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## Commercial sexual exploitation of American Indian women and girls

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**Commercial sexual exploitation of American Indian women and girls**

**Suzanne Koeplinger, MN Indian Women's Resource Center**

**Alexandra (Sandi) Pierce, Othayonih Research & Evaluations Services LLC**

This paper describes the findings of a preliminary study of the involvement of American Indian women and girls in commercial sexual exploitation in the state of Minnesota. The study was conducted by the Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center in Minneapolis, and funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Though several studies have been conducted in Canada, there has been no published research on the domestic sex trafficking of American Indian women in the U.S. Anecdotal data from providers of direct services to high-risk American Indian women and girls strongly suggest that this is a significant and rapidly growing problem. Several data sources inform the findings presented in this paper. Secondary analysis was completed of 1) statewide and regional data on homeless American Indian women and girls; 2) statewide and county-level data on the self-reported behaviors and experiences of American Indian girls attending Minnesota public schools, and 3) statewide and regional data from public health, criminal justice, juvenile justice, and child protection systems on the representation of American Indian women and girls in these systems as they relate to risk factors for involvement in commercial sexual exploitation. In addition, primary data were collected by two American Indian agencies providing social services, domestic violence services, and sexual assault services to high-risk Indian women and girls in Minneapolis and St. Paul. The two agencies added a new screening form to their normal intake process used to determine which services an incoming client will need, focused on experiences with commercial sexual exploitation. In addition, two full-day round table discussions were held with American Indian advocates providing direct services to homeless American Indian women and girls, runaway or throwaway girls, women and girls on probation for prostitution, and American Indian female victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and/or attempting to escape prostitution. One round table was held in Duluth, Minnesota's international port on Lake Superior, and one was held in Minneapolis. Dr. Pierce will present the research findings and Ms. Koeplinger will describe the direct-services developed in response to those findings. The findings of this study will be used to inform the design of a larger, more comprehensive and rigorous collaborative study to establish prevalence rates for the commercial sexual exploitation of American Indian women in the Midwest

# Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center

The commercial sexual exploitation  
of American Indian girls and women



# Overview of Project

How it started

Resources

Limitations



# Federal and State Law

- TVPA & Wilberforce Reauthorization Act defines sex trafficking as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act in which the commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act is under 18 years of age”.

