

# Under The Radar — The Sexual Exploitation of Young Men British Columbia Edition<sup>1</sup>

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In December of 2002, *Strolling Away* was released. *Strolling Away* represented a longitudinal retrospective study that examined young people from the sexual exploitation trade in 1991-1992 and then again in 2001-2002. The opportunity to interview individuals 10 years later was valuable.

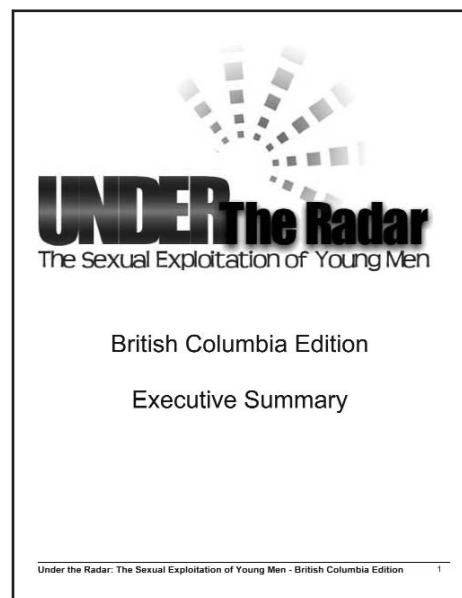
One of its major findings was that we know very little about young men involved in the sexual exploitation trade. The young men I interviewed commented on how my questions were “chick questions”. It was clear that we have traditionally looked at this issue through a female lens. It became evident through this study that more research was required in order to understand young men in the sexual exploitation trade.

This lack of knowledge was the impetus to begin the following connected piece of work entitled *Under the Radar: The Sexual Exploitation of Young Men*. This research aims to answer some of those important questions. Hopefully in doing so, we will be better able to assist younger men by providing specialized support services in order to help them live safe, healthy, meaningful lives.

Interviews for *Under the Radar: The Sexual Exploitation of Young Men — British Columbia Edition* began in April 2004 and wrapped up in March 2005. Forty young men were interviewed in total. Twenty-four interviews occurred in Vancouver and 16 in Victoria.

## Characteristics of Respondents

- > 43% of this population are of Aboriginal heritage
- > Half had involvement with child welfare services
- > Close to 50% had completed high school
- > 88% had a history of running away
- > 78% had a history prior to the street of being sexually violated
- > Over three-quarters had been physically violated and witnessed aggression while growing up
- > 63% entered the trade under the age of 18 years of age
- > 15% entered the trade over the age of 20 years of age
- > Males enter the trade younger and stay longer than young women
- > 70% experienced staying in shelters
- > Almost everyone felt no one should do this type of work
- > The fear of gay-bashing exists
- > Drug use is extensive
- > Exiting the trade is a long process, usually attempted more than once
- > Almost everyone has, and does, access HIV / STD testing



## Discoveries

### Comparable Histories Of Abuse

Both young men and women have comparable backgrounds of sexual and physical abuse prior to their entrance into the sexual exploitation trade. What is key to understand is that these are children with backgrounds of abuse who have entered into the sexual exploitation trade. For young men, this background of sexual abuse was prominent. Seventy-eight percent reported sexual abuse and 90% reported physical abuse.

### Creating A Construct

It was clear that many young men created an image or construct that allowed them to work while in the trade. A number of different methods to create constructs existed.

<sup>1</sup> - Nous présentons dans cet article des extraits du rapport déposé en 2005. L'intégralité est disponible au <[www.hindsightgroup.com](http://www.hindsightgroup.com)>

Young men strive to create a construct to achieve a level of performance while on the street because they are placed in the position of needing to achieve sexual satisfaction (eg. an erection and/or orgasm) for their customers. According to many of the young men I spoke with, many talked about the pressure, need or outcome to demonstrate physical arousal whether they were the receiver or the deliverer.

Even if they are taking the lead in giving a customer a blow job, there is an expectation that some form of excitement, that is an erection, can be sighted. This becomes very challenging for a young man particularly if he identifies himself as heterosexual. Young men are expected to demonstrate 'buy-in'; whereas, women have the advantage of 'faking it'. Men must show some physical evidence of being sexually authentic so they select a construct in which they can achieve what is expected of them from customers.

> Gay for pay > Straight for pay > Tranny for pay > Bisexual > Gay

### **Male Prostitution Fear Factor**

During the years I have been involved with the topic of sexually exploited youth, I have often spoke of the original 50 youth I interviewed in the early nineties. There seemed to be a pattern emerging that focused on the 'poor young women'; however, often I would have to clarify that nine of the original 50 were young men. The issue of young men in the trade made many uncomfortable. To ease this feeling, people would presume that those nine males worked with female customers. However, when I advised them that the majority of young men were involved with adult males, there was a great level of discomfort and angst. It has been a challenge to gain an understanding as to why and how we are able to so readily accept young women in the sexual exploitation trade and not young men. There is a sense that as long as the activity is heterosexual, it is therefore 'normal'. The issue of adult men purchasing sexual services from other young men raises discomfort with both the general public and service professionals. This level of discomfort is raised even higher when it is pointed out that not all customers are themselves gay men. Many are closeted married men. When we speak about young men in the trade we are asking people to stretch outside of their heterosexual comfort zone.

