



## **The Use of the Phrase “Child Prostitute” in the Media** *A critical examination and course for action*

In 2011, the FBI reported that about 293,000 children in the U.S. are at risk of being exploited and trafficked for sex. Most of these children are girls, and the average age of entry into commercial sexual exploitation is between 12 to 14.

Girls often are abducted or lured by pimps/traffickers at bus shelters, outside schools or at malls and they are beaten into submission and sometimes even branded with the pimp’s name. When they try to escape, they are beaten, tortured and/or gang raped by their traffickers.

While the media has reported on this phenomenon, the way sex trafficked girls are described has resulted in some troubling language that we hope can be reconsidered.

According to research by the Human Rights Project for Girls and The Raben Group, there have been more than 5,000 instances in the past five years when reporters for print, wire, and online outlets have used the phrase “child prostitute,” “child prostitution,” “underage prostitution” or other variations on the phrase.

Simply put, there is widespread use and acceptance of the term “child prostitute” in reference to underage children being bought and sold for sex. But “child prostitute” and its variations paint an incomplete description of these girls and does not convey the actual circumstances of the child.

As Congress made clear in The Trafficking Victims Protection Act, these girls are not “prostitutes.” They are, by law, victims of sex trafficking. Indeed, under any other set of circumstances, we would call them what they are: victims of rape, statutory rape or the sexual abuse of a minor.

Most of these girls are not even of the legal age to consent to sex at all, let alone illicit commercial sex. Even in situations where girls are 16 or older, federal law clearly states that any individual under the age of 18 who is induced to perform a commercial sex act in exchange for anything of value is by definition a victim of sex trafficking, not a prostitute.

The danger of referring to them as “prostitutes” or “child prostitutes” is that the term leaves open the possibility that consent was involved, or that it is somehow different from other forms of rape or sexual abuse of minors, when in reality that is not the case.

There is a very real way in which the term “child prostitute” can paper over the violence, harm, trauma and coercion that a trafficked child is subject to. Most of these underage girls are forced to sell themselves to many different men every night. Their traffickers exert full control over them through both manipulation and coercion. These girls do not have any choice or agency here. The term child prostitute is therefore a misnomer, failing to capture the legal and moral context of what these girls endure on a daily basis.

Again, under federal law, there is no such thing as a “child prostitute.” So shouldn’t we look for a term that better captures their circumstances and accurately reflects the fact they are victims of child rape?



## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

We understand it is the media's job to convey a situation or an issue with precision and clarity. "Child prostitute" may seem clear because it conveys the fact that money is exchanged for sex, but it is also potentially misleading because it can suggest consent when none exists, either in the legal sense or in the reality these girls face. The term "child prostitute" should be replaced by language that clearly represents the factual circumstances of these children.

The following terms provide accurate and precise language about children bought and sold for sex:

- "sex-trafficked child"
- "child sex trafficking victim"
- "commercial sexual abuse" of children
- child who is a victim of "commercial sex abuse"
- "commercially sexually abused" child

All of these terms evoke the elements of coercion and victimization that characterize the condition of children bought and sold for sex. The language here represents an important departure from "prostitute," a term that can easily convey choice, agency, and criminality to the reader. The language suggested to replace "child prostitute" also correctly comports with federal and state law recognition of children as victims of trafficking and exploitation, as well as sexual violence.

Even if there is not a third party exploiter and the child is selling himself or herself for sex, he or she is still not a child prostitute according to federal law. He or she is, instead, a commercially sexually exploited child. Federal law recognizes that children who sell themselves in exchange for basic necessities such as food, shelter, etc. are victims of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking.

## **LEGAL BACKGROUND**

A series of federal legal reforms construe minors as victims of human trafficking. The federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) was first passed in 2000 and subsequently reauthorized in 2003, 2005, 2008 and most recently in 2013. The TVPA identifies commercial sexual exploitation of children as occurring when individuals buy, trade, or sell sexual acts with a child under the age of 18. Children who are involved in the commercial sex industry are defined as victims of a severe form of trafficking in persons. Additionally, TVPA creates a special category for trafficking of underage victims, providing that a person younger than 18 who is induced to perform a commercial sex act— *per se* a victim of sex trafficking (22 USC § 7102; 8 CFR § 214.11(a)).