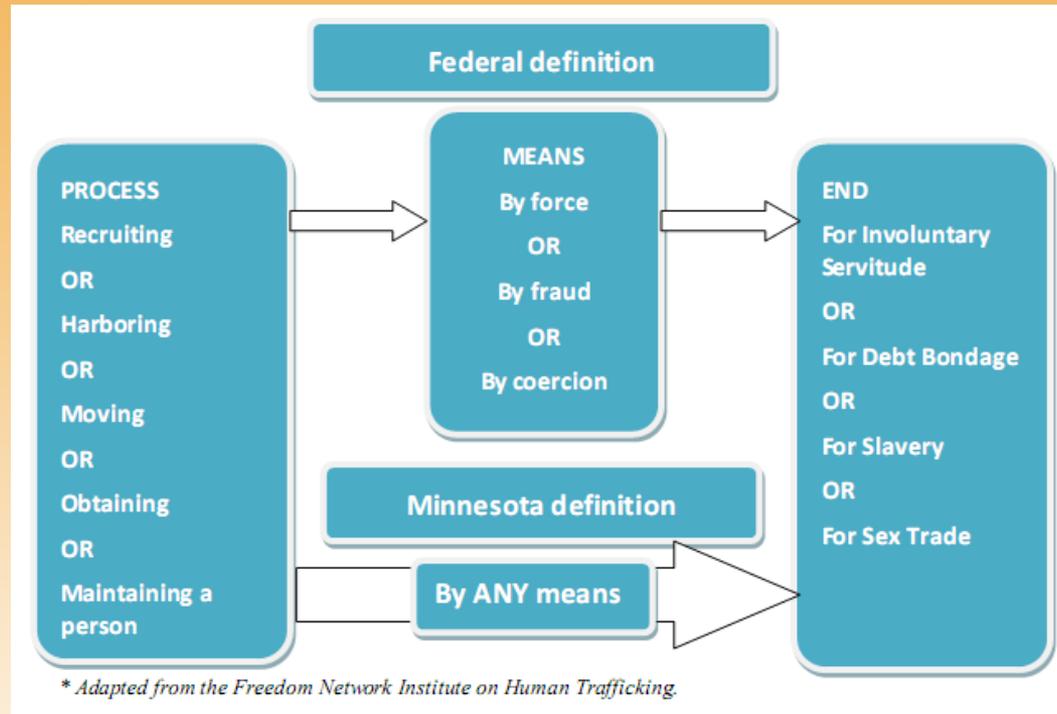


# Minnesota Law

- Defines sex trafficking as a form of promotion of prostitution, and acknowledges that no one can consent to be exploited.
- This removes the “force, fraud or coercion” language.
- May, 2009 Minnesota passed statute to strengthen prosecution of sex trafficking in the state.



# Legal definitions



# Historical context



- Colonial attitudes
- Boarding Schools
- Other assimilation policies – relocation, adoption, involuntary sterilization.



# Native women's experience

- Four Fundamental Beliefs:
  1. The world is a good and rewarding place,
  2. The world is predictable, meaningful and fair,
  3. I am a worthy person,
  4. People are trustworthy.



# Methods and definitions

- Regional Roundtables
- MIWRC intake data
- Published material U.S. and Canada
- Other data – vulnerability factors
  
- Commercial Sexual Exploitation
- Prostitution
- Sex Trade
- Sex Trafficking
- Victim



# Damage of Prostitution

- Women in prostitution experience rape and sexual violence at a rate of 70 – 90 %.
- Vast majority of prostituted women experience extreme physical and sexual violence at the hands of pimps/boyfriends.
- Extremely high rates of chemical addictions, PTSDs, dis-associative disorders, other mental illness.
- Homicide rate for prostituted women 40 times higher than general population.



# Honoring Resilience

- Statistics and outcomes of this report are preliminary.
- American Indian communities continue to find healing through positive connection with language, culture, traditions.
- Sexual violence is not our tradition.
- We must seek our own solutions while holding government, funders and policy makers accountable.



# Roundtable Comments

- Prevalence – the advocates in Duluth report highly visible prostitution, heightened recruitment during hunting season, tourist season.
- This is an old story – multi-generational.
- Increase in violence and gang involvement. Addiction to meth, crack, and other street drugs.
- Age of entry is getting younger all the time.

# Client screening at intake (n=95)



<b>Reported exchanging sex for:</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Shelter or housing	24	25%
Food	14	15%
Money	32	34%
Drugs or alcohol	30	32%
Transportation/use of a car	10	11%
Some other type of assistance	5	5%
<b>Had been:</b>		
Asked to recruit or pimp other girls	21	22%
Made to pose for pornography	11	12%

\*Some reported multiple types of sexual exploitation.

# Prevalence

*Everybody I've come across has been young [at the time they entered prostitution]. Like, 12, 13, 14 sometimes 15. I met one woman who was maybe 19, she was really the exception. There's definitely that 12-15 range. They seem like babies!*

*I work in the housing program portion of a women's shelter. I see the women and we accept the women escaping from prostitution. I did my data collection for a report and I couldn't believe how many people that we had...it was pretty close to 30 women, escaped from prostitution in a few short months.*

# Clients in the sex trade (n=33)



<b>Age when first prostituted</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
8-12	7	21%
13-15	7	21%
16-17	7	21%
18-23	5	15%
27-38	6	18%
39-55	1	6%

\* No age of entry reported for five clients

# Patterns of entry



- Stripping and Pornography – legal for adults but often used as a gateway into prostitution.
- Normalization – extremely high rates of overall sexual victimization, peer influence, multi-generational trauma.
- Internet/Sexting.
- The emotional connection with pimps/boyfriends.
- Guerilla pimping and finesse pimping.