### **Begin Young & Work Longer**

Over 60%, or 25 individuals interviewed, began work under the age of 18 years. Twelve of those, or 30% of the young men interviewed had begun work under the age of 16. This means that criminal charges could have been laid in 73% of those cases under Section 212(4) of the *Criminal Code* of Canada, which prohibits anyone from 'attempting, or purchasing the services for the purposes of prostitution of someone under the age of 18'. To my knowledge, no single case involving males was brought into the criminal justice system. A group of 15 young men entered the trade over the age of 18 years. They were hard pressed to find alternative options, selecting this lifestyle as a short-term solution. Young men averaged nine years working on the street. Nineteen of these young men had been involved in the street trade for over 10 years. Eleven of these young men had been involved for over 15 years. Overall, young men enter the trade younger and work longer as part of this lifestyle of voluntary desperation. Young women are often handed a lifeline of support. A significant majority of women from *Strolling Away* (McIntyre, 2002) had birthed children. Young men do not have the option to physically birth a child and as we have seen, if they father a child they are often separated from any benefits. Nearly every young man in this study had at one point or another spent time in a shelter. The voluntary desperation of the street can often only be replaced by life in homeless shelters. Life in the trade is often their only option to being homeless.

### **Flying Under The Radar**

What became clear to me is that many of the young men in this study had and continue to fly 'under the radar' of most service providers. The lack of awareness of males is two-fold. Some fly under to avoid contact and interaction with professionals because of their backgrounds in care and drug use. Many avoid contact with family and friends. Others are harder to identify, given the difference in demeanor and working styles of young men and women. Males do not wear short skirts or stiletto heels, nor do they circle around corners when working. They are more mobile.

### **They Have Unique Service Needs**

This research provided an opportunity to listen, hear and view the service needs of young men. Clearly, they were frustrated with the services they presently receive. They feel these services are an add-on to services provided for young women in the sexual exploitation trade, are minor in scope and reflect a female lens. Unfortunately, there is only one specialized service in Vancouver for young men and its program is limited by the hours it is available. This one service does not meet the needs of all young men. It is obvious that they have unique needs, and they have requested that we listen to them.

### **Public Education On Condom Use & HIV Testing Has Worked**

It is refreshing to hear about the awareness and safety knowledge this population has gained through public education. They understand the need for condom use and have become committed to using them while working. The message has been clearly understood. The only time they consistently identified the lack of condom use was when they were in a long-term, committed relationship with the same person. A strong awareness exists about the need and value of consistent HIV testing. The majority realize that consistent testing is both a preventive and self-protection

tool. Again, public education on condom use and consistent AIDS/HIV testing has worked with this population. Public education around the prevention of HIV/AIDS has also resulted in a significant level of awareness amongst this population. There does however, appear to be a lack of clarity around the issue of choosing to use or not to use a condom when oral sex is involved. A need exists to gain a clear medical opinion on this issue in order to provide an appropriate platform for any public education awareness campaign. A great deal of inconsistency exists on this issue between service providers, clients, and other professionals in the community.

### **Connection Between Street & Drugs Is Longer And More Intense**

Young men are spending a greater length of time on the street than young women. For many young women, they spend less time on the street and often take breaks to birth children. Hopefully, in most situations these breaks also disrupt drug use. The birth of a child can often work as a catalyst to disrupt, alter and cease drug use and street involvement. Again, young men do not have this opportunity. In many cases, this results in greater and more extensive drug use. It is possible that given the second stigma role of 'gay for pay' these young men feel both a greater level of shame and therefore drug use increases.

### **Family Ties**

The greater the length of time a person spends in the sexual exploitation trade, the greater likelihood it stresses and alters family relations. Over half of those interviewed had either a strained or non-existent relationship with their family. This strain and stress often

results from a family's awareness of their son being in the sexual exploitation trade. Only four individuals were from the Vancouver lower mainland area. Only 50% of those interviewed said that someone in their family was aware of their working. Many individuals kept their work a secret and they either had no contact with their family or just kept the secret. Twelve of the young men interviewed were from British Columbia. Five were born and raised outside of Canada. Distance creates a greater opportunity to keep their work a secret.

