

**WASHINGTON (CNN) -- A study released Monday revealed that between 300,000 and 400,000 U.S. children -- many from middle class homes -- are victims of some type of sexual exploitation every year.**

The three-year study, funded in part by the U.S. Department of Justice, analyzed the problem of sexual exploitation -- particularly commercial sexual exploitation -- of children in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

"Child sexual exploitation is the most hidden form of child abuse in the U.S. and North America today," said Richard J. Estes, co-author of the study. "It is the nation's least recognized epidemic."

He said the findings debunked many myths about what kind of children are involved in sexual exploitation.

"Seventy-five percent of the children we met on the streets are children from working class and middle class families and the simple majority of them are white," Estes said.

"One of the other myths is that this is a problem [of] poor, inner city, mostly minority youth. We cannot confirm that to be the case, but rather just the opposite."

Those who perpetrate sex crimes against children come from all parts of society and include relatives and other adults known and trusted by the children or their families, he said.

"Despite popular notions to the contrary," Estes said, "strangers commit fewer than 4 percent of all the sexual assaults against children."

The study, titled "The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada and Mexico," identified 17 groups of children in the United States at substantial risk for sexual exploitation.

Estes, a professor of social work at the University of Pennsylvania, said most of these children are runaways and homeless kids who trade "survival sex" for food, shelter and clothing on the streets of U.S. cities.

Some children in the United States, however, also engage in commercial sex while living at home.

"The majority of these children trade sex for money or for more expensive clothes or other consumer goods," Estes said. "Most of the 'customers' of these children are members of their own junior and senior high school peer groups."

Other groups of commercially sexually exploited children in the United States include girls in gangs, children brought into the country illegally, and American youths trafficked nationally and internationally as part of organized sex crime rings.

Boys are victimized as often as girls, Estes said.

Many of those who solicit children for sex are men who are married with children of their own, the study reported.

The report, in an 11-point action agenda, called for the earlier identification and more intensive supervision of sexually offending adults and juveniles.

The study found gaps in policies and services intended to combat sexual exploitation of children and help the victims.

For the project, researchers selected 28 cities in the three countries -- 17 in the United States -- based on their size and for being known as having problems with the commercial sexual exploitation of children. Seventeen cities were chosen in the United States.

The researchers examined public records and interviewed about 1,000 children, law enforcement officials, and human services groups. They used previous data and field research from 288 federal and local agencies to extrapolate their findings to the U.S. population.

The study was conducted by the National Association of Social Workers and the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work

"I think what the report highlights is that we're simply not doing a good enough job in this country taking care of our children," said Shay Bilchik of

the Child Welfare League of America.

"We've got to pay closer attention to the problem including what's happening in our own homes and neighborhoods with kids who we think we're taking good care of."

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