



Adolescent Girls in the Texas Sex Trade

Tracking Study Results for February, 2011

Report prepared for:



F O U N D A T I O N

Executive Summary

- This report details the results of a statewide study of commercial sexual exploitation of female children in Texas. The results indicate a significant number of girls under age 18 are involved in the sex trade. The results are part of a multi-year quarterly tracking study.
- The study is designed to count adolescent girls using scientific probability methods when they are encountered through two sources: ads on Internet classifieds websites and escort services. These are two of the main sources by which johns find girls to exploit sexually.
- The study is not designed to count organized, underground commercial sexual exploitation of children. In some states, this type of exploitation appears to affect Hispanic, Asian, and Native American girls at disproportionately high rates.
- It is safe to say that this research methodology is designed to count, over a one-month period, the number of adolescent females who are acutely commercially sexually exploited, and actively marketed within the local sex trade.
- Collectively the results indicate a significant number of adolescent girls caught in the Texas sex trade during the month:
 - 36 through escort services
 - 589 through Internet classifieds websites

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The Schapiro Group, Inc.
127 Peachtree Street, NE – Suite 1540 ♦ Atlanta, GA 30303
404-584-5215 ♦ 404-581-0058 fax

schapirogroup.com

Introduction and Methodology

The commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is a societal phenomenon receiving growing attention from researchers, policy makers, and a wide array of advocates. Rightfully so, many wonder how it could be the case that children are sold for sex in Texas and across the United States today. Unfortunately, it is an issue area fraught with mystery, misconception, and a general lack of scientific data.

One fundamental question looms over everyone who tries to put an end to CSEC in their community: how prevalent is the problem, anyway? This research methodology is designed to answer exactly this question in states across the U.S. It involves a series of state-level scientific investigations into the incidence of CSEC among females under age 18, with this report detailing the results for Texas.

Why state-level, why female only, and why victims under age 18?

- We measure CSEC incidence state-by-state because community and state-level factors appear to influence greatly the magnitude of the problem, particularly local permissiveness of the commercial sex industry.
- This study focuses only on female CSEC victims for a variety of reasons, chief among them that it is far less common to encounter blatant advertisements for sex with boys than it is for girls. A different methodological approach might be necessary to estimate CSEC incidence among boys.
- There are several ways to define a “child” according to federal and state laws. Not only does “under age 18” align with important federal laws defining childhood, but it is a definition widely accepted among the general public.

The Difficulties of Studying CSEC

To understand why it is difficult to study CSEC, it is instructive to define it, as CSEC is both simple and challenging to define. A simple definition of CSEC is when a person provides money or anything else of value in exchange for sex with a child. Practically, however, CSEC manifests in many different ways, ranging from survival sex—when a desperate child is forced to exchange sexual favors for basic necessities such as food or shelter—to instances where a child is kidnapped and pimped in underground sex trades. No single research methodology can measure victims of all of these manifestations of exploitation.

There have been documented attempts to quantify the problem of commercial sexual exploitation of children in the United States, however very few of these involve direct empirical investigations.¹ Most academic and government quantifications represent educated guesswork.² Several local victims services advocacy organizations have sought to measure the problem in their areas, yet many are forced to rely on second-hand information and estimates from social workers and other victims services providers, thus limiting their estimates to CSEC victims who have already come in contact with sources of help. A thorough review of this research is beyond the scope of the current report, but is readily available in the work of Estes and Weiner.³

While the available evidence contained in these reports indicates definitively that the problem of adolescent girls' sex services being sold to men does indeed exist, none is designed to use measurable, empirical methodologies to put a hard number on how many girls it affects. There are many reasons why this is the case, not the least of which is the difficulty of ensuring the safety of researchers and subjects. Beyond concerns about safety, though, are methodological challenges related to the nature of the problem itself. One of these challenges in particular—properly identifying age—is important to address briefly at the outset of this report.

