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## Prostitution's Hidden victims: boys

By Esther J. Cepeda

That "dirty old man" who pays cash to use women as disposable sex toys may have started out as a bewildered, ten-year-old boy.

Of the many shocking revelations meticulously documented in the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation's report "Deconstructing the Demand for Prostitution" released late last week, the most heartbreaking and disturbing was that among men who frequently pay prostitutes for sex, many had their first sexual experience paid for by a close relative – at as tender an age as ten.

In 2006 and 2007, a team of twelve male and female project interviewers from CAASE and a group called Prostitution Research Education set out to look into the minds of Chicago men who pay for sex from the estimated 16,000 to 25,000 women in the city who sell their services. They advertised their study on Craigslist, Chicago After Dark, and the Chicago Reader, and eventually spoke for two hours each with 113 men ages 20-71.

Their "average" john was 39 years old, only slightly more likely African American than Caucasian, overwhelmingly college-educated and making over \$40,000 a year, with a girlfriend or wife at home. A little over half of them bought sex from once a month to several times in one week, soliciting women on the internet, in person, and through escort services alike.

The average age of their first purchase was 21 with the jaw-dropping age of ten pulling down the average. These stark numbers – 29% of these guys' first time ever was paid and 17% had that first experience on a dad's dime – round out the tragedy.

"We have to do a lot better job of talking about exploitation and violence toward women just to counteract the overwhelming glamorization of prostitution in this country," study author Rachel Durchslag told me last week. "One thing we need to do is talk to young men about this issue. Moms and dads don't want to talk to their sons about this but with one quarter of our participants reporting they had their first paid experience before the age of seventeen, it tells me we have to talk to dads about how to bond with their sons with some healthy masculinity instead of based on exploitation and domination."

Up until now, the conversation about the fallout of pay-to-play has been focused on the female part of the prostitution equation. The facts in this report, found on <http://www.caase.org>, point to the serious need to intervene in the lives of very young men today in order to make a difference in the lives of women *and* men – both those involved in prostitution transactions and those hurt by after-effects like sexually

transmitted diseases, the pain of betrayal, and the inability to have healthy relationships – for generations to come.

That's a tall order in a society where young boys and girls are constantly bombarded by images of ultra-sexual women, and pimp culture has become so mainstream you can buy pre-packaged costumes at your local Halloween supply store. The same society where parents scoff at the idea of their 8<sup>th</sup>-graders learning about condoms in health ed. classes.

"Absolutely young women are growing up with unbelievable amounts of pressure to be sexual but that's only half of the equation. Prostitution not only harms women in communities but harms men as well," Rachel said, citing the guilt, shame, and real remorse the men in the study expressed to their interviewers after having the opportunity – in many cases for the first time in their lives – to talk openly about their behavior and feelings out.

Calling all moms and dads: get over your embarrassment about the "sex talk." Your sons and daughters need you to have frank and open heart-to-heart conversations about sexual health and responsibility, today. Sexual victimization for either gender can happen early but it's never too late to do everything possible to avoid it.

*Esther J. Cepeda writes the "600 Words" & "Pregunta del Dia" columns, and is also a Director at the Chicago-based United Neighborhood Organization. Her reporting and opinions do not necessarily reflect those of UNO. "600 words" is a registered trademark of EeJayCee, Inc., Copyright 2008. May be reprinted with permission, contact [eejaycee@600words.com](mailto:eejaycee@600words.com)*