The Criminal Justice System's Problematic Response To The Commercial Sexual Exploitation Of Children

Alexandra Levitskaya

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THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM’S PROBLEMATIC RESPONSE TO THE COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN

Alexandra Levitskaya

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ABSTRACT

There is a current problem with the way that the American criminal justice system is responding to survivors of commercial sexual exploitation of children, or CSEC. In this thesis, I will first acknowledge that this oppressive, abusive, and tragic reality cannot be fully examined in this one piece of writing and offer two areas of further exploration which are limited in this piece: international CSEC and the victimization of boys and transgender youth. I will then explore the development of CSEC on American soil, from how youth become coerced into “the life”, what physical and psychological tactics exploiters use, and the long-term effects that are most notable and studied. By using literature review and personal narratives of people I have met in my professional work, the thesis will progress into an overview of how the American criminal justice system is responding to CSEC and its victims, and why it is overwhelmingly a broken system that is more punitive than restorative and healing. Finally, several suggestions will be offered in terms of how to empower victims of CSEC, as opposed to further silencing their voices, as this would be the most valuable tool in changing the system for future generations.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My mom said that when I was four years old and she took me to the park, I’d make pretend phone calls at the public phone booth to world leaders to figure out how to stop them from fighting with each other. Unfortunately, I couldn’t quite figure out world diplomacy before first grade. However, I’d like to think that those make-believe phone booth chats were the roots of my social work career, which have led me to this moment in my life.

Writing this thesis was much more difficult than I imagined, which was surprising to me. I am not the best writer, but the topic of sex trafficking is something very dear and personal to me, so I never thought I’d have issues raising awareness around it. However, the heavier I dove into the work, the more stories I heard, the more trauma narratives became normalized, and the tougher the writing became. I began avoiding the writing, and just wanted to put a pause on the thesis altogether. However, I was reminded that while I have the privilege of having a pause button, the people whose story I was telling don’t have that option. There are some very special folks whom I want to thank for reminding me that we don’t all get pause buttons.

First, I’d like to thank my parents who sacrificed so much of their comforts and community to create a better future for their only daughter when we came here as Jewish refugees. I also can’t thank all of my friends and Adam enough for enduring the many happy hours that I may not have made so happy with all of my triggering stories of child trauma, and rants about social injustice, our broken criminal justice system, and the latest documentary that everyone just has to watch. Jan and Barbara, thank you for supporting me through the past four years, and allowing me to sculpt this thesis into exactly what made sense for me, even if that meant pausing at some points. Tali, Danielle, and Molly – I’ll never get tired of telling people that I was in a graduate program with three of the most compassionate, intelligent, and warm
people I’ve ever met – I could not have done this without all of our MetroNorth train rides and “peer supervision” at many dive bars you all entrusted me in choosing. Lastly, and most importantly, I want to thank all of the folks who have allowed me to tell their stories. I could never do it justice, because in an ideal world, they’d be telling their stories and they’d be heard. Unfortunately, the main issue here is that those voices that are the most inspiring, progressive, and captivating are the ones which are most easily oppressed and silenced. To anyone who’s ever felt scared, alone, and wronged by the world they were born into, this is dedicated to you. I hope that one day, someone like me won’t have to tell your story, because your voice was loud enough in the first place.
Throughout this whole process, the most consistently important theme of this writing is complete honesty and transparency. From the moment that I chose to focus my studies on domestic sex trafficking, particularly child victims, I knew that it was crucial for me to tell a very honest story, regardless of how difficult the reality may be to stare in the face. Therefore, I also want to be very clear that much of the material in this thesis, if not all of it, may be very emotionally triggering to the reader. I have done my best to portray this topic in the least shocking manner so that it can be consumed by all audiences, but I also believe that in order to raise necessary social awareness, people need to be startled to realize the true scope of this issue. Please be aware that this thesis includes both personal narratives and academic discussions of rape, torture, and other highly traumatic events.
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INTRODUCTION

“I was maybe 7 or 8, and her and I shared a bed. She was usually in the living room, and I remember that the TV was always really loud, so I learned that whatever noises I tried to make, I should stop trying. Getting her hit for the day was most important to her, I was just the tool to get to it. Sometimes, he’d start when we were both in bed, so it was all three of us, and I just huddle in the corner of the bed until my body was moved for me. After a while, my mom would leave the bed, and go back to her TV, grabbing the bottle of vodka with her. And then I’m not sure how long it would be before the light shone through again from the living room. I got older, I was 11 or 12, and I didn’t really know what else I had except my body. So before I was 14, I had sex with more than 50 men or so. I guess it was rape, but no one used those words. No one really used any words for me. I wasn’t much of anything.”

That’s one of the first conversations I had with Julia¹, an 18-year old woman who I met at the RSMC unit at Riker’s Island correctional facility. Later that week, in my office, I met Juan, a 25-year old man whose mother, Laura, at 54-years old, had a warrant out for her arrest due to prostitution, breaking and entering, and petty theft. This is what Juan wanted me to know about his mother:

“She’s not a bad person, and I finally know that. But she made my life really difficult, like in a way that no kid’s life should be. ACS took me and my sisters away from home so many times, I was worried when they didn’t show up every few weeks or so. Maybe that meant no one was even worried about us anymore. My dad tried to help for a while, but he got sick of it. She let strange men into our home, they’d eat our food, touch my sisters, and she’d do nothing about it. She would forget who we were sometimes, and I think she forgot she was a mother to us a lot of the time. She sang me bedtime songs, but wouldn’t be there in the morning. I think she did her best, but she wasn’t mean for parenthood. And I’ve finally stopped being angry, because when I see her now, in urine-soaked clothing at my doorstep, I know I’m her caretaker. And I still don’t know how to tell my boss that I have to be miss a meeting today because I need to bail my 54-year old mother out of jail because she was soliciting oral sex for $10. I still don’t know how to calm myself and my nerves when I’m not sure if she’s still alive. I still don’t know how angry I’m allowed to be at the fact that she only consistently comes to see me when I have her SSI check. But most of all, I don’t know how to not be her parent.”

¹ All identifying names and information have been changed to protect confidentiality.
Julia and Juan may be very different people as will be explained later, but they are both directly impacted by a modern version of human slavery, the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC). While Julia has direct physical exposure to being exploited from a young age, the impact of trauma still deeply impacts Juan as he lived his years of childhood and adolescent development in foster care due to his mother’s exploitation. It is these stories, as difficult as they may be to hear, that are the driving force behind the purpose of this thesis: to raise awareness about CSEC by creating a discussion about its causes and effects, the intersection with the criminal justice system, and suggestions for a more empathic and community-centered world.

More specifically, the focus of this project is on domestic CSEC, and the uncomfortable truth of how many American children are being exploited every day. I have narrowed the focus primarily because logistically, it would be unrealistic to thoroughly discuss international CSEC within the scope of this thesis. More importantly, there is a theme in American culture to perpetuate the myth that CSEC is a “third world” problem, that it only occurs in run-down massage parlors in Thailand, or abandoned alleyways in Ukraine. However, the data continue to show that America is no exception to these horrific conditions, and there are children who are born and raised on domestic soil who are experiencing the same kind of oppression, trauma, and loss of childhood. Therefore, while the majority of this thesis will explore domestic CSEC such as told by Juan and Julia, I felt it was absolutely crucial to first provide the reader with a basic understanding of the international state of CSEC and to encourage further exploration of this topic, as it affects us all.
TOPIC TO EXPLORE: INTERNATIONAL CSEC

On an international level, the exploitation of humans is the third largest organized crime industry, after the sale of drugs and weapons (United Nation Children’s Fund, 2012). According to The United Nation’s Children Fund (UNICEF), there are an estimated two million children exploited every year for sexual purposes throughout the world (2012). While children are also exploited for labor purposes, this number is not considered in the estimate. Furthermore, it is important to consider that these are underreported numbers, due to the secretive nature of CSEC, national stigma and embarrassment, and the various methods of research and technology that countries use to produce estimates. Ultimately, there is no one single data point that is accepted on an international level, but what many nations can agree upon are the various types of CSEC that exist, which will be referenced throughout this thesis.

Types of International CSEC

In 1996, the first meeting of the World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children was held in Stockholm, where 119 non-governmental organizations committed themselves to a global partnership against the commercial sexual exploitation of children (Trafficking Victims Protection Act, 2008). At this meeting, an official declaration was released which stated that global CSEC “comprises sexual abuse by the adult and remuneration in cash or kind to the child or a third person or persons. The child is treated as a sexual object and as a commercial object. The commercial sexual exploitation of children constitutes a form of coercion and violence against children and amounts to forced labour and a contemporary form of slavery.” (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012).

Furthermore, the declaration states that there are three sorts of CSEC that differ from one another, but rarely occur in isolation from the others. The first is prostitution, which the United
Nations (UN) defines as the act of engaging or offering the services of a child to perform sexual acts for money or other consideration with that person or any other person. The second form of CSEC is pornography, which consists of material representation of children engaged in sexual acts, real or stimulated, intended for the sexual gratification of the user. The last form, sex trafficking, will be largely discussed in this thesis, and is defined as “a pernicious form of slavery; it is the purchase of a body for sexual gratification and/or financial gain” (Trafficking Victims Protection Act, 2008). In regard to global sex trafficking, victims are often transported across borders or within countries, from city to city, and from rural to urban centers. The further a child is taken from their home country, the more difficult it is for authorities to track them down and return them safely, due to either a complete lack of identification documents, or fraudulent ones, that many traffickers use.

Additionally, this international declaration states that there are three main elements of all instances of human trafficking: The Act, The Means, and The Purpose (Trafficking Victims Protection Act, 2008). The Act is what is done to the individual and can include any of the following: recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of individuals. The second element of trafficking is The Means through which the person becomes involved in the trafficking and can refer to any of the following: threat or use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability, or giving payments or benefits to a person in control of the victim. Finally, The Purpose is the reason of why an individual or group may be trafficked. The Purpose may include: exploitation, which includes exploiting the prostitution of others, sexual exploitation, forced labor, slavery or similar practices and the removal of organs.
Where CSEC is Occurring Internationally

In terms of the actual geographic locations of where CSEC takes place, other than Antarctica, no continent has been able to exist without it. The most vulnerable countries to find victims of CSEC are those where poverty has a strong presence, where few educational and employment opportunities exist. Sex becomes a mode of survival for many youth, which is where the popular term “survival sex” originates from, and is often used within discussions of CSEC. While many youth are exploited in their country of origins, some are also transported across borders where there are customers who are willing to pay more money, such as traveling businessmen and women. This is what breaks the myth that CSEC only occurs in poverty-stricken nations, as some of the most affluent clients reside in developed Western nations, such as America, which is what this thesis will focus on.