¹ A noteworthy exception to this generalization is a recent scientific study in New York City that used respondent-driven sampling (RDS) to estimate the incidence of CSEC among boys and girls. While we believe the use of RDS will always systematically and significantly bias a sample of CSEC victims to the point that it is unfit for incidence estimation, we nevertheless believe this study yielded important findings about CSEC victimhood. For more information, see:

Curtis, R., K. Terry, M. Dank, K. Dombrowski, and B. Kahn (2008). *The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in New York City*. Center for Court Innovation.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2005). *Youth Risk Behavior Survey*. Available at: www.cdc.gov/yrbbs. Accessed on 5/16/10.

Clawson, H. J., M. Layne, and K. Small. (2006). *Estimating human trafficking into the United States: Development of a methodology*. Fairfax, VA: Caliber.

Edward, J.M., Iritani, B.J., & Hallfors, D.D. (2005). Prevalence and correlates of exchanging sex for drugs or money among adolescents in the United States. *Sexually Transmitted Infections* 82(5): 354-358.

Estes, R.J. & Weiner, N.A. (2001). *The commercial sexual exploitation of children in the US, Canada and Mexico*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania.

Finkelhor, D. & Jones, L. (2006). Why have child maltreatment and child victimization declined? *Journal of Social Issues*, 62(4), 685-716.

Gelles, R.J. (1980). Violence in the family: A review of research in the seventies. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 42(4): 873-885.

General Accounting Office. (1982). *Sexual exploitation of children—A problem of unknown magnitude*. Washington, DC: General Accounting Office.

Hammer, H., Finkelhor, D., & Sedlak, A. (2002). *Runaway/throwaway children: National estimates and characteristics*. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin – NCJ196469*, (pgs. 1-12). Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

United States Department of Justice, Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section. (2007). *Child prostitution*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved 5/16/10 from (<http://www.usdoj.gov/criminal/ceos/prostitution.html>).

Snyder, H.N., & Sickmund, M. (2006). *Juvenile offenders and victims: 2006 national report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

³ Estes, R.J. & Weiner, N.A. (2001). *The commercial sexual exploitation of children in the US, Canada and Mexico*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania.

While there are documented cases of girls as young as elementary school age involved in the sex trade, the majority of girls trapped in the industry are in their teenage years. Johns soliciting these girls are engaging in a despicable act, but typically *not* because the johns are pedophiles. It seems that most of the girls they solicit are, in a biological sense, sexually mature.

In fact, it is distinctly possible that johns looking for “young” girls sometimes do not know that the young woman they are soliciting is actually under age 18. One critical aspect of this study shows just how dramatically people fundamentally overestimate the ages of girls posing in mildly provocative ways. Adolescent girls still appear quite young—which we also document as central to their appeal to johns—but often do not appear to be unambiguously younger than 18. The current study involves methodologies that address this and other quantification challenges. The guiding principles of these methodologies are described next.

Guiding Principles

The foundation of the study is comprised of the following guiding principles and assumptions:

- There is no way to study directly—to make contact with—girls being commercially sexually exploited. Even if it were possible to keep researchers safe, it would be absolutely impossible to ensure the safety of the child subject.
- Commercial sexual exploitation of children is, by definition, a commercial practice. Though it is crude to even make the comparison, it is methodologically important to recognize that its enterprises operate under basic rules governing all types of businesses: they must be accessible to current and prospective customers, they must advertise, and they are subject to the law of supply and demand.
- When children are commercially sexually exploited, they are regarded as nothing more than assets to their exploiters. For all intents and purposes, every girl who is being commercially sexually exploited is findable by johns; if not, a girl is no longer an asset to her exploiter.
- Therefore, it is safe to say that this research methodology is designed to count adolescent females who are acutely commercially sexually exploited, and actively marketed within the local sex trade.

Is there any way to ensure that the methodologies based on these principles yield perfect measurements? No, of course not. While the accuracy of the study results overall is helped by having multiple methodologies that approach different facets of the problem simultaneously, there are nevertheless some important caveats to bear in mind when evaluating the results.

One of these is that the study is unable to count organized, underground commercial sexual exploitation of children. This type of exploitation appears to affect Hispanic, Asian, and Native American girls at disproportionately high rates. Research suggests that Hispanic and Asian girls, particularly in ethnic enclaves, become trapped in commercial sexual exploitation of children differently altogether.⁴ Nevertheless, we do encounter a comparatively small number of Asian and Hispanic females while monitoring internet service postings.

