Finding and Engaging Commercially Sexually Exploited Youth with Resources

Claudine O’Leary
Goal

- How to have conversations with youth about their experiences and resources available without forcing or mandating them
About me

- Technical assistance, training, capacity building
  - Benedict Center – Sisters Project
  - Milwaukee Academy
  - La Causa
  - Lad Lake
  - Proactive Outreach for the Health of Sexually Exploited Youth (POHSEY)
  - Sojourner Family Peace Center
  - Youth Living Out Loud Mentor Project
  - More on occasional basis
About me (youth version)

- Represent! A youth leadership group for teens with life experience in the sex trade
- Real Talk and sharing real life skills and knowledge (DT)
- Real Talk on the Outs
- Real Talk about Youth and the Sex Trade (10 sessions)
- Advocacy to explore your rights and options
- Opportunities to express your ideas and be heard
Some of my experience

- Started with Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt (WHISPER) in Minneapolis (early 90’s)

- Started the Young Women’s Empowerment Project (YWEP) in Chicago for teens and young women in the sex trade and street economies (98-06)

- Focused on harm reduction outreach, leadership development, popular education workshops, social justice activism with youth impacted by the sex trade and street economies
Definitions

- Youth = youth of all gender expressions
- Youth or Teens = 17 and under for this presentation
- Sex trade = sex or being sexual for money, gifts, drugs or survival needs; sometimes you or someone else gets to keep all or some of the money/resources
Grown people terms

- Commercial sexual exploitation
- Sex trafficking
- Human trafficking
Adultism

Defined as the "behaviors and attitudes based on the assumptions that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people without agreement"
Terms youth might use

- Hustling
- Trapping
- Bust some moves
- Do what I’ve got to do to survive
Working theories

- Love for harm reduction
- Community building – circle process
- Liberation focused – anti-oppression, system change
- Nothing about us, without us
- Popular education – youth co-developed groups and curricula
Different words = different results

- Life experience in the sex trade vs. sex trafficking
- Awkwardness of unusual terms
  - “they think I’m trafficking”
- Power of naming a perpetrator and power of youth defining their own experiences
- Name experiences instead of labeling someone
Youth voice
But they don’t self-identify...

- As what?
- Why is it important for them to identify as what you want?
- Identity formation is complicated already
- Maybe they are telling you in their own way.
  - She did me wrong
  - He’s not loyal
Where to find youth

- Schools
- Community Centers
- Out of home care and shelters
- Families
- Existing youth groups
- Social media
- Through friends
- Faith communities
- Social service programs
- Systems like juvenile justice, child welfare
Youth risk factors for commercial sexual exploitation

Static – can’t change
- Past sexual abuse
- Loss of a parent from abandonment, death or incarceration
- Cognitive disabilities
- Growing up in poverty

Dynamic - changeable
- Low school attendance
- Experiencing bullying
- Low supervision
- Negative peer group
- No safe place to live
- Lack of one stable connection to a trustworthy person
LGBTQ

Lesbian
Gay
Bisexual
Transgender
Queer
Questioning

Same sex attraction
Teen males

- Homeless, runaway, forced out
- Targeted by older people
- Recruited by friends
- Porn, stripping, cam shows
- Controlled by someone older sometimes
- Sold by parents, guardians and other family
- Exploited with girlfriends
What makes it hard for adults to talk with youth about the sex trade?
Negative repercussions youth often experience from telling someone

- Judgments, assumptions, never let you live it down
- Lose friends
- Family will be angry or disappointed
- Lose level or privileges
- More restrictive settings
- Visits from police
- Some youth workers will say you brought it on yourself, you’re dirty and promiscuous, you’ll never change
- So many people will find out and talk about you
- People are “concerned” about you; describing services in a way that says the youth needs to be fixed
As a result...

- Adults reward dishonesty and silence by making it too difficult for youth to tell us with all the negative consequences.

- Adults are great at putting the fault of few disclosures on youth (they must be brainwashed, they must not be ready to change, they must not understand the danger).
Commercial sexual exploitation is not “youth behavior” but the (criminal) actions of adults towards youth
A welcoming environment where youth want to tell us

- Extra support
- More access to good places to live
- Extra clothes and shopping
- Caring people surround you with support
- Extra outings
- Lots of love from people you care about
- Someone to listen to you without judgment
- More options than seemed possible
Focus areas youth request

- Legal rights
- Health needs – including but not limited to sexual health
- Relationships
- Practical needs
- Jobs
- Small school options, credit recovery, GED, Job Corps
- Alternative healing options
  - Outside of therapy in a little room
  - Meditation, Aromatherapy, Herbs, Acupressure
Besides violence – experiences teens have that make them want to leave the sex trade

- Boredom
- Betrayal
- Irritation
- Fights with other youth
- Fed up with fake people, no loyalty
- Repetitiveness
- A real alternative opens up
Why do youth who’ve been commercially sexually exploited hate mandated reporting?
- “Nothing happens”
- “It’s too many people talking about me”
- “What’s the point?”
- “Why worry about it now; they didn’t before”
- “I’m not ready to talk about it”
Possible solutions

- Some of us aren’t mandated reporters; we can build relationships first

- Explore all options concurrently

- Stick with the youth; it’s not about passing the child off but walking with them through the process
What if youth “don’t want help?”

- Maybe they don’t want the help you’re offering
- Ambivalence is a part of change
- Maybe they want help but don’t want to give up the sense of freedom, access to cash, usual coping skills like smoking weed or even just cigarettes
- Start the connection, don’t force it
- Explore what they’ve already tried and their frustrations
Every other Wednesday from 5:30-7pm
Wed. November 19
Wed. December 3
Wed. December 17

Free snacks, positive resources and earn your way to cash gift cards!

We meet at a NEW confidential place in the city - ask for location when you call

options, not judgments!
represent!

Express yourself, help others, share what you know and learn even more!
No pressure
No judgments

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For details and more info, call Claudine O'Leary 414.212.5121

including stripping, sexual videos/pics, and sexual exchanges for money, gifts, drugs or survival needs.
Youth love:

- Talking with someone that has been vouched for (youth sometimes know each other)

- Someone who accepts them, as they are, right now

- Advocacy with systems; someone who is on their side and makes things happen
  - Changed lawyers
  - Made case workers respond
  - Showed up to court
Youth want:

- More “people who’ve been there” involved
Sharing personal experiences

- Complicated for youth care workers
- Boundaries
- What’s the therapeutic benefit? When does it become about you?
- Sharing portions is different than spilling out the whole story
- Sharing your story repeatedly can be challenging
- Some sharing gives youth hope and a path forward
Youth want:

- For their actions and expressions to be welcomed with openness, respect and love
Be familiar with youth culture

Whose tattoo is this?
Ideas from youth

- Incentives
- Make it fun!
- Youth leadership with adult support
- Make it easy to participate through transportation help, childcare, time of the group
- Make programs small so youth don’t get lost
Welcoming space

- Rethink Resources
- www.rethinkresources.net
- Claudine O’Leary
- 414-212-5121