

# **New Study of Sexually-exploited youth in Kamloops, Kelowna, Nanaimo and Prince George Portrays Youth in Sex Trade**

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Burnaby, BC -- Some British Columbia children become victims of the sex trade before entering their teen years, according to a new study by The McCreary Centre Society. The study of sexually exploited youth in four BC communities reveals that most youth involved in the sex trade were abused as young children, face a high risk of suicide and health problems and urgently need safe housing and other support services.

The study, titled "Our Kids Too", is based on surveys of youth in Kamloops, Kelowna, Nanaimo and Prince George. It was conducted by The McCreary Centre Society, a non-governmental, non-profit youth health research organization.

The work was funded by a grant from Vancouver Foundation, Canada's largest community foundation. The Foundation has a province-wide mandate and makes some 600 discretionary grants annually to support a broad range of charitable organizations that help meet community needs.

In releasing the study, McCreary Executive Director Dr. Roger Tonkin said that, while the total number of sexually exploited BC youth is not known, the survey results show that involvement of young people in the sex trade is "not just a big city problem."

Other key findings of the study include:

- The average age of entry in the sex trade is 13.
- Most sexually exploited youth are female.
- 80% have been in government care.
- About 90% have been physically or sexually abused.
- Nearly eight in 10 were under 13 years old when they first became sexually active.
- Over half have been pregnant.
- Nearly half tried to commit suicide in the past year.

The youth identified their top three needs as safe housing, education and employment opportunities, and alcohol and drug counselling. Dr. Tonkin notes that the youth portrayed by this study are, in many ways, not unlike others their age. "However, the young people who participated in this survey clearly do not enjoy the same opportunities as most other youth growing up in this province," he adds.

This study says: "Sexual exploitation of youth is not only -- or even primarily -- about sex. It is about the lives of young people who have already, in the 12, 15 or 18 years of life, faced many grim realities including abuse, depression, violence and lost opportunity... Sexually-exploited youth, like their more fortunate counterparts, have a

positive outlook and hopes for future happiness. In spite of their difficult circumstances, most of these youth remain optimistic about the future. They have aspirations and dreams and, like other young people, look forward to completing an education, finding a job and having a family of their own."

"Our Kids Too" was released in advance of a major conference on sexual exploitation of children and youth to be held in Vancouver April 30-May 1. The conference "It's a Crime" is sponsored by the Vancouver Coalition for Children and Youth (604)709-5661.

Community agencies collaborating with the McCreary Centre Society in the study project are Kamloops Youth Resources Society, Central Okanagan Boys and Girls Club (Kelowna), Nanaimo and Area Resource Services for Families, and Native Friendship Centre (Prince George).

Further information may be obtained by contacting Dr. Tonkin at (604)291-1996.