International Laws Regarding CSEC

Since CSEC has been proven to be an alarming issue internationally, it is helpful to be informed about the global policies and laws that have been established to fight this abuse of children’s rights. Some nations, such as Sweden and the Netherlands, share some of the most progressive laws regarding sex trafficking, which include CSEC. Referred to as the Nordic Model, both Sweden and the Netherlands have made it illegal to buy sex there, but legal to solicit sex (Mathieson, A., Branam, E., & Noble, A. (2015). Therefore, sex workers, whether by force or consent, are not at jeopardy to be prosecuted by the criminal justice system, as they are in the United States. This also allows for sex workers to visit public health clinics for condoms, sexually transmitted infections (STI) testing, and other health needs without fear of the police being notified.
International legislation explains that domestically, all nations must be flexible with their own ways of attacking the issue of human trafficking. Each nation must be dynamic with its legal proceedings and criminalization in order to respond most effectively to trafficking in the appropriate jurisdictions. Reasons for this lax attitude towards the apprehension of buyers of sex include societal attitudes towards women, lack of ability for the victims to pay lawyer fees, poor accountability within the courts, power differences between the buyers and sellers, fear of the victims to testify in court, and the victims’ general lack of trust in the authorities.

Regardless of the country at question, it must be understood that human trafficking can occur both across the bordering lines of nations, as well as within the nation as a whole, on a domestic level.
TOPIC TO EXPLORE: BOYS AND TRANSGENDER YOUTH IN CSEC

Now that some light has been shed on the issue of international trafficking, it is equally important to explain why the majority of this thesis will focus on those who are female-identifying as victims of CSEC. According to the Trafficking Resource Center study, the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Boys (CSEB)\(^2\) is vastly under-reported. In 2008, a Center for Court Innovation study estimated that as much as 50% of CSEC victims are boys in the United States, but there are very few empirical reports to support this number, and therefore, there are few organizations created to specifically address the needs of CSEB.

Some of the contributing factors to why CSEB are not getting identified are: unwillingness of boys to self-identify as sexually exploited due to shame and stigma about being queer; a lack of screening and intake by law enforcement and social service agencies in the belief that boys are not victims of CSEC; limited outreach by anti-trafficking organizations to areas, venues, and tracks known for male prostitution (William and Frederick, 2009). Victims of CSEB also have a high correlation of being in the LGBTQ community, which is unfortunately often the reason why they are kicked out of their homes, and are additionally vulnerable to be groomed by an exploiter on the street. One study conducted interviews with 40 community agencies in America who provide tailored services to victims of CSEC, yet only 18 reported that they would serve boys, and only two of them have provided services to more than five CSEB (Reichert, J. & Sylwestrzak, A. (2013). Obviously, the issue of CSEB is one that deserves passionate attention, as CSEC is not a female issue, but a humanitarian issue.

\(^2\) CSEB includes those who identify as trans-men.
DOMESTIC CSEC

While international CSEC and male victims certainly deserve their own attention, the rest of this thesis will focus on what is happening in our own backyards to girls and women. Right here in America, whether it is at a business convention in Los Angeles, or underneath an overpass in Harlem, children are being treated as nothing more than business transactions. And it is our responsibility as adults to protect our children – a fairly universal cultural value that has been accepted in our society. If we act as bystanders, by ignoring the conversation, by justifying a girl selling her body to an adult man as “her choice”, and by pretending that this really is not a domestic issue, we perpetuate the cycle. We need to stop sending a message of ambivalence, and take a strong position to protect these girls, because they are all our own.

For the rest of this thesis, I will present the most current understandings of CSEC from a domestic perspective. I will first discuss the culture of the Life that youth become immersed in. This cultural exploration will include: (1) the various pathways that lead youth into CSEC, (2) who is involved and their different roles in continuing this “business”, and (3) the specific beliefs and traditions that the youth are expected to uphold. Once a basic understanding of the culture is achieved, I will offer an explanation of why it is so difficult for victims to willingly leave these horrible environments.

The second portion of this paper will focus on both the short and long-term effects that victims display after being exposed to CSEC. Some of these effects can also act as “red flags” for points of interventions of supportive services, as long as the adults in the children’s’ lives are aware of them. Unfortunately, when the victims are not identified in time, and supports are not

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3 The Life is a popular term used by survivors and experts of CSEC, referring to the lifestyle of sexually exploited children and adults (Ex: Victims have a hard time leaving the Life).
provided, dire consequences can occur. While many of these consequences will be discussed, including physical, emotional, and psychological, priority will be given to examining how victims of CSEC are treated by the criminal justice system.

The stories that Juan and Julia shared with me, were both in the context of the criminal justice system, during my time as a social work intern at a public defender organization in Brooklyn, New York. As I write this thesis a significant time later, I am still moved and inspired by what they have endured, but more importantly, it is my hope that by including their case studies as an integral part of this thesis, the reader will hear someone else’s voice other than my own. A deeper look at their lives will showcase that CSEC is something that impacts not just the individual’s development, but relatives, friends, and society.

These two case studies will lead into a current examination of how the American criminal justice system treats victims of CSEC, as well as the perpetrators. Suggestions will be made on ways to improve the gaps in service that currently exist, by referencing already established policies and that have proven to be most effective in terms of providing support, and not further hurting the victims. These specific interventions and therapeutic processes have been successfully implemented by two American non-profit organizations, which will be referenced towards the conclusion. Throughout the paper, personal stories and quotes from victims will be included, as their voices are the most powerful way to stir awareness. Their stories are ones of sadness, pain, love, and ultimately, of courage and resilience. The fight against CSEC is certainly necessary on a community level but a basic understanding of all its elements must first be established to create a more informed society.
**Basic Terminology**

For consistency’s sake, throughout this paper, I will primarily refer to the legal definition of domestic CSEC as defined in the American Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2008, which states that domestic instances of child sex trafficking occur:

“(A) in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or (B) the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.”

For those working with these children, CSEC\(^4\) is often referred to as modern-day slavery. In most cases, a youth is engaged, solicited, or forced to engage in sexual conduct or performance in return for not just monetary exchanges, but also food, drugs, shelter, clothing, gifts, or other goods. The sexual conduct may include direct sexual contact as well as live, filmed or photographed display or other performances, such as stripping, for the sexual gratification of others. According to Estes and Weiner (2001), about 100,000-300,000 children are at risk for CSEC domestically; meaning that these children both enter sex trafficking and continue to be sold within American borders. According to a 2007 study conducted by The New York State Office of Children and Families (OCFS), in New York City alone, there were an estimated 2,200 children victimized by CSEC. It is vital to point out that throughout this paper, “children” and

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\(^4\) Some referenced literature uses the term Child Sex Trafficking to refer to CSEC, but I have made the decision to only use CSEC for clarity and consistency within this paper.
“youth” almost exclusively refer to girls, due to previously explained reasons for little research existing about male victims. Regardless of gender, before I discuss the appropriate resources for the victims, it is necessary to examine the different pathways and factors that lead children into a life of CSEC.

**The Victims and Their Pathways Into CSEC**

All young women are vulnerable to become victims of sexual exploitation due to their innocence, as the average age of entrance into the Life is between 12-14 years. However, there are some overarching characteristics that make certain adolescent girls more desired targets than their peers. According to Lisa Grace (2009), the most common factor of commercially-sexually exploited girls is a history of childhood sexual abuse (p .1). In a meta-analysis of 20 recent studies that interviewed adult women who were exploited through prostitution, 33-84% reported being sexually abused as children, before entering the Life (Raphael, 2004). A specific study which interviewed 106 women living in Boston found that 68% were sexually abused before the age of 10, and almost half of the women reported being raped before that age (Norton-Hawk, 2002). More specifically, the majority of childhood sexual abuse involved inter-familial cases of molestation, which many experts view as the perfect “training camp” for future CSEC (Dworkin, 1997).

When a girl experiences sexual abuse by a family member, she begins to feel that she already has nowhere safe to go, since the same person claims to love her while simultaneously abusing her. Through sexual abuse within the family, a girl begins to believe that she is only useful for her body, and without providing sex when commanded, she will lose the love and affection of the adult. Once a girl internalizes this as an appropriate and normal relationship with
adults, she will then be more susceptible to similar treatment by a future exploiter\(^5\). In addition to sexual abuse occurring within the home environment, there are several other familial factors which contribute to a girl’s vulnerability of becoming a victim of CSEC.

Several types of familial disruptions have been proven to heighten the risk of youth involvement with CSEC. As discussed in a 2009 literature review conducted by the U.S Department of Health and Human Services, many studies have shown that drug abuse among caretakers is one of the most common factors within an exploited girl’s home environment (Clawson, H.J., Dutch, N., Salomon, A., & Grace, L.G.). In 2001, a Chicago study at the Center for Impact Research found that out of 222 prostituted women, 83% identified either one or both parents having an addiction to illicit drugs and/or alcohol (O’Leary). The same study stated that many girls have also witnessed severe instances of domestic violence between parents, most often from the male caregiver to the female (O’Leary, 2001). Additionally, O’Leary’s 2001 study claims that 62% of the women viewed domestic violence in their homes as children, and 40% reported these instances as “serious” (beatings, rapes, use of weapon). Through interviews, many girls have claimed that when they are subjected to such disturbances within the home, they often run away as both a physical and mental escape. However, when they run away, they must now find all those basic survival needs that were previously found within the home somewhere else. (Farley and Kelly, 2000).

When my dad gets angry it’s physical. ... It’s not, “well you can’t go out for a week, you can’t ...” It’s .. it’s physical and he is a big man. And I’ve watched my ma .. I grew up watching my mom be abused and being beat. I’d rather run away.