# Clients in the sex trade (n=38)



<b>Recruited into prostitution by:</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Friend(s)	14	52%
Family member(s)	5	19%
Boyfriend	5	19%
Gang	1	3%
Pimp	1	3%
Landlord	1	3%



# Vulnerability/Risk factors

- Violence in the home – runaway, throw away.
- Homelessness, staying in high risk relationships for lack of suitable housing.
- Substance abuse – parent/caregivers and early use of alcohol/drugs for girls
- FASD
- Poverty
- Dropping out of school
- Involvement with child protection system

# Normalization

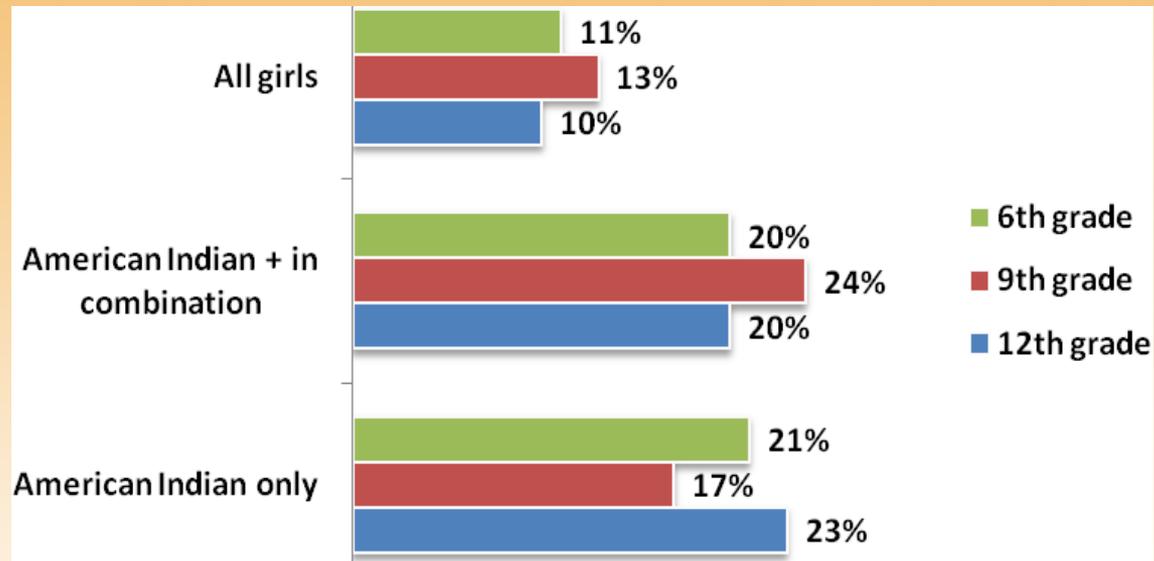


*“I grew up with a bunch of women who did trade sex for money, clothing, food, shelter, housing, did whatever they had to do to keep me in a private education and a good home. I want to be able to move on from that so we’re not raising more kids who normalize that activity as part of everyday life”.*

*“The majority of them have been exposed to sexual abuse. So, its like, they’re making the decision now, they are in control of their bodies and they are going to do what they need to do to get what they want”.*

# Abuse at home

## Girls that reported physical abuse at home, statewide (2007 Minnesota Student Survey)



# Homeless Native women & girls



% reporting abuse as a child	Age group			
	11-17	18-20	21	22+
Physical mistreatment	45%	41%	40%	54%
Sexual mistreatment	30%	41%	20%	51%
Parental neglect	32%	33%	60%	41%
<b>% homeless now due to:</b>				
Feeling unsafe from violence in the home	28%	31%	Not asked	
Physical/sexual abuse by someone in the home	17%	31%	Not asked	

\* Non-reservation, statewide survey (Wilder Research)

# Homeless Native women & girls



% reporting violent victimization	Age group		
	11-17	18-21	22+
Physically abusive relationship during past 12 months	20%	48%	25%
Staying in abusive situation because had nowhere else to go	5%	48%	50%
Physically/sexually attacked or beaten while homeless	10%	16%	31%