⁴ A report titled *DEMAND* by Shared Hope International provides an in-depth explanation of how young Hispanic and Asian girls get caught in the sex trade within the United States.

The most important fact to keep in mind is that the study is a quantum leap forward in determining—objectively and in a replicable fashion—the magnitude of the problem of commercial sexual exploitation of children. Over time, as the study is replicated and the problem tracked objectively, the picture of the problem will become clearer.

Age Identification

When researchers count events that occur at varying degrees of uncertainty, they typically count probabilities rather than discrete cases. For a simple example, consider a drawer of 40 identically-shaped red and blue marbles. Imagine trying to count the number of red marbles while wearing a blindfold. This, obviously, is an impossible task. If we knew from previous experience, however, that 25% of the marbles are red, we would count each marble—without seeing its true color—as .25 red. We count each of the 40 marbles in the drawer this way, and sum up the red probabilities to arrive at a red count of 10 marbles.

Instead of trying to determine precisely whether or not each individual marble was or was not red, which is impossible while blindfolded, we arrive at the most precise count by acknowledging that—while we cannot know exactly the color of any one marble—each has a 25% chance of being red. This, in essence, is how we count the number of girls under 18 in each of the study's individual methodologies; it is the most scientifically sound way to deal with the inherent uncertainty of estimating girls' ages.

The key to the technique described in the marble example comes from the phrase “if we knew from previous experience.” The problem is, there is no scientifically reliable previous experience on which to base the probability that a girl selling sex who looks quite young is, indeed, under 18 years. Therefore, we conducted a separate study to serve as this previous experience.

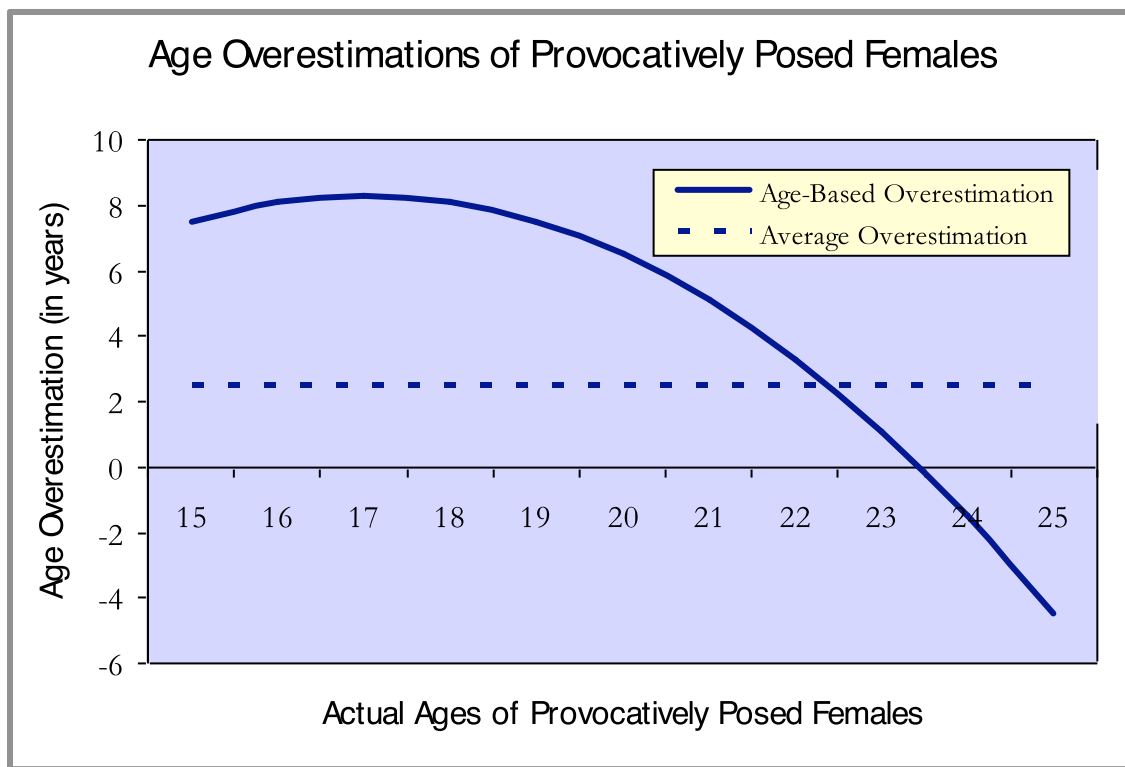
Basically, the study involved asking a random sample of 100 adults to guess the ages of a variety of females in photographs. Most of these pictures were of females whose ages were known (teenagers to young adults), and some were not. Half the pictures were of Black females, the other half White. The pictures of unknown girls came from erotic services postings on the Atlanta Craigslist web site. All pictures were of shoulders and above. Each picture was decent, though subjects were posed provocatively (e.g., a picture of a female licking her lips). The research team decided to include pictures of unknown young females taken from online classifieds sites in order to determine whether there was a difference in the average age ratings of the pictures with known ages and those from the classifieds. Pictures of females of unknown ages were selected because the subject appeared “young.” In selecting the pictures, multiple reviewers agreed that there was at least some chance that each of the females of unknown ages in the pictures was actually under 18. This is how we operationalize “young” throughout the study.