## **MEDIA BACKGROUND**

Human Rights Project for Girls and The Raben Group used Lexis/Nexis to survey thousands of national and local outlets that used “child prostitute” and five related phrases in news stories during the last five years.

<b>Outlet</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Child Prostitute</b>	<b>Child Prostitution</b>	<b>Underage Prostitute</b>	<b>Underage Prostitution</b>	<b>Minor Prostitute</b>	<b>Minor Prostitution</b>	<b>Juvenile Prostitute</b>	<b>Juvenile Prostitution</b>
<b><u>Washington Post</u></b>	60	7	17	22	9	1	1	1	2
<b><u>The Associated Press</u></b>	143	16	45	66	15	0	1	0	0
<b><u>Associated Press Online</u></b>	166	22	52	77	15	0	0	0	0
<b><u>New York Times</u></b>	65	19	25	16	4	0	1	0	0
<b><u>USA Today</u></b>	13	3	6	2	1	1	0	0	0
<b><u>LA Times</u></b>	53	8	18	16	5	1	2	1	2
<b><u>Forbes</u></b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b><u>Chicago Tribune</u></b>	51	8	23	14	3	0	0	0	3
<b><u>Legal News Group File</u></b>	267	16	179	28	19	9	4	5	12
<b><u>Congressional Quarterly</u></b>	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b><u>Non-US Newspapers and Wires</u></b>	4182	776	0	2597	469	16	98	50	176
<b><u>Business News Publications</u></b>	1066	79	500	92	282	10	48	21	34
<b><u>UK Publications</u></b>	2552	306	1309	772	114	1	8	16	26
<b><u>U.S. Newspapers &amp; Wires</u></b>	34029	714	977	1253	378	193	180	134	200
<b><u>All Magazines - Combined</u></b>	5629	86	355	95	33	8	18	8	26
<b><u>US Publications</u></b>	4405	777	980	1461	432	217	188	136	214
<b><u>Major Newspapers</u></b>	2744	387	1084	743	260	50	84	61	75
<b><u>Web Publications</u></b>	1202	101	533	388	95	16	30	4	35
<b><u>Web Blog</u></b>	1352	151	550	424	144	18	16	14	24
<b><u>Major World Newspapers</u></b>	2203	306	811	729	215	38	49	22	33
<b><u>Major World Publications</u></b>	3508	441	1574	1005	285	50	83	26	44
<b><u>Business Wire</u></b>	11	3	6	0	1	0	1	0	0
<b><u>PR Newswire</u></b>	53	0	48	1	2	0	1	0	1



**Publications Using “Child Sex Trafficking”**

<b>Outlet</b>	<b>Child Sex Trafficking</b>
<b><u>Washington Post</u></b>	25
<b><u>The Associated Press</u></b>	19
<b><u>Associated Press Online</u></b>	20
<b><u>New York Times</u></b>	3
<b><u>USA Today</u></b>	1
<b><u>LA Times</u></b>	5
<b><u>Forbes</u></b>	0
<b><u>Chicago Tribune</u></b>	7
<b><u>Legal News Group File</u></b>	100
<b><u>Congressional Quarterly</u></b>	4
<b><u>Non-US Newspapers and Wires</u></b>	599
<b><u>Business News Publications</u></b>	350
<b><u>UK Publications</u></b>	233
<b><u>U.S. Newspapers &amp; Wires</u></b>	2418
<b><u>All Magazines - Combined</u></b>	122
<b><u>US Publications</u></b>	2630
<b><u>Web Publications</u></b>	157
<b><u>Major World Newspapers</u></b>	130
<b><u>Major World Publications</u></b>	222
<b><u>Business Wire</u></b>	21
<b><u>PR Newswire</u></b>	46