\* Non-reservation, statewide survey (Wilder Research)

# MIWRC clients (n=95)

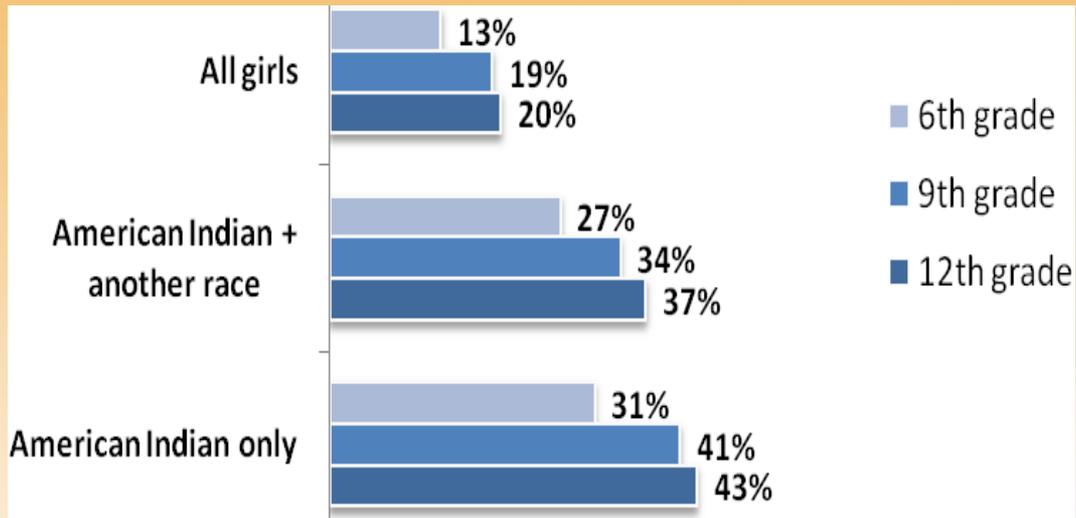


<b>Know someone in prostitution</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Know at least one person	45	47%
Personal friend	44	46%
Family member (all categories)	25	26%
Cousin(s)	10	11%
Aunt	8	8%
Sister	4	4%
Mother	2	2%
Two or more family members	7	7%
Mother's friend	1	1%