Study participants viewed each of these pictures and estimated the age of each pictured female. Importantly, study participants rated the average age of females from Craigslist (whose ages we did not know) the same as the average age of pictured females whose ages we did know. Study participants were balanced by race and gender, though the results indicated conclusively that participant demographics did not have an impact on age estimations, nor did the demographics of the pictured females have an effect. There was also no difference in the average ratings between the known age and unknown age pictures.

Figure 1 shows how study participants tend to overestimate the ages of provocatively posed females. The dotted line represents the average overestimation of 2.5 years. That is, across all ratings of known-age females, participants tended to assume the females were 2.5 years older than they actually were. This is not the whole story, though.

There are other ways to describe this overestimation bias than as a constant overestimate of 2.5 years. What if, for example, people overestimate the ages of adolescent girls more so than they do women in their 20s? The data showed convincingly that this was exactly the case. The solid line in Figure 1 shows how this bias manifests. When a girl under 18 poses provocatively, participants tended to overestimate her age by 7-8 years, whereas when the subject was closer to age 22 or 23, the age estimate was much more accurate than the average overestimate of 2.5 years. In fact, women age 24 and over tend to be estimated as younger than they actually are when posed provocatively.

Figure 1.



This effect, which is represented by a curvilinear mathematical equation, allows us to speak definitively about the probability that a female of a given estimated age is actually under age 18. In fact, the study showed that any given “young” looking girl who is selling sex has a 38% likelihood of being under age 18. Put another way, for every 100 “young” looking girls selling sex, 38 are under 18 years of age. We would compute this by assigning a value of .38 to each of the 100 “young” girls we encounter, then summing the values together to achieve a reliable count.

With this “previous experience” in hand, we can reliably determine how many of the “young” girls we record through the various study methodologies are actually under age 18, and thus victims of commercial sexual exploitation of children.

Results

Our probability-based empirical approach to counting CSEC victims was first implemented in Georgia in 2007, and has since spread to new states across the country. The research is designed to count the total number of female CSEC victims within a state over the course of a 4-week month using several methodologies. Data are collected quarterly during the months of February, May, August, and November.

Escort Services

In order to count adolescent girls whose paid sex services are offered through escort services within a state, we place calls into each of the state's listed escort service phone numbers over the course of the one-month study period. Calling is necessary since most advertised escort services do not provide information about age in ads. The main goal of these calls was to determine whether the escort service offered “young” girls, defined in this methodology as any escort age 21 and younger. During the current study period in Texas:

- There were 509 listed escort service phone numbers
- 100% of these phone numbers connected to confirmable, “full service” agencies
- 42% of these “full service” agencies offered “young” females

For many escort services, 21 is the youngest escort they say they have available, though quite a few say they have 18 year-old escorts as well. Many also indicated they have girls who are 18 years or slightly older, but who “look younger than that.” Escort service operators have told our callers they have 17 year-old escorts specifically, and that if we want “full service” (industry code for sex), we needed to “negotiate that with the girl herself.”

