



In Their Own Words: Marginalized Voices of 10+ Year Survivors of Sex Trafficking in the United States

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The Commercial Sex Industry in the United States

The commercial sex industry encompasses all circumstances where something of value is exchanged for sexual acts (Reid 2010). It thrives on the sale of persons, from infancy through adulthood. Involvement can be limited to one form, for a short period of time, or can extend to multiple forms over a long span of time (Dalla 2000).

Sex trafficking in the United States is not a new phenomenon. Its history remains hidden, even in the midst of the current awareness. Over the decades, survivors have witnessed the evolution of terminology:

- from child prostitution, child pornography, juvenile prostitution, teen prostitution, survival sex, sexual exploitation of youth, and *Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking* (DMST) to *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children* (CSEC): the involvement of any person under 18 years old in the commercial sex industry
- from prostitution, pornography, *Adult Forced Prostitution* (AFP), to *Commercial Sexual Exploitation* (CSE): involvement of a person over the age of 18 who participates without full freedom of choice

Reid, Joan. 2010. "Doors Wide Shut: Barriers to the Successful Delivery of Victim Services for Domestically Trafficked Minors in a Southern U.S. Metropolitan Area." *Women & Criminal Justice* 20(1):147-66.

Dalla, Rochelle L. 2000. "Exposing the 'Pretty Woman' Myth: A Qualitative Examination of the Lives of Female Streetwalking Prostitutes." *The Journal of Sex Research* 37(4):344-53.

Formal Recognition

In 2014, the American Psychological Association formally recognized *long-term survivors* of sex trafficking in the United States. In their *Report of the Task Force on Trafficking of Women and Girls*, they recognized that *long-term survivors*:

- have extensive knowledge about healing
- bring expertise to conversations in the anti-trafficking movement
- provide perspectives that are essential to finding solutions

A More Descriptive Name

Belonging to an invisible people group has been difficult. I was grateful that our existence was finally acknowledged in print. But I was not convinced that our name should be *long-term survivors*.

- The opposite of *long-term* is *short-term*.
- What does that say to younger survivors?
- That they might not make it?

The negative implications bothered me enough to continue my search for a more descriptive name.

Another issue with naming is that the currently used term *survivor* is too general to describe the complexity of our lives.

- It denies the growth and understanding that occurs over decades.
- It overlooks how perspectives and standpoints change over time.

Eventually, I figured out that the most accurate designation would need to include the amount of time since exiting sex trafficking.

- A *30+ year survivor* has been out for 30 years.
- A *30+ month survivor* has been out for 30 months.
- A *30 day survivor* exited 30 days ago.

I am a *38+ year survivor*, and I am proud of that. I have discovered that many other survivors also know their precise "out date."

My research is not an academic exercise. It is my life's work. I will continue to make art, send out national surveys, conduct interviews, write, and publish until our collective wisdom has been both disseminated and recognized. I want young survivors to be able to look back at their "out date," and feel proud of their accomplishments.

Melanie Weaver, MFA

Red Light District Art Installation
12' x 20' x 40' (Dimensions Variable)

August 2010, January 2011

Photography by Linda Lewis

Diversity in the Community

The national community of survivors in the United States is a diverse group of people, despite current one-size-fits-all programs and services that treat us as homogenous. The common thread that ties us together is our experiential understanding of CSE: the oppression, dominance, subjugation, and dehumanization inherent in the sale of human beings as sex objects.

However, there are two sets of interrelated factors that contribute to significant differences in lived experiences of trafficking, responses to trafficking, and journeys afterwards.

- Six external factors include the victim's relationship to traffickers, age of entry, setting of CSE, frequency of being sold, type of buyers encountered, level of physical violence, and length of time trafficked (Wessells 2006).
- Five internal resources include developmental age, socialization, enculturation, identity formation, and temperament (Wessells 2006).

CSEC ranges from survivors sold by parents to homeless teenagers exchanging survival sex for a place to sleep. CSE includes brothels, mail-order brides, sexual slavery, escort services, hustling, etc. Survivor narratives span all levels of agency at time of involvement, including involuntary exploitation (sex trafficking), voluntary participation (sex work), and facilitation (trafficking others).

Current support services do not take any of these differences into account.

Wessells, Michael. 2006. *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Consulting Project National Survey and Interviews

The *Consulting Project* is about valuing the lived experiences of 10+ year survivors. You may interpret the questions any way that makes sense to you. Your stories may be about experiences that felt positive or negative. Please feel free to skip questions that feel uncomfortable, or that do not relate to your life.

1. What has your experience been like, as a survivor of CSE in the United States?
2. What do you wish people understood about survivors?
3. What do you wish people understood about you, as a survivor?
4. What experiences have you had in telling your story?
5. What experiences after CSE have made your life feel more difficult?
6. What experiences after CSE have made your life feel easier to handle?
7. What other experiences have you had as a survivor of CSE?

The minimum amount of time required to complete the survey is around 20 minutes. However, if your decades of surviving have provided you with countless stories (as mine have), you are welcome to turn this survey into a journal project.