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\(^5\) The most commonly used term to refer to those who sexually exploit children is a “pimp” and this role will be explored in depth later. Most literature uses the pronoun “he” when discussing a pimp, and I will do the same for consistency’s sake.
I never thought about running away but I was .. I didn’t want to go back to my mom’s and the stuff started at my dad’s and I was .. I’d rather be with people who, who showed me affection, got me things, just showed me attention.

- 14-year-old CSEC victim, Williams study, 2009, p. 13

Now that these girls feel unsafe in their own homes, they must find another place to receive their most basic needs of food, shelter, and some type of “family” structure. Many of the girls who run away or are kicked out of their homes first try and find a place within youth programs. Unfortunately, such programs are often overcrowded and so the girls must turn to shelters that are forced to accommodate all ages and genders. One girl claims that “There wasn’t even any clean blankets in there, and I just slept on the floor, sometimes next to these old men. They smelled and I knew they were masturbating. So I left, I wasn’t gonna be a part of that place” (Williams, p. 16).

In other cases where the home environment is not deemed safe, social services may intervene and place girls into foster care or group homes. According to several studies, about 64-78% of women who were involved in CSEC as minors were part of the child welfare system (Nixon, et. al, 2002). However, while the intentions of Child Protective Services (CPS) may be to protect children, many youth feel that when they are placed into foster care, the effects are sometimes more damaging than helpful. Some of the girls who have been transitioned from one foster family to another claim that the transitions are too frequent and only a further confirmation of abandonment and inconsistency with adult relationships.

“(CPS) is a, a bunch of idiots, easiest way to put it... I don’t see how putting someone with behavioral issues in another home... with strangers.... What is that getting done? ... Kids with behavioral problems need attention for their behavioral
problems; not to be taken from the situation which got them there because, obviously, if you take yourself out of that situation you’re not gonna solve anything. Nothing there (in the original family situation) is gonna get solved, so... putting kids in foster homes with new people, it’s creating new problems, new things for them to deal with. I think the best solution for kids with behavioral problems is in-home therapy, you know, simple stuff... things that they can just go out and do and talk to somebody. An outside person can be like “oh, well I see where you’re coming from on this, maybe you should try this.” It might take a while but I think that would help more than foster homes. Those foster homes should be used for kids who have been abused or kids ...home issues, like violence and neglect and stuff like that. It just doesn’t make sense to me.”

- 17 year old CSEC victim, Williams study, p.34

Throughout all these cases, the themes of trauma, abandonment, and disruption are very central in the narratives of girls who have been commercially sexually exploited. In a 2003 study, the author claims that “Girls describe having a profound sense of being alone without resources: ‘They [the women and girls] describe their isolation, lack of connectedness, and feelings of separation as the single most important factor in making them vulnerable to prostitution to begin with’”(Rabinovich, 2003). Whether the girls run away from their biological family, group homes, or foster family, they are now on their own. The vast majority of children who become targeted for sexual exploitation are labeled as “runaways” 6. Between 77-96% percent of all domestic victims of CSEC are runaways, which is particularly alarming when legal officials claim that within the first 48 hours of running away, an “adolescent will be approached to participate in prostitution or another form of commercial sexual exploitation” (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2008).

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6 Runaways, or street kids, are those who run away from both family homes as well as foster care or youth centers or shelters. They are often most vulnerable because they are isolated in the community and are looking for support and basic necessities. This also contributes to under-reported statistics for CSEC instances, because runaways are often those kids who “slip through the cracks”.

In addition to being alone or isolated as runaways, there are several other factors that increase a girl’s vulnerability to become targeted as a victim of CSEC. A UPenn meta-analysis study claims that other less-researched but nonetheless, significant, factors include: academic difficulties, gang membership, and personal drug dependency (Estes, R., & Weiner, N2001). The same study also points out that while the majority of girls are runaways, some girls are introduced into CSEC through parents, peers, or romantic partners.

Regardless of the path that leads a girl to feeling alone and isolated, there will be someone ready to effectively take advantage of her innocence and need for love. It is when a girl is in this vulnerable state, wandering around train tracks or city underpasses without any protection that she becomes targeted by third party exploiters. Upon this introduction to an exploiter, a girl’s life changes forever.

**Third Party Exploiters: The Pimps**

They may be referred to as “third party exploiters” in legal proceedings, but to anyone having direct contact with them, they are better known as pimps. From the most basic standpoint, pimps are those that gain the most monetary profit from CSEC. Just like there is no single profile of a person who is a batterer or a child abuser, there is no single profile of a pimp.

In her 2012 memoir, *Girls Like Us*, CSEC survivor and activist Rachel Lloyd offers some vivid insight into the various versions of who a pimp may be. Channeling some notion of empathy, Lloyd explains, “There are pimps who may have been abused themselves, whose fathers, brothers, uncles were pimps, who have grown up in the life, and who know nothing else.” (p.93). Some pimps are primarily drug dealers who only exploit one girlfriend at a time. However, most pimps command more than one girl at a time, creating their personal “families”.
Just as some girls are worth more than others, pimps also belong to a pyramid of social status, structure, and respect.

Pimps come in all shapes and sizes, which makes it even more difficult to accurately identify them. Some pimps are incredibly violent and brutal, referred to as “guerrilla pimps”, known to erupt at a second’s notice with kicking, stabbing, punching, and raping the girls. “Simps” are at the lowest tier of the pimp food chain, also referred to as “sneaker pimps or subway pimps” and are generally considered to have the “low-rent” girls. Other pimps are sophisticated and know all the rules of the game, showing great expertise at how to most effectively avoid any legal consequences while still gaining the most profit from the girls. A portion of pimps may not totally fulfill the clinical definition but are deemed to be “simply following the same cultural verity that we all do what we need to do to survive” (p. 94). More variation amongst pimps becomes unveiled when considering gender, race, and socioeconomic status.

It is important to note that anyone who makes money off of the commercial sexual exploitation of someone else is pimping him or her. Contrary to popular stereotypes, pimps are not solely men, but can also be women or transgendered folks. Recently, more women have become active as pimps because girls tend to trust them more easily than they would trust men. A “new friend” or an “older-sister” character may offer a girls’ trip to the mall, get her nails painted, buy her a new outfit to attract a cute boy in class, and gain her trust. Once the trust is established, the older female will introduce a girl to parties or hotel rooms where other pimps or clients are waiting to begin the transaction.

In terms of race, there are also stereotypes regarding pimps that must be addressed. In a culture that already “unfairly demonizes low-income young men of color”, it is critical to be
aware that pimps are of all races and ethnicities (Lloyd, 98). Most people who make money off the commercial sex industry are actually not men of color, but this is often the first thought people have when hearing the word “pimp”. However, if the term “trafficker” is used instead, then people have shown to consider a wider range of races. Furthermore, it is known that in every country, pimps most often prey upon whoever is most accessible, and this is usually girls and women of their own culture. Therefore, in America, especially New York, where most of the victims are girls of color, so are their pimps. But if the scope of pimps is expanded from those who run the streets to those who own and operate strip clubs where minors are employed, escort agencies, and online “adult services”, the diversity is much more widespread. To most effectively help the victims, there needs to be a conscious resistance to feed into the stereotype of men of color as the overarching vision of what a pimp looks like.

**The Rules, Expectations, and Punishments**

While there is diversity in both the girls and the pimps, the methods which pimps use to entice girls rarely differ from one another. As Lloyd recalls her own experience as well as the many accounts from other girls she’s mentored, she states that pimps “all seem to have graduated from the same mind-control training camp as cult leaders, hostage takers, terrorists, and dictators of small countries.” (p. 95). When a pimp first sees a vulnerable victim, he will rely on grooming tactics. Grooming refers to the methods used to first entice a girl into the Life. Most often, a pimp will offer things that the girl is naturally looking for. These necessities can be physical ones, such as food, shelter, or clothing. However, even more effective are the emotional and psychological needs for love, support, and a sense of family. This is often a gradual process and within a certain amount of time, a pimp will ask a girl to “help them out” by just doing one small thing for a friend. Once the girl agrees, the floodgate is opened for all sorts of sexual favors to
countless people. When a girl is successfully groomed, a pimp will rely on coercion to keep her in his control.

Originally distributed by Amnesty International, Biderman’s Chart of Coercion is often employed by organizations that aim to help understand how a pimp brainwashes girls to both enter and stay in the Life (Appendix, Figure 1). When the “clinical” terms of coercion were explained to victims of CSEC, they were able to create direct parallels from this framework to behaviors that the pimp often used. The girls reflected on their own personal narratives of coercion as they provided insightful examples: “Oh, you mean like not letting you talk to anyone outside the life?” and “Making you do dumb shit, little shit, just to see if you’ll obey?” (Lloyd, 99-100).

Like any subculture, American pimp culture has its own terminology and slang, all of which is about humiliation and degradation. For example, when a pimp uses the phrase, “pimps up, hoes down”, the girls are trained to know that this means the girls need to be in the streets while the pimp walks down the sidewalk. If a girl hears that she’s “being out of pocket”, this refers to her showing disrespect to either her own or someone else’s pimp. Common infractions may include looking another pimp directly in the eye, disagreeing with a pimp, or not making enough money. As within any culture, there are also expected consequences and punishments for incorrect behavior.

Pimps have a set of tactics and tools that are employed to instill pure fear in the girls. When a girl does something that deserves punishment, the pimp will elicit a spectrum of possible responses that become expected after some time. A pimp may viciously and repeatedly beat or rape the girl. Verbally, the pimp will threaten the safety of the girl’s biological family, especially if she has any younger siblings who can be exploited. A girl may be forced into a “pimp circle”,
where she will be harassed by a group of pimps simultaneously. Another consequence that girls are taught to expect is called paying the “charge”, when a pimp creates a fine for one of his girls, which can only be paid off by being traded to another pimp. As yet another way to make the girls feel as nothing more than property, many pimps “brand” the girls with their names. In case the girl runs away, another pimp may find her and will know who she belongs to, lessening her chance of escape even more. Photographs of such tattoos can be found in the appendix, as well as a guide to “common” terms used within the culture of the Life (Figures 2-6).