The Problem of Call Centers. We also know that many of these phone numbers go to just a handful of call centers; one operator told us there were more than 50 phone numbers for her call center alone. It is important to know how many call centers we called in order to make calculations properly, since call centers likely correspond to significantly more escorts than non-call centers. We used two separate methods to determine how many call centers we dialed versus non-call centers. The “manual” method involved removing duplicate phone numbers and business names from the list of valid escort service calls, as well as instances when the caller is able to identify a phone operator across multiple calls. This is a very conservative way to estimate unique call sites.

A more reliable way to estimate the number of call centers in the list of valid escort numbers is to mathematically determine how many there are based on how often *they identify us*. We refer to this as the “Refusal Probability” method, and it is based on what we discovered after making numerous calls in a row to supposedly different escort services (each had a unique phone number) from a single phone line with caller ID (most escort services will not pick up the phone if caller ID is disabled).

This is what tended to happen when we unknowingly called the same call center—referred to as call center X—multiple times in close succession: the first call to call center X was successful; the second call was also successful but the operator (usually a woman) recognized our caller’s voice; on the third call the operator usually hung up on us and noted our caller ID number; the fourth and subsequent calls went straight to voicemail.

After we placed 30 calls into our list of phone numbers, practically all of our calls went straight to voicemail. Of course we could not know whether any call we made went to call center X or another one. We are, however, able to deduce mathematically—based on “3 calls then voicemail” in combination with “30 calls from one caller ID then nothing but voicemail”—how many call centers we likely encountered during the month of data collection. During the current study period in Texas:

- There were an estimated **2.9 call centers**, as determined using the “Refusal Probability” estimation method
- There were an estimated 1.4 call centers if we employ the more conservative “Manual” estimation method

Using the more reliable “Refusal Probability” method to identify call centers, and knowing how many confirmable “full service” escort services provide “young” females, we are able to calculate the number of CSEC victims statewide under various scenarios:

- If non-call center escort services average 1 escort per service and call center escort services average 10 escorts per service, then we encountered 15 CSEC victims through escort services during the month.
- If non-call center escort services average 5 escorts per service and call center escort services average 30 escorts per service, then we encountered 68 CSEC victims through escort services during the month.
- If non-call center escort services average 2.5 escorts per service and call center escort services average 20 escorts per service, then we encountered **36 CSEC victims through escort services** during the month. In our opinion—and based on our callers’ experiences speaking with call center operators—this pair of assumptions is most tenable, and thus produce the most accurate count.

While a weaker and more conservative estimate of call centers, the “Manual” method of call center determination actually produces *higher* estimates of adolescent girls because of the large number of non-call center escort services. The highest estimate of adolescent girls involved in escort services uses the “Manual” method: if non-call center escort services average 5 escorts per service and call center escort services average 30 escorts per service, then we encountered 108 CSEC victims through escort services during the month.

Internet Classifieds Websites

Over the course of the month we also monitored user-added content to Internet classifieds websites such as Backpage, Erotic mugshots, and others. Among other things, these websites are used to advertise sex services. For some of these websites, advertising sex services is all that they do. In today's market, johns have many choices for "shopping" for sex. As of November 2010, the tracking data do not include any content from Craigslist, as it closed the "adult services" section of its website in the U.S..

Recently the story was completely different. There were many websites, but only one main source for paid sex services ads in states across the U.S.: Craigslist. Starting in 2008, however, Craigslist made a number of changes to its paid sex services ad policies.

At the end of 2008, Craigslist changed its policy for posting erotic services ads on its site. Users now had to "verify" their account with a credit card number, as well as pay \$5 per ad. This was a major shift in Craigslist policy, and as a result there was a sudden dramatic drop in Craigslist ads for erotic services.

In May 2009, Craigslist eliminated the erotic services section of its website completely. At the same time, it created an "adult services" section of its website to house "legitimate" ads, which would cost \$10 each. At the time, advocates' hopes were high that this change would spell the end for paid sex services ads on Craigslist and thereby completely eliminate ads on the site for young females. This change would come about one year later.

