PR firm observed activity at major hotels and on streets thought to be frequented by sex workers. Staffers also called escort services, posing as customers, to inquire into the possibility of hookups with adolescent girls. And they created online ads featuring photos of young-looking females and inviting prospective customers to call a phone number—a line answered by PR firm “operators” posing as pimps and madams. (For more about the Schapiro Group’s dubious methods, see “Weird Science,” written by Nick Pinto and published in the March 24 issue of Village Voice Media’s newsweeklies. [citypages.com/2011-03-23/news/women-s-funding-network-sex-trafficking-study-is-junk-science/])

Mary Finn is troubled by the murky provenance of the statistics, but more so by the time and effort wasted on sensationalizing a problem instead of addressing it.

“This shouldn’t be a race to the top,” she contends. “We should be mobilized for a *single victimization*. Why do we need 300, or 500, or 1,000 to mobilize as a community?”

“I guess that’s what is most disheartening about the [dubious] numerical information that’s coming out: We may not be putting resources where we need to put them because we don’t have a clear grasp of what the underlying problem is.”

Anyone curious about the underlying problem in New York City can find numerous clues within the 122-page report documenting the several hundred in-person interviews at the core of the John Jay College study.

There are, for instance, the state-run group homes for orphans and kids whose families have kicked them out:

“. . . [H]e was like, you know, the little leeches that linger around,” said a girl who told of being picked up by a pimp outside the group home where she resided at age 15. “And I was sittin’ on my steps, and I was cryin’ because they’re givin’ you allowance—20 sumpin’ dollars a week—and then you’re not allowed to do certain types a jobs because you have a curfew. And if you miss curfew, they shippin’ you somewhere else. So it was like, I was just at my rope’s end. And the things that he was sayin’ to me, it sounded good.”

And the potential pitfalls of the foster-care system:

“My mother died, and I was placed in foster homes,” said a girl who started hooking at age 15. “My foster father would touch me, and I ran away. I ended up coming to New York, and I was on the streets; nobody wanted to help me. And I ran into this girl, and she was like 38 when she passed away last year, but she taught me everything I know. She taught me how to do what I have to do—but not be stupid about it—to play it right and be smart.”

Not to mention youth homeless shelters:

“I’ve been raped at Covenant House three times,” one young man stated. “It was by guys in the men’s ward.” (The three other youths interviewed for the study who spoke specifically about the New York–based nonprofit, whose mission is to care for kids in crisis, made no mention of sexual assault; they described the shelter as a place where kids shared knowledge about how to sell sex and/or characterized it as a popular place for pimps looking to recruit.)

One recurring theme is economic desperation:

“The fact that people think that I’m doing it because I want to—I mean, I get replies all the time on e-mail, and they tell me, ‘You know, why don’t you just get a job?’” reported a boy with three years’ experience selling sex. “Well no shit, Sherlock! Honestly! I don’t know, I would like someone to be able to offer me something.”

Law-enforcement personnel, the kids say, are not always helpful:

“One cop said, ‘You’re lucky I’m off duty, but you’re gonna suck my dick, or I’m gonna take you in,’” a transgender youth stated. “This has happened to me about eight times.”

“Police raped me a couple a times in Queens,” said a female who had worked as a prostitute for four years. “The last time that happened was a couple months ago. But you don’t tell anybody; you just deal wit’ it.”

Although many kids said they developed buddy-system strategies to stay safe and fed on the street, nearly all wanted a way out:

“I really wanna stop now, but I can’t ’cause I have no source of income since I’m too young,” said a girl who’d begun hooking at age 12. “So it’s like that I have to do it; it’s not like I wanna do it. As I say, I’m only 17, I got a two-year-old daughter, so that means I got pregnant real young. Didn’t have no type of Medicaid. . . . Can’t get a job, have no legal guardian, I don’t have nobody to help me but [friends], so you know, we all in this together.”

In late 2009, the U.S. Department of Justice called on the Center for Court Innovation and John Jay professor Ric Curtis to expand their research to other cities nationwide, backing the project with a \$1.275 million federal grant. Now Curtis and Jennifer Bryan, the center’s principal research associate, direct six research teams across the U.S., employing the same in-the-trenches approach that worked in New York City: respondent-driven sampling, or RDS.

The method was developed in the 1990s by sociologist Doug Heckathorn, now on the faculty at Cornell University, who was seeking a way to count hidden populations. It has since been used in 15 countries to put a number on a variety of subcultures, from drug addicts to jazz musicians. Curtis and his research assistant, Meredith Dank, were the first to use RDS to count child prostitutes.

For the John Jay study, Curtis and Dank screened kids for two criteria: age (18 and under) and involvement in prostitution. All subjects who completed the study’s full, confidential interview were paid \$20. They were also given a stack of coded coupons to distribute to other potential subjects, and for each successful referral, they were paid \$10. And so on.

RDS relies on a snowball effect that ultimately extends through numerous social networks, broadening the reach of the study. “The benefit of this is that you’re getting the hidden population: kids who don’t necessarily show up for [social] services and who may or may not get arrested,” says Bryan. “It’s based on the ‘six degrees of separation’ theory.”