An additional tradition that can be found within pimp culture is the divide-and-conquer tactic. Through this manipulative behavior, a pimp will designate one girl as the “bottom”, who ironically, receives the most privileges of the group. This girl may work less hours, be given the less aggressive clients, endure less abuse, etc. However, the pimp waits until she makes a mistake and when she does, her punishment is the most severe the group has yet seen. She serves as an example for “should’ve known better”, and her surprisingly horrible punishment terrifies the rest of the girls to ever attempt to break any rules. The pimp also chooses one girl to be the “head” girl, who usually makes the most money or may be the mother of the pimp’s child. She is consistently treated “better” than the rest, and by using this manipulative tactic, the pimp is able to create a competitive atmosphere among the girls. The girls are already separated from most of their old friends and families, and now even within their current peer group, they must compete for the most attention and best treatment. Pimps rely on these social threats to eliminate the possibility of an uprising amongst the girls.

By using a combination of the previously described methods, pimps break down the girls’ identities. As a girl’s energy is consumed between alternatively competing with one
another for “Daddy’s” attention and trying to avoid being the one getting beaten, she loses her identity. Pimps are experts at eliminating the little amount of self-esteem a girl may have had when she entered the Life. As a girl loses her sense of self, she relies completely on the pimp for her survival.

As difficult as it may be for outsiders to understand, many victims of CSEC are truly in love with their pimps and believe that they are involved in caring relationships. It is this intense level of dependency upon the pimp that makes it so difficult for girls to leave the Life voluntarily. Many experts who have spent ample time with victims of CSEC claim that the girls exhibit very strong symptoms of Stockholm Syndrome, a psychological term for effective brainwashing and loyalty for the person in control. Psychologist Dee Graham identified four factors that need to be present in order for Stockholm Syndrome to occur (Lloyd, p.105). First, a perceived threat to survival and the belief that one’s captor is willing to act on that threat; second, the captive’s perception of small kindness from the captor within a context of terror; third, isolation from perspectives other than those of the captor; and fourth, a perceived inability to escape. All four of these conditions are repeatedly created and enforced by the pimp’s manipulative physical, psychological, and emotional tactics.

Ultimately, a pimp isolates the girl from any type of true support so that she never feels empowered enough to leave. The girl’s only interactions are with other pimps, clients, and other victimized girls. Finally, if the emotional threat wears off, pimps will not hesitate to resort to consistent episodes of violent attacks. According to experts on rape, Drs. Lorennne Clark and Debra J. Lewis assert that “all unequal power of relationships must in the end, rely on the threat or reality of violence in order to maintain themselves” (Lloyd, 111). Many of the exploited girls

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7 “Daddy” is a popular term that CSEC victims often use to refer to their pimps.
have experienced rape, had guns held to their head and heard pimps talk about the other girls that he has murdered. Violence is their reality, and they will obey every command to minimize its possibility. However, the pimps are not the only perpetrators of abuse in the cycle of CSEC.

**The Buyers: The Johns**

The ugly truth is that CSEC is essentially a financial establishment. The girls are the goods and the pimps are the salesmen, but in order for the business to continue, there must be a demand. The clients, most often referred to as “Johns”, affect the perpetuation of the CSEC cycle just as much as the pimps do. According to Lloyd and other experts, the term “John” is a fairly fitting term for men who buy sex (a very small percentage are women). Similar to *John Doe* and *Dear John*, the name is used as a generic catchall for the “anonymous everyman who makes up the millions of men in American who buy sex from children” (Lloyd, p. 107). Just as with pimps, there is no one type of “John”.

“Johns” are represented by all walks of life, every age, ethnicity, socio-economic status (SES), etc. Girls have claimed that some of their clients ranged in jobs from truck drivers, janitors, and drug dealers to doctors, lawyers, and teachers. No one should be disregarded as a possible client: handsome and rich, poor and unattractive, married, single, widowed, fathers, husbands, sons, brothers, uncles, and neighbors. While “Johns” is still the most commonly used term for those who buy sex, many activists believe that this name minimizes the actual harm that they do. Instead, they should be referred to as rapists, abusers, and pedophiles. By continuing to refer to them as “Johns”, society shies away from completely addressing the crimes that they have committed, while simultaneously invalidating the trauma the girls have experienced. However, in order to be consistent with the resources I reference, I will continue to refer to these clients as “Johns”. 
While it certainly does not justify the heinous acts of the “Johns”, many experts also point to the media’s influence of why adult men would want to buy sex from minors. When the Olsen twins turned 18, there was a countdown clock on the Internet marking minutes until they were “legal”. Britney Spear’s most popular video, “Hit Me Baby One More Time”, was largely successful as it revolved around the overtly sexual image of a school-aged girl. Hundreds of American websites feature “barely legal” pornography actresses, and over twenty million annually reported searches were for “teen sex” or “teen porn”.

Clearly, American society has created some type of demand for engaging in sex with younger versus older women. According to a 2008 Chicago study, out of 113 men who purchased sex, 76% stated that the age of the girl was a very important factor and 80% stated that they most often prefer young “prostitutes” (Durchslag, R. and S. Goswami). Many men claim that they want someone who is clean and fresh, which usually translates into younger girls.

The same Chicago study also interviewed “Johns” to understand how informed they were about CSEC. The results showed that a little over half of the “Johns” believed that most of the girls experienced childhood sexual abuse, and 28% believed that they purchased someone who was trafficked against her will. Furthermore, 40% bought sex from a girl whom he knew had a pimp or manager and 42% believed that exploitation caused psychological and physical harm.

What these statistics indicate is the fact that the clients are certainly aware that their actions are harmful to girls and women, yet they continue to participate in them. When asked why the men continue to buy sex, most cite “peer pressure; being introduced to the sex industry by family, friends, even coworkers; the belief that women in the sex industry are ‘different’ and therefore, more acceptable to abuse” (Durchslag, R. and S. Goswami, 2008). Most men also referred to the lack of consequences as a factor in their decision to purchase sex repeatedly. Ultimately though,
most men would rather not ask the girls questions they do not want the answers to. Most would rather believe that the girl likes it, that she likes them, and that there is no real harm being done.

A Canadian commission found that women in the sex industry are 40 times more likely to be murdered than other women, while another study put the estimate as high as 130 times more likely to be murdered (Special Committee on Prostitution and Pornography, 1985). The following is a quote from Gary Ridgway, known as the “Green River Killer” who was captured in 2003, after spending two decades preying, stalking and killing 48 women in the sex industry. More than half of these women, 27 of them were under the age of 18. At his final hearing, Ridgway explained how he chose his victims.

I picked prostitutes as my victims because I hate most prostitutes and I did not want to pay them for sex. I also picked prostitutes as victims because they were easy to pick up without being noticed. I knew they would not be reported missing right away, and might never be reported missing at all. I picked prostitutes because I thought I could kill as many of them as I wanted without getting caught.

- Lloyd, 2012, p.112

When planning appropriate interventions to eliminate CSEC, the “Johns” must not be ignored. They are criminals without a doubt, and should be treated as such. If these men are held accountable, the supply-and-demand model will cease to operate and the cycle will break.

The culture of CSEC is terrifying, harmful, and certainly very real. There are necessary roles that all have a part in this culture: the victims, the pimps, and the “Johns”. There are acceptable and understood methods of communication, behavior, and punishment. The various factors which contribute to the creation and perpetuation of the
CSEC cycle have been discussed. With this basic level of understanding of the causes, it is now necessary to examine at the long-term effects and effective interventions for the victims.

**Long-Term Effects**

The consequences of CSEC should be viewed in terms of both the psychological effects on the individuals and the psychosocial effects on the individual’s physical health and social development. Due to the many elements of CSEC explored within this thesis, only the most commonly exhibited effects will be discussed but every girl presents with a unique set of behaviors, attitudes, and physical signs of exposure to CSEC. Understanding the prevalence of the effects will paint a more accurate picture of what “red flags” to look for when attempting to reach out to girls involved in CSEC.

The physical environments that the girls are subjected to living in for months, or even years, directly impact the girls’ physical health. Because most girls spend the majority of their day walking the streets or with “Johns”, they are surrounded by unsanitary conditions. Girls can suffer from a multitude of infections due to lack of clean water, adequate food portions, and little, if any, access to medical or personal hygiene care.

Additionally, these girls are at a heightened risk of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and HIV exposure since they are having frequent sexual encounters with people whose medical histories are unknown (Farley and Kelly, 2001). Some “Johns” prefer to not use contraception and the girls are more susceptible to becoming impregnated. If a girl becomes pregnant, she may have to either undergo a dangerous and
illegal abortion or a pimp may kick her out onto the street, fending completely for herself and her new baby.

Other physical effects that have been reported include constant exposure to violence. More than 90% of girls have been physically beaten, raped, or kidnapped either by pimps, “Johns”, or even law-enforcement (Grace, p.5). Because almost 20% of CSEC survivors have been propositioned or sexually assaulted by police, the girls are often very hesitant to report any abuse to the authorities, out of fear and further violence (Estes, 2001). To distance themselves from these horrible realities, girls often turn to substance use. The cycle between exploitation and drug use is a vicious one: the girls need it as a mechanism of escape and survival, but they must then work more in order to continue to financially fund their drug misuse. One large study that interviewed sexually exploited homeless youth found that more than 75% of the victims reported that they abused alcohol or drugs, and almost all of the interviewees admitted to some level of use (Farley and Kelly, 2000). It is important to point out that before the girls entered CSEC, the majority did not suffer from addiction. All of these physical effects are usually seen in combination with some emotional and psychological effects.

As a result of the constantly abusive treatment by pimps and “Johns”, girls become exposed to severe psychological harm. When drug or alcohol abuse does not numb the girls effectively, some develop dissociative-identity disorder (Grace, p. 5). This psychologically recognized mechanism allows the girls to “black out” during instances of abuse, rape, or torture as a method of mental escape. When girls are later interviewed, they may explain that they simply have no memory of what happened. The brain realizes
that the reality is so horrible and traumatic that it does not allow for it to register within the girl’s consciousness.

Other girls rely on destructive behaviors to help them “step out” of the situation, such as cutting or self-mutilation. One prostituted woman said, “When I’m in pain, I like to hurt myself because the pain goes away” (Nixon, 2002). Because most of these girls do not have access to mental health treatment or support, many of the adolescents involved in CSEC often attempt suicide (Parriott, 1994). According to Grace, for those girls who were able to find some type of professional help, a majority were diagnosed with Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder (PTSD). Symptoms of PTSD in these girls may include: hyper vigilance, heightened alertness, anxiety, anger, flashbacks, nightmares, and attempts to avoid people or environments that have caused trauma (almost impossible since this abuse is repeated every day). These girls exhibit similar symptoms that returning war-veterans show, but the girls must go back to their battlefield day after day.

