

Acknowledging the Continuum from Childhood Abuse to Male Prostitution

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Article

The “Stroll”. Any city has one and Vancouver is no exception. On any night of the week, a dozen or more young men can be seen standing along a street in Yaletown. In darkened doorways, leaning against a building, or standing near the curb, these young men (some just barely beyond childhood) are selling their bodies for survival. This is not a lark for them; this is not “a way to have lots of sex and get paid for it.” As is the case for female prostitutes, it is a continuation of their childhood victimization.

An informal survey conducted by BCSMSSA revealed that approximately 84% of male sex trade workers were survivors of sexual abuse. Those who were not survivors of sexual abuse claimed to have experienced physical abuse as children. It is likely that some of the other 16% either do not remember their sexual abuse or do not wish to admit to it. One of the “hustlers” being interviewed said in response to the question about the men being survivors, “If you think that any of these guys haven't been sexually abused as kids, you're from the moon.”

In addition to our survey's findings, a significant number of our clients have disclosed during their therapy that they had worked the streets at some time. We believe it is safe to suggest that there is a clear and direct link between their childhood sexual abuse and the fact that these young men are working in the sex trade.

A number of factors contribute to these youth ending up in prostitution. To begin with, being sexually exploited as a child defined the victim's sexuality as not belonging to him, not being a form of intimacy and sharing, but rather a commodity. Often the offender(s) gave their victim(s) money, gifts, alcohol or drugs, camping trips or short holidays and, most important to a child, attention. At the time, the price these boys had to pay was the use of their bodies.

In order to cope with the abuse as it is taking place, the victim often disassociated. He would “leave” his body until it was safe to return, thus lessening the pain he experienced. Subsequently, disassociation became an important survival tool. When memories or feelings threaten to surface, the need to disassociate is triggered. At the same time, the survivor's purpose as a sex object, as defined by the abuse, hovers just on the edge of consciousness. These feelings of being a sexual commodity, coupled with the need to disassociate, lead youth to head for The Stroll. Years after the original abuse they are still paying with the only thing they have been taught is of value.

For many of these youths, living on the streets was a preferred alternative to living in a violent abusive family. At first the streets were a refuge, but soon necessity and familiarity with being exploited led these boys to The Stroll. Easy money? So it seems at first, but the drugs used to disassociate are expensive to maintain. Self esteem, already low, is lowered further still. The cost in other ways are immeasurable.

Subconsciously, working the streets is an attempt to find resolution for the trauma of their unresolved childhood abuse. Boys are socialized from a very early age to believe that if they are to become “real

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men” they should be powerful, in control and sexually aggressive. For a male child or adolescent, sexual victimization psychologically robs him of his masculinity at a time when his sense of self is highly vulnerable. A child who has been abused, particularly by his caregivers, has been taught that the nature of interpersonal relationships is one of a power imbalance, where one is either subservient (victim) or dominant (offender). In order to find control or right the balance, the young male survivor may find a pseudo sense of power through prostitution. He is able to set his price and to say what he will and will not do.

Unfortunately, his attempt at power does not work, as he is often forced to comply with the wishes of an aggressive “John” or to bargain at a lower price when business is slow. Worse yet, his low self-concept as a victim is reinforced, along with all of the accompanying negative feelings. After his night on the street he will often need to further disassociate by spending his money on drugs or alcohol.

Working the streets replicates the original childhood abuse in another, very significant way. Part of the control exerted by the offender was to convince his or her victim that the child is a willing party to the abuse and will be made to bear equal responsibility should anyone find out. Often the child is told that any number of terrible things will happen if he tells. The child is scared into silence for fear of condemnation by those to whom he may reach out. In the same way, male prostitutes are viewed as criminals who willingly participate in a crime against society (not against them). A former client was arrested, along with an adult male, at the age of 13. This child, instead of being helped as a victim of crime, was charged with sexual immorality. He was not even a hustler, but rather a frightened, lonely child exploited by a predator and further abused by the system.

Male hustlers are harassed by police, raped and assaulted by Johns, and gay-bashed (even though many are not gay) by marauding thugs. Society's misunderstanding of the reality of the male hustler's life further marginalizes him beyond the original abuse.

BCSMSSA recognizes the serious gap in services for these young men. We are aware of their inherent distrust of the system, which they see as yet another abusive power figure. We are developing a program which will reach out to male hustlers, offering them a place free of judgement and condemnation, where they may begin to find healing and a new sense of self. Their response to our preliminary survey suggests they are open to our assistance. We hope to offer them both group and individual therapy, as well as victim services should they wish to pursue legal action against their offenders.

Our first attempt to find funding for our male hustler outreach program failed, but we are determined to ensure that this opportunity is available. This agency will not, and the Canadian public and government must not, abandon these abused boys who have been left to the dark streets of Yaletown.

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