### **Run Away Programs**

Eighty-eight percent of this population had run away. What is important from this finding is that 75% of those who had run away were offered food or shelter with sexual conditions attached to the offer. Running away plays a vital role in the potential entrance into the sexual exploitation trade. Often it is the trigger that initiates entrance into the trade.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Recommendation #1**

Efforts should be directed towards supporting the future expansion of this study to other provinces. Upon completion of the four western provinces those being British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, a report should be developed outlining the differences and similarities across Western Canada. Ontario, Quebec and Nova Scotia should be considered as future sites in order to allow for national, eastern, central, and western perspectives.

### **Recommendation #2**

A need exists for Outreach Programs to gain an exemption, relaxation to Safe Care legislation authorizing involuntary intervention if it becomes a reality. Often outreach programs offer the only lifeline of support for youth involved in the sexual exploitation trade.

### **Recommendation #3**

That we publicly acknowledge both young men and women are being exploited in the sexual exploitation trade, and that we provide services to help them exit. In over three-quarters of cases, both young men and women have a history of sexual and/or physical abuse. They are children who have been abused and are now being sexually exploited. There is a need to ensure that children who are sexually and physically violated have the option to access treatment. It is critical that we have services available for those exiting the sexual exploitation trade. Remember, for these young men, they have been in the sexual exploitation trade longer and the issue of homophobia circles around them. We must offer long-term clinical services to the populations who have escaped under the radar for far too long. As was discovered in *Strolling Away* once an individual exits the sexual exploitation trade, former memories of abuse before and during the trade often flood individuals. There is a need to provide ongoing clinical support to this population during their reintegration back into mainstream life. This will increase the likelihood of a successful departure from the trade.

### **Recommendation #4**

That staff working with young men in the sexual exploitation trade be provided with gender non-conformity training. As discussed, there is often a level of discomfort, overtones of homophobia and a general lack of awareness and comfort amongst program staff.

## **Recommendation #5**

That service providers create the opportunity for young men in and out of the sexual exploitation trade to tell service providers about the services they require. We should not assume that one service will fit all. This type of information could be discovered through focus groups and individual interviews with young men from the sexual exploitation trade. A neutral facilitator would be a critical step. The use of experiential youth could also facilitate in attaining accurate needs.

## **Recommendation #6**

That a series of detox and rehabilitation beds be established for young men exiting the trade. Years of extensive drug consumption requires an intervention that will provide them with temporary accommodation while detoxification and rehabilitation takes place.

## **Recommendation #7**

That safe affordable accommodation is provided for this population once they have completed drug detoxification and rehabilitation. This population requires safe, supportive living arrangements. Coupled with this, they need help seeking alternative employment. Close to half of this population had completed high school and some college and university; however, they have limited employment skills and experience. Standard employment assistance programs will be required to assist them in supporting a successful exit from the sexual exploitation trade.

## **Recommendation #8**

That we approach the issue of demand, that being customers, with an equal balance for both young men and women who are being sexually exploited. Like women, these men are young people who are in need of our assistance.

## **Recommendation #9**

That prevention information is directed towards both young men and women. We need to provide information that both young men and women in the sexual exploitation trade experienced sexual abuse in their part. We should support, not ridicule them.

## **Recommendation #10**

That the community-at-large recognize the damaging effects of sugar daddy relationships on this young and vulnerable population. In addition, an awareness of the economic disadvantages facing young males involved in the trade must be taken into account and considered as a symptom of the differential power relationship existent in sugar daddy relationships.

## **Recommendation #11**

Develop mentoring connections for the population who are exiting. A need exists for those exiting to have support from those who have exited. An experiential voice can assist an individual who is in the process of exiting the sexual exploitation trade. There are many questions, and those who have been through such a journey can better answer challenges facing those who are exiting. This type of service could be set up in a formal structure through an agency that works with this population or informally within the volunteer community network. This network could be set up in formal face to face meetings, telephone or online support.

## **Recommendation #12**

A review of prevention, intervention and re-integration materials be completed and adjusted to speak to the sexual exploitation of youth regardless of gender. Materials must recognize the differences facing young women and men in the sexual exploitation trade. Education for both genders needs to be covered in these materials, emphasizing that the trade is a risk for both genders.

## **Recommendation #13**

That an evaluation occurs of harm reduction approaches such as distributing bad date sheets, mobile support services to sexually exploited youth. The opportunity exists to move into a more direct approach to intervention. The ultimate goal must always remain moving someone out of the trade.

## **Recommendation #14**

That the National Youth In Care Network embrace the topic of sexual awareness. There is a need to ensure that youth from care have the same knowledge base as the general youth population. This information could be delivered through DVD, booklets or lectures.

## **Recommendation #15**

That we develop and pay closer attention to youth who are running away. We need to recognize this as the early warning system for possible entrance into the sexual exploitation trade for both genders. For youth, service providers and professionals, the opportunity to successfully support and stabilize a situation is more likely to occur prior to years of abuse and drug use on the street.