Emotionally, the victims of CSEC have a very difficult time forming beneficial and healthy relationships with others. The manifestations of the chronic trauma may make girls resistant to trusting anyone outside of the Life who wants to offer a helping hand. The girl’s self-esteem has been diminished to the point that she does not believe she deserves any care or true support. Girls will often claim that no one should respect them, and they have no functioning purpose in a community other than to be used as sexual outlets. Because most of the girls have been isolated from previous friends and family, they have trouble reestablishing those relationships if they are provided with a reunion. The girls often feel overwhelmingly ashamed and judged by others. Finally, almost all the girls report having no sense of an internal locus of control: they feel they
have no personal control over their state or future. Without this developed sense of control, girls continue to be taken advantage of into their adulthood.

In terms of social effects, the girls who remain in the Life are at a disadvantage for building healthy relationships as adults. Many women continue to be involved in sex trafficking into their 30s and 40s. These adult victims exhibit low educational attainment, lack of involvement in mainstream employment and early pregnancy, which have shown to continue the CSEC cycle inter-generationally (Martin et al., 2010).

It is quite clear that sexual, physical and emotional abuse, which often accompanies CSEC, all have a negative impact on the mental and physical health of adolescents. However, one of the most debilitating effects of exposure to CSEC is the almost inevitable involvement in the criminal justice system. Before providing an analysis of the current criminal justice system’s attitude towards CSEC and sex trafficking, the thesis will turn back to the narratives of Julia and Juan.
JULIA’S STORY

Julia is an 18-year-old Black girl, born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. I first met her in September of 2014, as a social work intern at a public defense agency. The purpose of this organization is to provide legal defense to over 300,000 people per year who cannot afford private attorneys, such as the homeless, immigrants, people of color, individuals struggling with addiction and/or mental illness, and other societal factors that cause oppression and marginalization. Within this agency, my role was to conduct biopsychosocial assessments and interviews with clients that the lawyers deemed needing extra assistance and support, which Julia certainly did. The hope was that I would be able to gain extra insight into Julia’s life, and to provide her attorney with a stronger basis of why she was not guilty of charges and should be provided with treatment, not incarceration.

It was a rainy Monday when Julia’s lawyer and I arrived in a van to Riker’s correctional facility. For those who have never been to Riker’s, it is as gloomy and depressing as portrayed in the movies. Out of the ten facilities at Riker’s, one is specifically designated to women, the Rose M. Singer Center, better known as “Rosie’s”. After waiting for two hours for her to be produced, Julia was brought out in handcuffs into a tiny interview room behind a Plexiglas wall.

This was the first time I was meeting Julia, and the third or fourth time that she was seeing her lawyer. However, Julia could not remember the lawyer’s name, and it took about ten minutes for her to realize that this was her attorney and that we were there to understand what led her to be at Riker’s. At first, Julia was very cooperative and spoke in a soft, calm voice, to the point where it was difficult to hear her at times. The lawyer
explained that there were seven charges against her, including prostitution, breaking and entering, identity theft, and drug possession. Julia did not deny these charges, but instead, went into a very detailed account of the first time she was raped.

Julia recounted in vivid detail when she was about seven or eight years old, that random adult men would enter into the bedroom that she and her mother shared. Her mother would most often be in the living room, watching television and drinking vodka from a plastic bottle. Meanwhile, men would climb into bed with Julia, and she remembers wearing her My Little Pony pajamas which would quickly become removed from her body, and the men would often use them later to wipe themselves after they raped her. Sometimes, Julia said, her mother would enter the bedroom during this, and participate in the sexual acts, always finishing with an exchange of money or drugs from the men. This was the normalcy she grew up with, which led Julia to leave with one of these men when she was 13 years old.

A man who had sex with Julia over 30 times, according to her recollection, invited her to join him on a trip when she was 13. The man promised her a life of travel throughout the country, expensive clothing, and a lifestyle that was much better than what she was going to receive living with her mother in the housing tenements of Brooklyn. Julia remembers feeling love for this man, as almost a father figure, and trusted him with her safety. Within a few weeks, Julia was being transported across state lines, up north to Maine, down the eastern seacoast to Florida, and ending up west in Las Vegas.

This was Julia’s life for two years or so, where she was introduced to other girls around her age, who all traveled together. The man in charge, Juicy*, arranged for all
their traveling, as well as the other men that they met at hotel rooms, concerts, and staged modeling auditions. Julia was often told that these men were going to make her famous, and it was just part of the game to have sex with them from time to time. However, this quickly turned into a story that is unfortunately too predictable, and Julia was soon forced to have sex with 20-30 men per day, often five or six at one time. It was at this time that Julia turned to cocaine and methamphetamine, to help numb her from the reality of being gang-raped. When she tried to resist, or explain that she was tired, she was often beaten, kicked, and had cigarettes burnt on her body. None of the men would allow Julia to use condoms, which resulted in her becoming pregnant before she was 16 years old.

Julia’s pimp would not allow her to see a doctor, and he then kicked her out of the apartment he provided for her because as a business product, she lost her appeal. Customers did not want to have sex with a pregnant girl, and as a result, she lost her value. She was now homeless and pregnant, with a strong drug addiction, states away from home. With no other option, Julia began selling sex on her own, charging much less than her pimp previously did. Julia remembers that during this time, she would accept as little as $10 for an hour’s worth of sex, with as many men as wanted to be involved at the same time. Her drug use increased as she became completely isolated, as she feared for her life every day. As a result, she began using dirty needles for her newly developed heroin addiction, causing her to contract HIV, which she informed us of during the interview.

The news of her HIV diagnosis added another layer of depression, anger, and isolation to Julia’s reality, causing her to combine all the drugs she had in her possession in one night, while cutting herself with the goal of suicide. However, she was found on
the side of the highway later that night, which she does not have a distinct memory of. Police reports explain that her baby was born that night, on the street, and described as a miracle because Julia was partially unconscious. Julia and her baby were taken to the hospital that night.

Julia’s baby was born five weeks prematurely, and experienced severe drug withdrawal and other serious medical conditions. The Administration of Children’s Services, (ACS), removed the baby from Julia’s care, due to her inability to provide a safe and nurturing environment for the baby, and Julia has never seen her baby to this day. The removal of her baby caused Julia to enter into her darkest period yet, and as she made her way back to Brooklyn at the age of 17, she continued to prostitute herself, and now began stealing as well, to fulfill the “quota” that her new pimp expected her to bring back every day. During our interview, she referred to this man as her “boyfriend” and stated that they were still in touch, and that she planned on seeing him once she was out of prison.

It was when she was working for her boyfriend that Julia was picked up by the New York Police Department, during a prostitution raid. Julia had a previous warrant out for her arrest for drug possession, which was added to her New York charges. Julia had a public defender assigned from when she was 13 years old after assaulting a man who raped her, but since she was no longer a minor, a new public defender was assigned and she was to be tried as an adult in Brooklyn criminal court.

After meeting with Julia, the lawyer and I were very concerned for Julia’s safety. She would show symptoms of forgetting important details of her life, such as orientation to time and place. She also quickly fluctuated between being very calm and almost
catatonic, to punching the Plexiglas wall and stating that she was going to kill herself, and then inject both the attorney and me with a needle that would carry her HIV strain. Soon after she punched the glass, within moments, Julia retracted into a very passive position, and told us that she was pregnant with her second child, and believed that she would be able to have the baby raised in jail, a symptom of disconnection with reality. Julia continued to speak with both her mother and Julia’s boyfriend, who were advising her to continue selling herself for sex, and that if she was released from jail, to immediately run and return to the Life. As a result of this interview, Julia’s lawyer and I filed for a 730 motion, which is an evaluation conducted by a team of forensic psychiatrists to test an individual’s ability to stand sane and competent for trial, which we did not believe Julia was.

At Julia’s 730 hearing, she did not state that she remembered meeting me or the lawyer at Riker’s. Nor did she recount threatening our lives or her own. She again recounted in vivid detail all the trauma she had experienced, starting from young childhood until the recent events she endured. It was painful to observe this, as Julia began to wail and cry as more strangers asked her yet again, to recount her trauma narrative. Julia was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Dissociative Identity Disorder, (DID).

Julia’s attorney and I were pleased with this news, because it would mean that she wouldn’t be deemed to continue at Rikers, but instead, be sent to a psychiatric hospital where she’d receive proper medical and mental health treatment. The judge ordered her released to such a facility, but unfortunately, because Julia turned 18 during this time, she was able to sign herself out of the hospital. Furthermore, we were not notified of her
release because she did not consent as an adult to notify us. The only thing that the nurse was able to tell me is that she left with an adult male.

The attorney and I attempted to contact her foster care agency, her previous attorneys, and any other professionals she had contact with. We also reached out to her sister who lived in North Carolina, but wanted nothing to do with Julia. At the time of writing this thesis, her location is still unknown, and there have been no hospital records of Julia or her baby being born. The only thing that is known is that an 18-year old victim of CSEC, who is HIV positive and pregnant, was last seen with an adult man who was her exploiter. Whether she is healthy, or even alive, is something I’ll never know.
JUAN’S STORY

An hour after I met Julia, I was introduced to Laura in the same detention center at Riker’s. Laura walked in very meekly, and slouched in the chair with a withdrawn posture and demeanor. Laura was also facing prostitution charges, but this was her 34th charge during her lifetime of 54 years. According to her criminal record, she was first arrested for prostitution at the age of 18, but her entry into CSEC first began at the age of 7.

Laura moved to Brooklyn with her mother and three brothers from the Dominican Republic as a young girl, and she’s never known who her father was. Laura’s mother did her best to provide for all of her children and worked three jobs. As a result, there was no adult supervision in the home, and Laura’s older brothers often had friends over after school. Some of these friends began molesting Laura, and within a year or so, Laura remembers older men becoming involved. The rapes stopped happening at her own home, but would happen in the men’s cars or public places, such as abandoned buildings. One of these men, who Laura calls Papi, began paying her extra attention and started buying her clothing, taking her to McDonald’s after school, and providing her with the male attachment she never previously had.