# Alcohol use

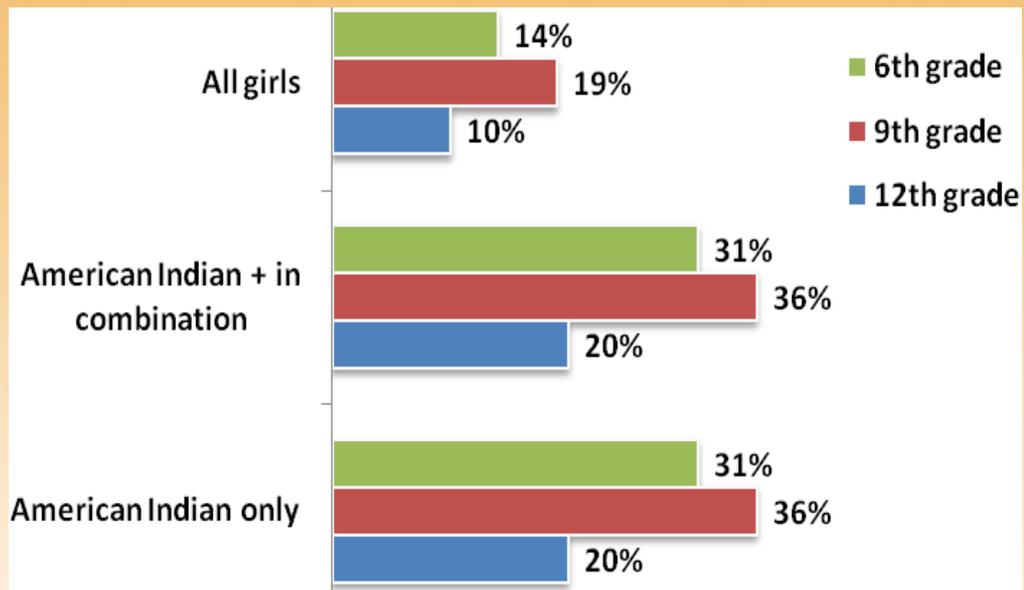


## Girls reporting that a family member's alcohol use caused problems (2007 MN Student Survey)



# Alcohol use

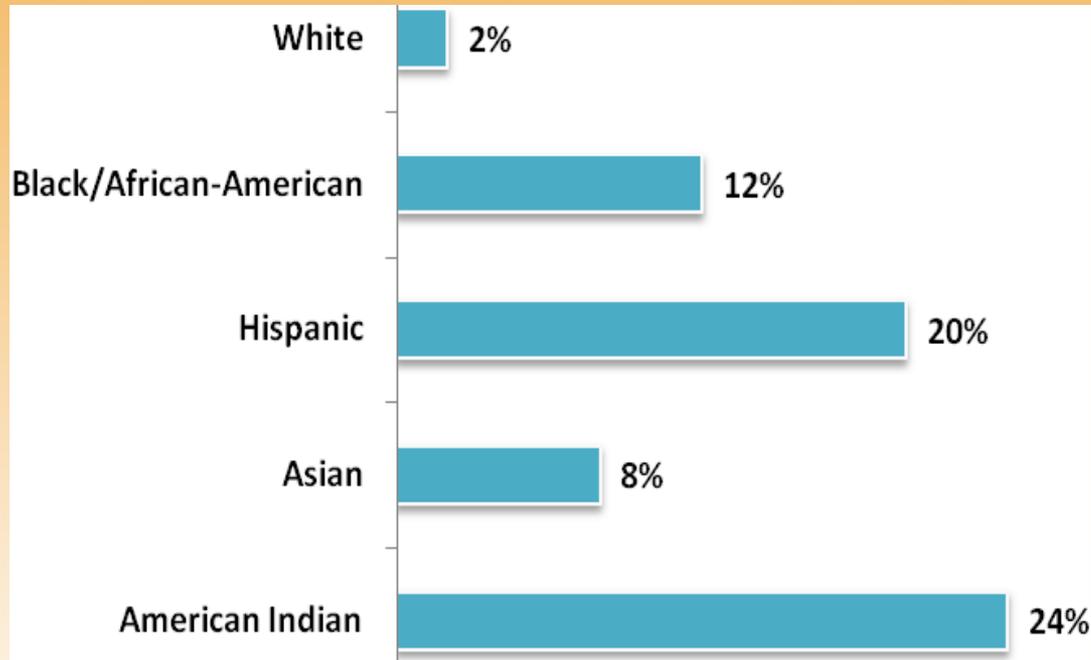
## Girls reporting alcohol use at age 12 or younger (2007 Minnesota Student Survey)



# Failure to complete high school



## Percent of Hennepin County girls that dropped out of school, by racial category (2006 data)



# Barriers to exit



- Inadequate support to ensure safety.
- Distrust of the system – law enforcement.
- Distrust of the system – advocates.
- Absence of real options for self sufficiency.
- Funder restrictions.
- Fear, shame, the “don’t talk” rule.

# Recommendations



- Re-frame the issue, stop criminalizing the victims.
- Increase access to culturally appropriate housing and holistic care for victims.
- Build community support through honest dialogue.
- Hold perpetrators accountable.
- Systems change to increase penalties for perpetrators and bring resources into victims.
- Raise awareness across domains.



## Next Steps as identified by community

Keep emphasis on healing and empowerment, strategic planning must be led by committed and knowledgeable group of Native people.

Prioritize the healing within our communities, ensure no re-victimization as a result of information in this report.

This is not solely a woman's issue – include men, boys, two spirit people in solutions.



**For additional information or a copy of  
the full report, please contact:**

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