During the current study period in Texas:

- There were a total of **35,400 paid sex services ads** across all major websites
- **59%** of these ads featured unique pictured females⁵
- **27%** of pictured females on these websites continued to be advertised two weeks or longer
- **35%** of unique pictured females were classified as "young"
- There were an estimated **137 CSEC victims advertised each day across all major websites**

The data show that many of these girls do not "stay" long on these sites, a finding that is consistent with the notion that many girls are trafficked state-to-state. Our own calls into young females listed on these websites found that some were no longer in the posted city after as little as one week's time, though it is unlikely that one week is the average length of time.

⁵ In this case, "unique" pictured females means the number of different females, rather than the number of ads of females, pictured on websites.

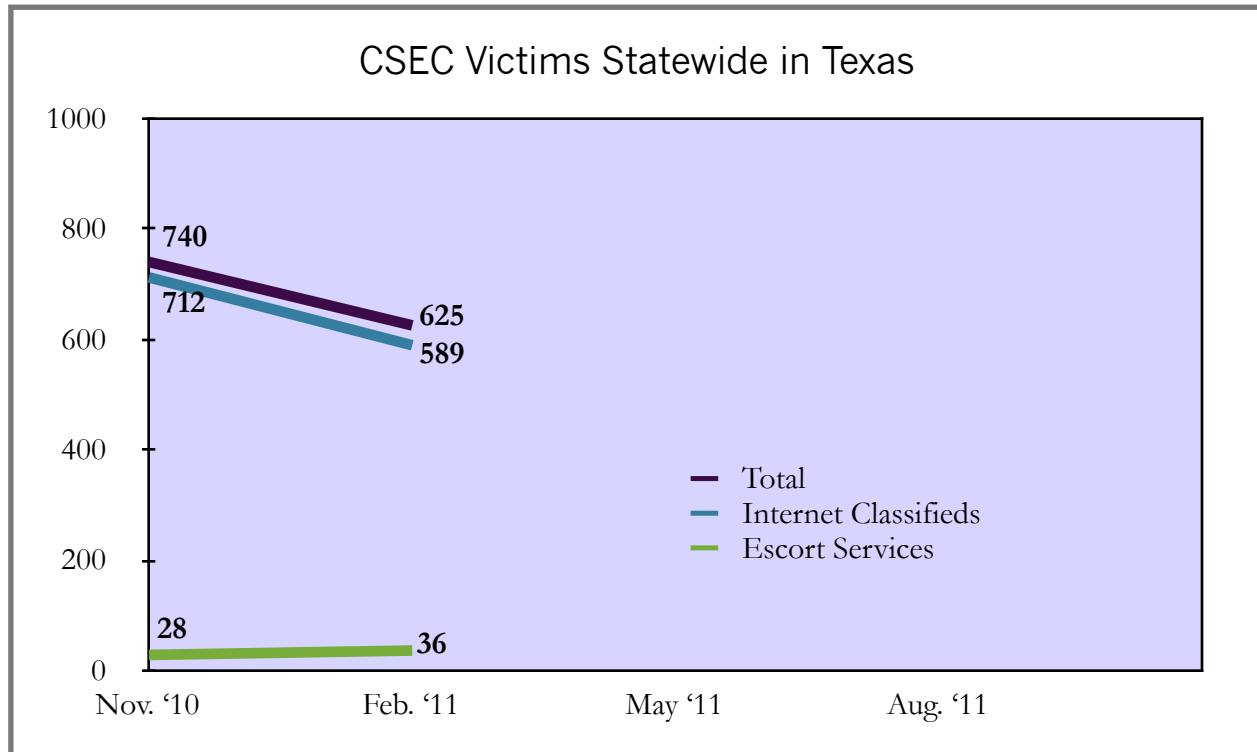
By combining the daily count of CSEC victims with the percent of females who continue to be advertised for paid sex services in the same state two weeks later, we are able to calculate the number of CSEC victims statewide under various scenarios.