To calculate their population estimate, the John Jay team first culled the interview subjects who didn’t fit the study’s criteria but had been included for the potential referrals they could generate. The next step was to tally the number of times the remaining 249 subjects had been arrested for prostitution and compare that to the total number of juvenile prostitution arrests in state law-enforcement records. Using a mathematical algorithm often employed in biological and social-science studies, Ric Curtis and his crew were able to estimate that 3,946 youths were hooking in New York.

David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, calls the New York study significant, in that it “makes the big [national] numbers that people put out—like a million kids, or 500,000 kids—unlikely.”

Finkelhor’s single caveat: While RDS is efficient in circulating through a broad range of social networks, certain scenarios might elude detection—specifically, foreign children who might be held captive and forbidden to socialize.

Still, says Finkelhor, “I think [the study] highlights important components of the problem that don’t get as much attention: that there are males involved and that there are a considerable number of kids who are operating without pimps.”

The John Jay study’s authors say they were surprised from the start at the number of boys who came forward. In response, Dank pursued new avenues of inquiry—visiting courthouses to interview girls who’d been arrested and canvassing at night with a group whose specialty was street outreach to pimped girls. She and Curtis also pressed their male subjects for leads.

“It turns out that the boys were the more effective recruiter of pimped girls than anybody else,” Curtis says. “It’s interesting, because this myth that the pimps have such tight control over the girls, that no one can talk to them, is destroyed by the fact that these boys can talk to them and recruit them and bring them to us. Obviously the pimps couldn’t have that much of a stranglehold on them.”

The same, of course, might be true of the elusive foreign-born contingent Finkelhor mentions.

Curtis and Dank believe there is indeed a foreign subpopulation RDS could not reach. But with no data to draw on, it’s impossible to gauge whether it’s statistically significant or yet another overblown stereotype.

And as the researchers point out, the John Jay study demolished virtually every other stereotype surrounding the underage sex trade.

For the national study, researchers are now hunting for underage hookers in Las Vegas, Dallas, Miami, Chicago, and the San Francisco Bay Area, and interviews for an Atlantic City survey are complete.

Curtis is reluctant to divulge any findings while so much work remains to be done, but he does say early returns suggest that the scarcity of pimps revealed by the New York study appears not to be an anomaly.

A final report on the current research is scheduled for completion in mid 2012.

“I think that the study has a chance to dispel some of the myths and a lot of the raw emotion that is out there,” says Marcus Martin, the PhD who’s leading the Dallas research crew. “At the end of the day, I

think the study is going to help the kids, as well as tell their story.”

At the end of the day, if the work Ric Curtis and Meredith Dank began in New York is indeed going to help the kids, it will do so *because* it tells their story. And because it addresses the most difficult—and probably the most important—question of all: What drives young kids into the sex trade?

Dallas Police Department Sergeant Byron Fassett, whose police work with underage female prostitutes is hailed by child advocates and government officials including Senator Wyden, believes hooking is “a symptom of another problem that can take many forms. It can be poverty, sexual abuse, mental abuse—there’s a whole range of things you can find in there.

“Generally we find physical and sexual abuse or drug abuse when the child was young,” Fassett continues. “These children are traumatized. People who are involved in this are trauma-stricken. They’ve had something happen to them. The slang would be that they were ‘broken.’”

Fassett has drawn attention because of his targeted approach to rescuing (rather than arresting) prostitutes and helping them gain access to social services. The sergeant says that because the root causes of youth prostitution can be so daunting to address from a social-policy standpoint, it’s easy—and politically expedient—to sweep them under the proverbial rug.

And then there are the John Jay researchers’ groundbreaking findings. Although the study could not possibly produce thorough psychological evaluations and case histories, subjects were asked the question: “How did you get into this?” Their candid answers revealed a range of motives and means:

- “I can’t get a job that would pay better than this.”
- “I like the freedom this lifestyle affords me.”
- “My friend was making a lot of money doing it and introduced me to it.”
- “I want money to buy a new cell phone.”

Although the context is a different one, Dank and Curtis have, not unlike Byron Fassett, come to learn that their survey subjects’ responses carry implications that are both daunting to address and tempting to deny or ignore.

For example, the John Jay study found that when asked what it would take to get them to give up prostitution, many kids expressed a desire for stable, long-term housing. But the widely accepted current social-service model—shelters that accommodate, at most, a 90-day stay—doesn’t give youths enough time to get on their feet and instead pushes them back to the streets. The findings also point to a general need for more emphasis on targeted outreach, perhaps through peer-to-peer networks, as well as services of all kinds, from job training and placement to psychological therapy.

Regarding that last area of treatment, Curtis believes that kids who have made their own conscious decision to prostitute themselves might need more long-term help than those who are forced into the trade by someone else.

“Imagine if you take a kid off the street and put them in therapy,” he says. “Which do you think is easier to deal with: the kid who’s been enslaved by another human being or the one who’s been enslaved by him- or herself—who only have themselves to blame? In my view, healing those kids is a steeper hill than the one who can point to somebody and say, ‘*He did that to me, I’m not that kind of person,*’ and who can deflect the blame.”

Which raises the question: Who’s willing to pay the freight to guide kids up *that* hill?