The rest of Laura’s history is vague, due to cognitive impairments she has endured, as a combination of blunt force trauma to her head by several pimps and Johns, as well as chronic drug use. What she did speak about the most was her son, Juan, who is her youngest of seven. She has lost all communication with the rest of her children, but Juan seemed to be the one person from her family who still has an interest in Laura’s well
being. She asked me to reach out to him and see how he’s doing, because she was too embarrassed to call Juan yet again, from inside the walls of Riker’s.

I only saw Laura one more time, when her lawyer and I were able to have her released from prison with an alternative to incarceration program in place. Laura agreed to attend an outpatient program five days a week, which would assist with her drug addiction and diagnosis of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and Bipolar I Disorder. I was able to find her a bed in a women’s shelter for those over 50 years old, which could assist with medication management as well. Unfortunately, Laura missed three out of her first five days at the program and stopped returning to the shelter at night. As a result, her condition of release was broken, and a warrant was out for her arrest.

While I was unable to create a strong therapeutic alliance with Laura, it was her son, Juan, who became my unofficial client. Juan and I met on an almost weekly basis, to discuss case planning for his mother, as I quickly learned that he was the true parent in their relationship. Juan explained that he was removed from his mother when he was 8 years old, and lived with many relatives before he was placed into the foster care system. He was now in his late 20s, and a successful cosmetologist in New York City. He explained that it has taken him many years, and he still has feelings to process regarding his mother, but that he has finally gotten to a place where he does not resent her. Juan stated that his mother is a good person, but most of his childhood was full of strange men who would show up at their home, several times a day, and he would hear noises from his mother’s bedroom. He learned to leave home when this would happen, and to take his siblings with him, who were also all removed from his mother’s care later. Unfortunately, because Juan has chosen to stay involved in his mother’s life, he has become isolated
from his siblings and is currently not in touch with any of them. Juan’s traumatic childhood caused him to turn to drugs as a coping mechanism, and to also sell sex for money as a young, gay man. Juan was arrested once for prostitution, but because he was a minor at the time, was released and that was the last time he had any involvement in the criminal justice system.

Similar to Julia’s story, Laura’s involvement in the criminal justice system continued as I finished my internship. Laura did not attend any of the appointments that we continued to set up for her with the program, nor did she appear on any of the bench warrants that were issued for her, which adds severity to her charges. I continued to be in contact with Juan until my last week, and at that point, he had not heard from Laura for several weeks. If Laura was ready for support, she knew where to find him, and in the meantime, he had to continue writing his own story.
THE INTERSECTION OF CSEC AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

The stories of Julia and Juan were just two of the millions that could be told every single day. Aside from the themes of chronic trauma, abuse, and the general exploitation of children, what I found most alarming was how the American criminal justice system was responding to these victims’ needs. According to American law, prostitution is seen as a criminal charge, which can be punishable by time in prison, as shown by Julia and Laura’s narratives. Fortunately, recent policies have been passed that allow leniency for minors charged with prostitution, and to provide them with supportive services as an alternative to incarceration. However, for those who are 18 or older, there are many less options. This is particularly concerning since it has been proven that most adults involved in prostitution were victims of CSEC. As these children grow into adults, however, and their mental illnesses, addictions, and other conditions continue to become more severe, their ability to avoid the criminal justice system becomes nearly impossible.

An Ineffective and Expensive System

Many activists are advocating for a change in how the court systems are set up within New York City, in regards to combating the issue of CSEC. It costs $64,000 per year to incarcerate one woman in a New York City jail, compared to $20,000 per year for residential treatment (Henrichsen & Delaney, 2010, p. 6). Furthermore, a life without incarceration may open up the doors that these individuals need to become contributing members of society and to prevent another generation of trafficking victims being born, which will impact us all. Therefore, this issue should interest policy makers, community agencies, and the general public to become involved, as it affects the larger society as a whole.
Since their establishment in 2013, there are now nine Human Trafficking Courts within New York, whose purpose is to provide alternatives to incarceration for adult victims of trafficking (Robbins, 2014). For first-time charges, these courts are currently equipped to designate five or six counseling sessions with outpatient programs that are partnered with the courts, such as Safe Horizons and Girls Empowerment Mentoring Services (Hines & Hochman, 2012, p. 12). While this is certainly a progressive push for victims’ rights, by adulthood, over 80% of these women have histories of trauma, including domestic violence, sexual assault, childhood sexual abuse, and or physical assault (Schweig, Malangone, and Goodman, 2012, p. 3). The culmination of trauma, along with substance use, housing issues, poverty, etc. cannot realistically be addressed during five counseling sessions and involvement in the criminal justice system continues.

As these individuals are cycled through the criminal justice system, there are many reasons why “getting out” is not as simple as the larger society may think and why longer-term care is necessary. Research shows that adult victims of trafficking were first introduced to Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children between the ages of 12-14, meaning that the emotional, physical, and mental impacts of trafficking are deeply rooted in the individual by the time they are seen in Human Trafficking Court as adults (Estes & Weiner, 2005). Furthermore, 95% of victims have experienced abuse as a child, 70-80% were homeless, 73% struggled with addiction, and 91% have histories of mental health, which make them especially vulnerable to being groomed by traffickers, who provide shelter, food, and some sense of security (Gragg et. al, 2007). This results in individuals having a hard time identifying as “victims”, which makes testifying in court problematic.
This all culminates in the fact that it takes a person more than several attempts to successfully leave the Life (Polaris Project, 2015). Therefore, when this specific group of individuals are brought in front of the court, they can not be treated as everyone else – the cases need to be handled delicately by professionals who are trained at working with this population, especially through a trauma-informed lens, or when appropriate, are survivors of the life themselves and can act as mentors. A few counseling sessions, as the standard currently is in Human Trafficking Court, can not possibly address all these concerns, and as a result, residential/long-term treatment is a more effective response.

Based on research, it has been proven that the therapeutic alliance is most crucial to truly being able to make a difference in a person’s growth, which is unrealistic to accomplish within five sessions (Williamson, Dutch, & Clawson, 2008, pp 2-3). Additionally, because of the highly traumatized nature of these clients, they are highly distrustful of most authorities, including social workers and program advocates, which reinforces the notion that more time is needed to build trust and respect. Furthermore, because most of these women have no other options for survival, their needs are vast: housing, medical/sexual health care, protection of their children, education, work, etc (Clawson, Dutch, Salomon & Grace, 2009, pp. 4-5). These concerns can only truly be addressed in a long-term treatment program, where the women have time to acclimate, adjust, and begin to process their realities, aiming for a better and safer future out of the Life.

The Need for Additional Residential Programs as Alternatives to Incarceration

It must be acknowledged that there is a dire shortage of long-term residential programs for victims of sex trafficking across the nation (Reichert & Sylwestrzak, 2013). In 2012, the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (ICJIA) conducted a national survey of
residential programs for victims of domestic sex trafficking, identifying the prevalence and calling for increasing the number of treatment facilities in the U.S. (Reichert & Sylwestrzak, 2013). This report identified past accomplishments on behalf of youth victims of sex trafficking and documented the resources needed to propel the anti-trafficking movement forward. This report called upon policymakers and agency donors to understand the mental health consequences facing youth and take steps to combat the phenomenon of sex trafficking of minors in New York City.

According to a prevalence study that was completed in 2009, by the Center for Court Innovation and John Jay College of Criminal Justice, the size of the domestic sex trafficking population in New York City alone registered between 3,769 and 3,946 minors (Hines & Hochman, 2012, p. 3). ICJIA’s national survey found a total of 33 residential programs that were exclusive to trafficking victims, which yielded a total of 682 beds (Reichert & Sylwestrzak , 2013, p. i). Those facilities were clustered in the West Coast and the Midwest, leaving under 50 beds in New York City for trafficked female victims and even fewer for male or transgender victims, when the combined populations is estimated to be in the thousands (Reichert and Sylwestrzak, 2012, p. 14). Current short and long-term safe housing facilities in New York City for youth victims of sex trafficking include: Girls Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS, including its Transitional Independent Living Program), The Gateways Program, Safe Horizon/Streetwork, Sanctuary for Families, Sexual Assault and Violence Intervention Program (SAVI) at Mount Sinai, and The Door (Hines and Hochman, 2012, p. 13).

Although victims have access to residential solutions not specifically targeting their population, those beds are in short supply with just 200 beds for homeless youth in NYC, to serve an estimated of 3,800 homeless minors (Reichert & Sylwestrzak, 2013, p. 14). The
Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 reauthorized the TVPA’s 2005 provisions to support shelters for U.S. minors that were never funded (Kortla, 2010, p. 184). New York City also serves as a major hub of commercial sex trafficking, and these minor shelters and group homes are often known to traffickers and serve as recruitment sites (Clawson & Grace, 2007, p. 2).

These housing options in New York City are inadequate. Young victims are often held in juvenile detention centers, returned to homes from which they fled, or placed in non-secure facilities—choices that risk repeated episodes of running away or re-victimization by the hands of traffickers (Kortla, 2010, p. 184). Time limitations on length of stay in existing housing alternatives prevent the building of meaningful therapeutic relationships with the victims. The lack of homogeneity of minors in shelter programs or group homes exacerbates the difficulty of tailoring services for this specific population (Shigekane, 2007, p. 136). Lastly, the evident lack of residential treatment facilities allows victims to feel compelled to return to the trafficker out of fear of the retribution that might occur if she did not (Clawson & Grace, 2007, p.3). Increasing the number of residential treatment facilities must account for these challenges and must be available to this at-risk population.

This thesis calls on policymakers, agency donors, and governmental officials to channel resources to create additional residential treatment facilities in New York City. Youth victims require lengthy and structured services to help them cope with the severe psychological trauma (Shigekane, 2007, p. 122). Themes of trauma, abandonment, and interpersonal disruption are central to minors’ narrative, and a new identity separate from The Life must be fostered so that the victim can develop healthy attachments with peers and family and feel physically and
emotionally safe (Clawson & Grace, 2007, p. 2). The policy calls for an increase in residential facilities, which would:

- Provide an intimate community of 6-24 beds to help victims begin to re-navigate interpersonal relationships,
- Allow for a length of stay of at least 18 months to allow victims to build trust,
- Promote safety by ensuring the location is confidential and the residence has 24-hour staff, surveillance, and safety precautions,
- Train residential staff to facilitate trauma-focused treatment and adopt cultural competence in learning the language of sexual trafficking and of the victims,
- Create additional facilities for male and transgender victims,
- Facilitate a wide array of services (including therapeutic, medical, vocational, educational, life skills) to promote victims’ empowerment and rebuilding of life (Clawson & Grace, 2007, p. 4).