- If the remaining “young” girls who *do not* appear on these websites for the full month are advertised for an average length of 2 weeks, and their ads appear each day during those weeks, then we actually encountered 314 CSEC victims through Internet classifieds websites during the month.
- If the remaining “young” girls who *do not* appear on these websites for the full month are advertised for an average length of 1 week, and their ads appear each day during those weeks, then we actually encountered 478 CSEC victims through Internet classifieds websites during the month.
- If the remaining “young” girls who *do not* appear on these websites for the full month are advertised for an average length of 1 week, and their ads appear 4 days out of 7 during those weeks, then we actually encountered 916 CSEC victims through Internet classifieds websites during the month.
- If the remaining “young” girls who *do not* appear on these websites for the full month are advertised for an average length of 2 weeks, and their ads appear 4 days out of 7 during those weeks, then we actually encountered **589 CSEC victims through Internet classifieds websites** during the month. In our opinion, this assumption is most tenable, and thus produces the most accurate count.

Summary of Findings

Figure 1 summarizes the latest CSEC tracking study results for Texas statewide, while Figure 2 summarizes the latest results only within the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area.

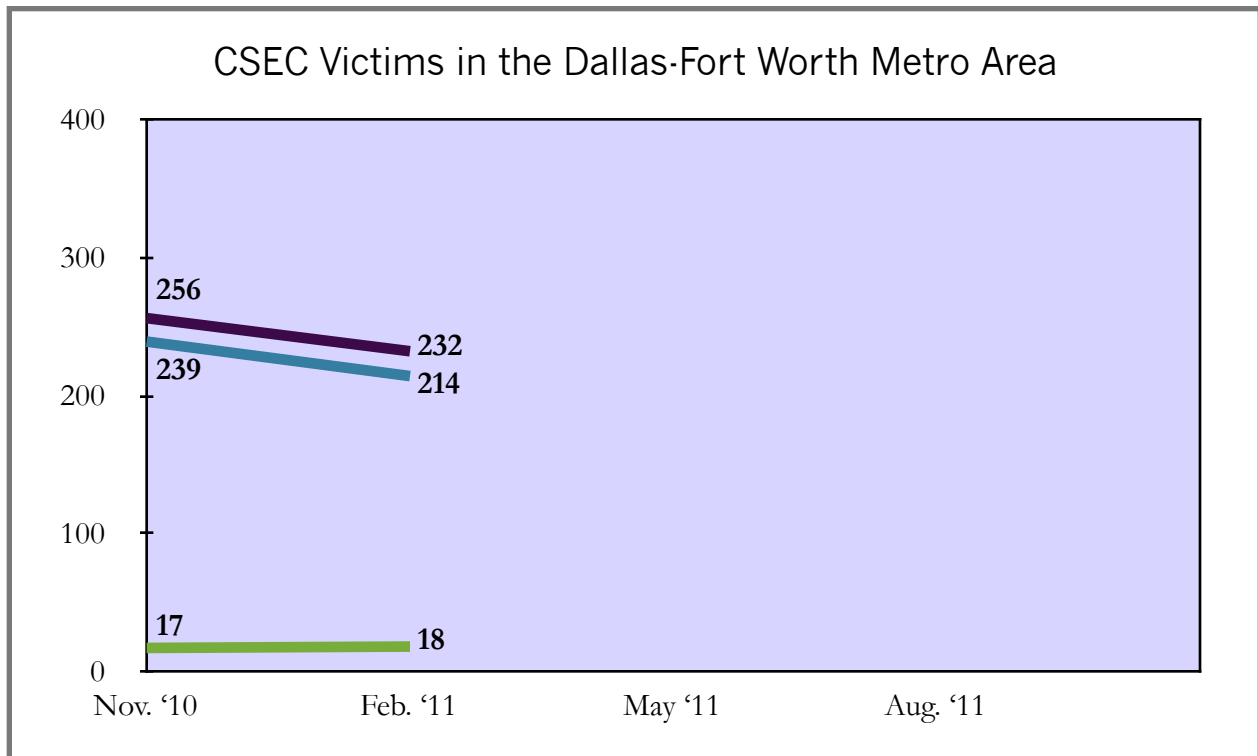
Figure 1.