The sources of funding for these facilities around the country vary, and many of the 33 in existence have been forced to close until funding can resume. Operating budgets for the surveyed residential programs range from $10,000 to $100,000 with federal and state funding providing minimal proportions (Reichert & Sylwestrzak, 2013, p. 14). Residential programs turn to faith-based, individual, and agency donors- including domestic violence and sexual assault workers, health providers, law enforcement, and victim advocates- however federal and state level funding is necessary to lay the groundwork to serve this population in need (Reichert and Sylwestrzak, 2012, p.8). Increased funding for more flexible services, which would integrate therapeutic intervention with safe housing, can help victims achieve recovery and further the goal of putting an end to this potent operation. Thirteen years later, in 2020, there are two existing residential
programs specifically created for survivors of CSEC: Girls Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS) and the Gateways Program through JCCA, a foster care agency.

**Effective Interventions and Programs**

While there is still much work to be done, there are certainly experts who have paved the way on the most effective ways to provide services to victims and survivors of CSEC. The interventions and treatments I will be focusing on heavily draw on information from two non-profit organizations that specifically aim to reach girls who are either vulnerable to CSEC involvement, or are already involved with the Life. While the structures of the two programs are somewhat different, they have both proven to be effective at combating the occurrence of CSEC in their respective communities. The organizations’ policies and plans simultaneously address the criminalization of the pimps and “Johns” while also providing a safe, structuring, and empowering environment for the victims to start over.

The first program is Girls Empowerment Mentoring Services (GEMS), located in New York City. GEMS was founded in 1998 by Rachel Lloyd at the age of 21, a survivor of CSEC in Europe and the author of *Girls Like Us* (2012). GEMS provides services to girls between the ages of 12-24 in the New York area who have experienced CSEC. According to the GEMS website, their mission is “committed to ending commercial sexual exploitation and domestic trafficking of children by changing individual lives, transforming public perception, and revolutionizing the systems and policies that impact sexually exploited youth.” (www.gems-girls.org).

My Life My Choice (MLMC) is a sister program to GEMS. MLMC was co-founded in 2002 in Boston by Lisa Goldlbatt Grace, a licensed social worker and a personal family friend
along with Audrey Porter, a survivor of CSEC (2013, mylifemychoice.org). The organization was created in response to this terrible but real story that is featured on MLMC’s homepage:

“In 2001, a young woman by the name of Latasha Cannon was murdered. She was 17 years old and living in a CPS funded group home in Boston. Unbeknownst to any of the caring adults in her life (her family, her CPS worker, the group home staff), she was under the control of a pimp and being exploited through prostitution. At the time of her death, a lot of folks came together to say "was this an isolated incident or the tip of the iceberg"? We quickly learned that it was the tip of the iceberg. Out of Latasha's death, My Life My Choice was born.” - My Life My Choice website (2013, mylifemychoice.org)

*Mentorship*

Throughout the years, both programs have established a variety of services in an effort to rid the United States of CSEC by providing services to victims, but by also educating the public and service providers. First and foremost, the tactic they use is street outreach. Because the girls are so isolated from accessing helpful resources, the organizations must instead go to the girls. By employing survivors of CSEC as outreach workers, both GEMS and MLMC are able to establish a type of genuine connection to the girls that would otherwise be very difficult to create. The victims feel less judged and stigmatized when spoken to by survivors, and simultaneously, see that there is a better alternative to their future. Once the girls are successfully connected and become part of the program, they are enrolled in the Survivor Mentorship Program.

The Survivor Mentorship Program pairs exploited youth or those at high risk of exploitation with an adult female Survivor Mentor. The goal of this human connection is to
provide guidance and encouragement for the youth to find their own path to safety. It is
important at MLMC that the interventions used do not rely on “rescuing” the youth, but
“recovering” the internal strengths the youth already have. Trauma-informed clinical
interventions are used, sometimes combined with Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, to assist the
girls to “build the intangible needs that they need to be healthy adults: self-worth, a positive self-
image, the ability to trust, and the tools to know how and where to seek help when they need it”.
(mylifemychoice.org/our-work). More than half of the staff in both MLMC and GEMS are
survivors of CSEC and they are all women. Furthermore, these mentors serve as examples for
the young girls that there is another way to live life. The pimps are not in control of the girls;
instead the girls are in control of their own destiny. The journey is certainly a scary one, but with
these supportive and caring mentors and clinicians, recovery is definitely attainable.

*Self-Empowerment through Skills Training*

Another integral component of both agencies are the self-empowerment trainings for the
girls, which often include an educational and vocational component as well. Both GEMS and
MLMC run specific classes on teaching the girls how to find their voice and use it as a tool for
being heard, when they have been silenced for so long. Some girls are taught how to publicly
present to peers, while others help write grants and ordinances alongside politicians and legal
officials. The following are quotes from two girls enrolled in the GEMS 20-week long Youth
Leadership Program, according to their website:

“Coming out of the life is very like depressing, you know, you feel like you really don’t have anything. You feel like what you say is never heard and you’re feeling all these things at one time. It’s basically like we fell, and by us falling, we fell into the life, like a different life, a different us, and by us coming to GEMS they are picking us up, slowly but surely, and they’re just making us like gems, shiny and stronger than ever.”

- Hannah
As girls gain more confidence acting as leaders, they realize that how they were previously treated was not love, but instead, abuse. The genuine relationships they are now establishing are the ones that will propel them into a life of success, accomplishment, and positive identity. In addition to the therapeutic processes that GEMS and MLMC employ, they also offer various services and trainings to officials who may come in contact with this specific population of children.

Prevention Education

In an ideal world, children would not have to worry about being exploited and be able to enjoy their childhood. Unfortunately, MLMC recognizes that this is not the case, and as a result, has developed a 10-week curriculum used to educate youth about what sorts of warning signs to look for in a possible perpetrator, or how to assist a friend that may be in danger of exploitation. Experts now nationally recognize the curriculum, as it provides a “concrete, well-researched method for preventing commercial sexual exploitation among vulnerable adolescent girls.” Run by staff of MLMC, including clinicians and survivors of CSEC, the groups are offered on a weekly basis in community settings where youth are most comfortable, such as group homes, schools, or youth community centers. These groups are offered weekly in schools, group homes, and other community settings.

In terms of the actual content, the groups teach at-risk girls how to recognize and avoid the recruitment tactics of pimps and find a path out of exploitation if they are already involved. The groups are designed to change girls’ attitudes and perceptions of the commercial sex industry, as well as build self-esteem and personal empowerment. Using the strength and power of the collective voices of survivors and their peers, girls not only receive important preventive
education, but learn to see themselves as agents of change – empowered with information they want to share with their sisters and friends. In addition to educating the youth who are at risk, MLMC and GEMS also conduct professional trainings nation wide.

*Professional Training*

Before a girl enters a program or encounters a clinically-trained professional, she may have interaction with other adults who can help guide these girls to the appropriate resources if they knew what “red flags” to look for. GEMS and MLMC have established curriculum for various audiences to raise awareness, including: foster care workers, social workers, teachers, school nurses, guidance counselors, police, hotel management, internet providers, and other groups. GEMS offers professional training through their “CSEC Community Intervention Project Train-the-Trainer” curriculum, which is a 3-day training that covers topics of: understanding trauma/Stockholm Syndrome; identification of victims; best practices in programming and prevention; federal and local laws; models for court-based interventions, and other crucial topics that must be thoroughly understood by professionals who may encounter victims of CSEC.

Teachers and school nurses are taught to be aware of girls that suddenly have new electronic devices, wear more revealing clothing, keep referring to an older boyfriend, are isolated from old friends, have trouble focusing in class, appear tired, or have a higher occurrence of STIs or pregnancy scares than their peers. Those working in the hotel industries (receptionists, managers, maids) are cautioned to be aware of patrons who pay cash only for a block of rooms for several nights in a row that many men frequent but only one (or few) girls have entered. When speaking to counselors, case managers, and other workers in foster center or group homes, these trainings focus on being extra vigilant of any older men who seem to spend a lot of time outside, waiting for vulnerable victims to want a ride to the grocery store, a bag of
chips, or a new shirt to wear. For those who work within social networking and technology sites such as Facebook and Craigslist, there are specific signs that someone is attempting to sell a girl on-line, such as “cash only” transactions, meetings at discreet motels, or posting pictures of young girls in compromising situations. The criminals behind these postings are smart and deliberate, but professionals can be trained to heighten the chance of their being caught. One of the most crucial components of this project was my privilege to interview the founder of MLMC, Lisa Goldblatt-Grace, and her insight around the various issues of CSEC and how to carve a healing path forward is included in the appendix (Figure 7).

*Changing Attitudes of Law Enforcement*

There has also been much work done by these organizations to work alongside law enforcement and change the mentality that these girls are prostitutes and should be criminalized as such. Instead, efforts are being made to work collaboratively with law enforcement to find these girls on the streets, or during police raids of pimps’ homes, and bring them to the appropriate mental health facility. Politicians and lawmakers are becoming increasingly involved in the fight to end CSEC, and to increase society’s awareness of the reality of these travesties by increasing the punishment for pimps and “Johns” and by providing more legal protection to the victims. The efforts to eliminate CSEC do not stop at working with the victims, but also involve connecting with the community. In the world of CSEC, that is so tragic and alarming, there is a glimmer of hope in knowing that there are successful experts in the field, such as GEMS and MLMC, that should be utilized to pave new paths for victims to transition into survivors.
CONCLUSION: VICARIOUS TRAUMA AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

As I stated in the beginning pages of this work, honesty and transparency are most important to me, both as an academic, but more importantly, as a human being. I have been interested in exploring this topic since I was a teenager, when I found out that my childhood friend was taken by some men and never heard from again. I don’t think that at age 14, I was able to understand all the complexities of CSEC as I have described in this thesis, but what I did know is that my friend was gone, and I didn’t understand why something like that would happen to someone like her.

I have always been drawn to understanding other people, their beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes. I continue to find a human’s identity the most complex and interesting puzzle to solve, knowing that the pieces will never quite fit. However, as I got older, I was drawn more to those whose puzzle pieces were often thrown away by the larger society, which is what led me to social work. Upon starting my graduate career, I was enticed by the privilege that as a future social worker, I’d have the chance to write a thesis, since this is an opportunity that most social workers do not have. Four years ago, I knew I wanted to explore CSEC as my topic, and have never stopped doing so.

However, something unexpected happened during my process. Before this year, most of the work towards my thesis was strictly academic. I researched, read, watched documentaries, whatever methods would broaden my knowledge of the state of CSEC in the United States. I felt like an expert on the topic amongst my peers, which I’m not sure anyone enjoyed, but I assumed I’d be able to complete this thesis within a month or so, since I had been working on it for years. To my surprise and dismay, once my academic journey turned into reality, I experienced something unexpected.
The horrific stories I read about countless times were now being told by people in front of me, in my previous role as a foster care worker, and now, as a social worker at a large public defender organization, where I work with clients with concurrent family and criminal court matters. I couldn’t hide behind pages or TV screens, these were actual people behind prison bars, young women with no supports, who were raped by six men at a time for $40, in the hopes of providing food for their infants. I’ve always prided myself on being skilled at having people trust in me, but I suddenly wished this wasn’t the case. I almost had two master degrees at this point, but nothing trained me for being able to hold the narratives that were being spilled onto me.

For a few months, as I became more involved in my internship, I couldn’t stop thinking of these cases as I went home. I was distracted, wasn’t sleeping well, and certainly wasn’t able to focus on writing. Ironically, this was the material I should’ve been including in my thesis as soon as it was happening, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Something in me was conflicted about making these real people just words on paper, especially being told by someone from a privileged, academic stance.

Logically, I knew that I was experiencing vicarious trauma, especially since this is something I read so much about during my research. Almost all of social work education discussed the importance of self-care and the threat of burnout and vicarious trauma, but again, I couldn’t connect with this on an emotional level. Finally, after friends started noticing changes in behavior in me, I realized that I was no longer in control and needed help. Almost three years ago, I began seeing a mental health professional for the first time in my life, and that has been the biggest blessing of this thesis.
Of course, the thesis wasn’t the sole reason I began attending therapy, but it was certainly a catalyst. It took me a long time to get to a place where I could write about these issues as passionately as I originally did several years ago, while also encompassing the reality of the work that I did as a case planner in foster care, and do now as a social worker at a public defender agency. By being able to transition through various positions and organizations, all while working closely with clients who have direct exposure to CSEC, I am finally in the best place I have been, professionally and personally.

I would have never imagined that this work would take me five years to complete. I did not think that it would lead me to my first therapist, and one I am still seeing years later, even as I write these closing remarks. While this thesis made me question my own tenacity, values, and self-worth, it has ultimately led me to carve out my own space, with my own voice, in a world that is growing louder each day. Because of my belief in the importance of this work, even if it took me four years of pausing and reflection, I am now in my proudest professional position. I am now a Senior Social Worker, on a novel unit that defends clients with concurrent family and criminal court cases, but just as importantly, we also work on policy and systemic change to really pose the question to the larger community: how truly just is our criminal justice system? I am finally at a space where I do not feel conflicted about sharing this piece with others, but I am beyond humbled, because if even one person’s awareness is raised by reading this thesis, change is possible.
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APPENDIX

Figure 1: Biderman’s Chart of Coercion, which has been used to explain how victims of war hostages, domestic violence, and CSEC become brainwashed and manipulated by those in power.

Figure 2: Police found this handwritten collection of "rules" in Carlton "Privilege" Simon's car when he was arrested on suspicion of promoting prostitution on June 25, 2006.

Figure 3: “Rules 2 Da game of Hoez!!!”. Similar to the previous photograph, this is a list of rules that a pimp wrote that he used to maintain control over CSEC victims. This journal was recovered in a police raid.

Figures 4, 5, 6: Photographs of tattoos that CSEC victims have been branded with, to show their pimp’s ownership over them. Many are strategically placed on the leg so that it is easier to hide when authorities are around.

Figure 4: “Lay Low’s Property”.

Figure 5: “Zoook”, the pimp’s name underneath a barcode on the back of a girl’s neck.

Figure 6: “Daddy’s Lil Bitch”. Again, on the back of a girl’s neck which can be quickly concealed if her hair is down when authorities are in the area. Many girls refer to their pimps as “Daddy”.

Source for Figures 4, 5, 6: Citizens Against Trafficking, *Tattoos of Girls Under Pimp Control and Pimp Rules for Control of Victims*, Donna M. Hughes, August 10, 2009,
Phone Interview with Lisa (May 14, 2013)

Me: From a clinical perspective, what would you say has been most effective with the girls at MLMC? Going to turn on the phone recorder now!

Lisa: Well, there’s a lot of overlap the way we would treat veterans with PTSD and our girls. They need to be re-trained in how they’re thinking and viewing the world. We have to make them see that even though they have encountered traumatic events repeatedly, the world can be good and positive. So the way I do this with the girls I see in private sessions is usually through CBT and DBT. I mean, so many of these girls just have no positive image of themselves – they think they’re worthless, which causes them to feel helpless and disgusting, and as a result, they act in ways that perpetuate the cycle. So, our job here is to interrupt that cycle, and create a healthier one. I try and focus on the positive relationships they have found within MLMC, from mentors, myself, or their peers. I’ve worked in mental health for twenty years, I’ve heard horrible stories and seen terrible things, and I have all the best intentions and a diploma, but I’ll never really be able to understand what these girls have been through, but Audrey and the other survivors have that insight and some do have family members or old friends that are part of the recovery process, so I just really try and help them see that those people love them for not their bodies, but for their minds, personalities, and goals.

Me: What about group therapy or expressive arts? I know that’s helpful sometimes with traumatized victims.

Lisa: Yeah, groups are definitely a huge part of our curriculum here. Of course, we need to make sure that a girl is ready to listen to other stories and share her own struggles. That takes a while sometime, because the girls are so closed off and just don’t want to connect with other people, because they fear they’ll just be judged or abandoned, which has happened to them so much. But with patience, support and nurturance, almost all the girls in our program end up participating in group sessions and later tell us how valuable it was to feel understood. And most of the groups are led by a clinician and a mentor, so there’s this tag-team philosophy when running trainings or workshops with the girls. Cause, I mean, as much as we love them, there’s certainly rough days where you need some support too.

Me: And the expressive therapies?

Lisa: Oh, gosh, there’s so many we use. The Boston community has been really great in this regard. We do yoga classes with the girls across the street, they’ve been invited to museum trips, dance workshops, private concerts, you name it, they’ve done it. So many of our girls are so incredibly talented in the arts, but they’ve never been able to really explore that part of themselves because they just lost their identities and dreams. But we really encourage them to explore what makes them happy, and we realize that sometimes, talking about your trauma over and over again isn’t so fun. So if they wanna run a lap by the Charles, or write a play about their experiences, we love that! And plus, it adds a bit of light to what is otherwise, a really intense and emotional work environment.
Me: That sounds really meaningful and a great way to let the girls feel empowered. Do you think that’s an important part of the treatment, helping the girls feel in charge?
Lisa: Honestly, I think that’s the most important piece out of anything we can strive to accomplish with the girls. When they come to us, they are usually resistant and miss the Life, and the pimp. Whether or not we like to admit it, the Pimp provided the girl with food, shelter, food, and what she perceived to be love, protection, and support. So, we sure as hell must provide all those things, that’s the only way she won’t go back (even thought some do). And the most effective way we can provide those bare human connections to the girl is by showing her that she can be in control, she can tell us if she’s pissed, or happy, or scared and we’ll still be there. She can yell at me, and I won’t abandon her. We really have to work with her to create a shift in her identity. We have to shower her that we genuinely respect and value her as a human with her own mind, beliefs, imperfections, and aspirations.

Me: And how does your program specifically aid in developing a girl’s sense of identity?
Lisa: Well, it’s a constant process but we do several things. We help the girls do well in school, so that they can get their GEDs or graduate, so they they can later find independent work and see that money does not just come from a pimp. We help girls create resumes, prep them for interviews, all those things most of us take for granted as learned skills. The girls create Power Point presentations, they present to us, their peers, classmates, and often times, politicians and legislators. Once the girls have a job, we help them with budgeting their finances, so that they don’t suddenly feel the overwhelming need to turn back to the Life for money.

Me: What about the obstacles you run into?
Lisa: Well, as you can imagine, there’s a hell of a lot of setbacks. We’re trying to rebuild the brainwashing and manipulation of months and sometimes years that the pimps have been using. We have to be careful to not immediately speak badly of the pimps, which is hard to do, but if we jump down their throats, the girls feel like we’re attacking their family and will often become angry and defensive. The truth is, setbacks are pretty common, but we have to stay with the girls, no matter what. We can’t physically keep them in our program against their will, but we sure as hell can keep calling, patrolling her neighborhood, and showing the girl that unlike most interactions she’s had, we’re not going anywhere. We work with our girls well after they turn 18, and a lot come back and work as mentors, and every time they come to visit, we’re always so happy. We’re really a family. Maybe a dysfunctional one, sure, but we’re totally a family.

Me: Do you have any favorite stories of those girls who come back?
Lisa: Actually, I just got an e-mail from one of our survivors. I was called into the Boston Police Department around 3am two ago, when she was 15. This girl was bleeding, hair missing, bruised, it was really hard to look her in the eye. And I’ve seen a lot, but I still get shaky thinking about it. Her step-dad was sexually abusive to her for years, and he also violently assaulted her mom almost every night. She wanted to leave with her mother, but the mother couldn’t separate from her husband, so the girl started confiding in her male best friend of five years. Her friend told her she could stay with him for a few months, while she figured everything out. She happily accepted the offer, but after about
half a year, her friend started tricking her out. She had no where else to go, and her friend didn’t usually beat her, so she stuck with it until I met her when she was 15. She worked with Audrey and the other girls at MLMC, but she went back to the life a few times. Anyways, last year she left for good and moved away. Now she lives in an independent living facility, working towards her GED, and has some of her photographs on exhibit. As an extra bonus, she’s going to co-facilitate some groups with us next year. That’s what makes this work incredible. I couldn’t be a part of this type of story anywhere else.