Girls Per Typical Weekend Night

- While it is important to quantify this problem over the course of a full month, it is also valuable to estimate how many girls are victimized through CSEC on any given weekend night—the time when activity peaks. This calculation involves re-examining each methodology and its assumptions to see which computation most closely aligns with a one-day count. For Texas statewide, the latest statewide data suggest **145 girls under 18** are commercially sexually exploited on a typical weekend night via Internet classifieds websites and escort services. For Dallas-Fort Worth specifically, the data indicate the number to be **50 girls**.
 - Since our Internet classifieds methodology is derived from a collection of one-day counts, our research indicates that statewide in Texas **on any given weekend night, there are 137 girls under age 18 commercially sexually exploited through ads posted on these websites**. For Dallas-Fort Worth specifically, **there are 42 girls**.
 - Absent an empirically-derived method of determining a daily count from escort service results, we are compelled to assume that the pattern governing daily counts on Internet classifieds websites applies to escort services as well. Using this method, our count indicates that statewide in Texas **on any given night, there are 8 girls under age 18 commercially sexually exploited through escort services**. For Dallas-Fort Worth specifically, **there are 3 girls**.

Figure 2.



Findings in Context

- A problem like CSEC is abhorrent and intolerable regardless of its incidence. Nevertheless, it can be helpful to compare CSEC incidence to other social problems in Texas for an improved sense of scope of the issue.⁶ For example, more adolescent girls are commercially sexually exploited *in one month* in Texas than...
 - ...there are teens girls who died by suicide, homicide, and accidents combined in one year (461)
 - ...there are females of all ages who died from complications due to AIDS in one year (255)
 - ...there are females of all ages who died from complications associated with pregnancy or childbirth (75)
 - ...there are women of all ages murdered in one year (323)

Each of these problems is widely regarded as too prevalent to ignore. By prevalence alone, the commercial sexual exploitation of children in Texas belongs in the same category.

⁶ All Texas comparison data are from the Texas Department of State Health Services, 2007—the latest year for which data are available.

Researcher Observations

- The Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area accounts for 37% of the state’s Internet and escort service CSEC activity, despite accounting for 26% of the state’s total population.
- Thinly-veiled Internet classified ads for paid sex through “massage parlors” are quite common outside of the Dallas-Fort Worth area, but we encountered essentially none within it. Most of these “massage parlors” advertised Asian females.
- In the first round of data collection, there was a relatively high rate of turnover among young females advertised online, but in February turnover appears to have decreased. That is, the same females are posting multiple times throughout the month, which accounts for much of the drop in this month’s numbers.
- The number of internet classifieds ads (of all ages) placed in Dallas-Fort Worth on Super Bowl Sunday was slightly higher than on an average Sunday. Other monitored areas, however, tended to show *lower* numbers on Super Bowl Sunday.

Using Data to Drive Change

- An effective campaign to end the commercial sexual exploitation of children statewide should have at its foundation reliable, scientific data on the state of the epidemic locally. This foundational resource should be a part of all of your advocacy efforts, and should be shared widely and freely with local advocates for maximum effectiveness. Reliable data such as these are crucial for gaining traction with legislators and other policy makers, as well as for leveraging public funding—particularly in reallocating existing victims services dollars.
- Research data are also important in raising public awareness of the realities of CSEC in your state. Doing so will set your campaign apart from many others, and will provide you with a high degree of perceived credibility among various audiences. Relying on empirical scientific data will cause others to perceive you as a credible expert, whereas inflated “guesstimates” will often lead others to perceive you as having a personal agenda.
- We strongly encourage advocates to talk about CSEC incidence in their states relative to the incidence of more widely known social ills such as teens killed in car accidents, etc. Doing so helps audiences understand an incidence figure on a more personal level.
- We recommend making a campaign commitment to tracking CSEC incidence scientifically over time, as it greatly increases advocates’ knowledge of the macro-level trends in the issue and the perceived credibility as a campaign. Additionally, a firm commitment to tracking data over time will eventually allow you to forecast CSEC incidence in the future.