

**Fact Checker**

# The fishy claim that '100,000 children' in the United States are in the sex trade

By **Glenn Kessler** September 2

*"At least 100,000 children in the U.S. are commercially sexually exploited."*

—[Web site of ECPAT-USA](#), which says it is the leading anti-trafficking policy organization in the United States

This is a commonly cited statistic in [the media](#) and among politicians when discussing the sex trade involving children under the age of 18. Frequently, it is provided without any source, though ECPAT's Web site attributed it to 2010 [congressional testimony](#) by Ernie Allen, at the time president of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC).

At The Fact Checker, we are wary of round numbers, particularly involving an underground business such as the sex trade. So, as part of our continuing series examining the background of commonly-cited statistics, we investigated how this figure was calculated.

## The Facts

Allen says he came up with the figure about a decade ago because of a pressing need: "With any social issue, if you can't quantify it, it must not be a problem in the view of policymakers."

In other words, lawmakers need a number they can cite in order to call attention to a problem. In 2010 Allen told Congress the number was "empirically sound and defensible," but Allen acknowledges now that "there was no scientific empirical data" about the number of children in the sex trade.

Under the federal law known as the Trafficking Victims Protection Act any minor who exchanges sex for something of value is considered a victim of trafficking, regardless of their willingness or desire to engage in the sex act. But there is little common agreement on definitions, and law enforcement reporting is inconsistent and

incomplete. The number of child prostitutes recovered by police each year numbers in the hundreds.

So Allen said he relied on two reports: [a 2001 report](#) written by Richard J. Estes and Neil Weiner of the University of Pennsylvania and the 2002 National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children (NISMAT), [a random-sample survey](#) released by an arm of the Justice Department.

Both of these reports rely on data collected in the 1990s, meaning it's already a quarter-century old. Estes told The Fact Checker earlier in 2015 that his report was out of date, as the world of the 1990s "was quite a different one from that in which we live today."

But the problems don't end there.

As we have noted previously, the Estes-Weiner report has been [the subject of criticism](#) by social scientists for years, and yet for some reason it remains the go-to source for anti-trafficking advocates.

The report suggested that about 300,000 children were "at risk for commercial sexual exploitation," but this was a rather nebulous term that did not necessarily mean the children were forced into prostitution. In fact, the report was assembled in a way that the same person could have been double or triple counted.

Nevertheless, Allen relied on the report to come up with his estimate. He said that about 250,000 were between the ages of 10 and 17, and that 60 percent were runaways, thrown-away or homeless kids. So he took 60 percent of 250,000 to come up with a figure of 150,000.

To be safe, he said, he then rounded down to 100,000. "I was attempting to come up with a conservative, defensible number," he said. He pointed to the NISMAT survey as validation, since that showed nearly 1.7 million kids had a runaway episode a year. Out of that number, he said, 100,000 seemed conservative.

But if you dig into [the NISMAT report](#), it shows that only 1,700 kids — less than one percent — reported having engaged in sexual activity in exchange for money, drugs, food, or shelter during the episode. David Finkelhor, a University of New Hampshire professor who is director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center and a key author of the NISMAT report, said that figure would best represent sex trafficking, though the number is so small in the context of the report that its reliability is suspect.

"Given that running away has declined, I wouldn't put any stock in these figures as indicators of what is going on

today,” Finkelhor said. A new NISMART report has been completed and is awaiting release by the Justice Department, but he said that it will not break down the data to this level of detail. “It’s not going to be any help to those looking for estimates of juvenile sex trafficking,” he said.

Moreover, to put that 1.7 million figure into context, more than three-quarters were away from home for less than a week; 99.8 percent of the children were recovered. So the pool of children who could end up being trafficked is relatively small.

Allen insists he was not trying to hype the number. “I don’t think it matters that it is 50,000 or 100,000 or 25,000. It is an underreported problem,” Allen said. “It almost doesn’t matter what the number is. There is abundant evidence that the number is significant.”

Yet it is worth noting that there are not even reliable estimates on the number of prostitutes in the United States, let alone child prostitutes.

The Journal of Sex Research published [an article](#) in 1990 by a team led by John Potterat based on two decades of data observing sex workers in Colorado Springs, Colo. They concluded the density of full-time equivalent prostitutes was 23 per 100,000 population, for a total of 84,000 women in the United States annually in the 1980s.

Updated to the current U.S. population, that would mean only a total of 103,000 prostitutes — of all ages — in the United States. The researchers also estimated that most sex workers engage in prostitution for only short period of time, with even long-term prostitutes averaging about four to five years. In other words, there is a lot of churn in the sex market.

Potterat, who is retired, said the study has not been updated. But he said “in my 30 years on the street with nearly 2,000 prostitutes, I rarely encountered underage prostitutes — pulp-fiction reports notwithstanding.” He referred The Fact Checker to a colleague, [Devon Brewer](#), who has conducted more recent research. Brewer said that he has studied arrest data from jurisdictions across the country and very few juvenile prostitutes can be found. He speculated that sexually immature women are of little interest to most men who purchase sex.

Still, 100,000 total prostitutes in the United States seems on the low side. The FBI [reports](#) that in 2010, 43,190 women were arrested for prostitution or assisting in prostitution, of whom less than two percent (855) were juveniles. Since 1990, the number of sex-worker arrests had declined by more than 50 percent.

The Internet has moved the sex trade off the streets, making it even less visible. Arizona State University researchers [in 2013](#) placed fake ads on the erotic ad section of Backpage.com in 15 U.S. cities, and tracked how many different men called the phone numbers. This has yielded an estimate that one in 20 men in the United States seek to pay for sex.

But the number of juveniles is unclear and perhaps unknowable. The FBI arrest data suggests two percent of sex workers are juveniles, though other estimates are higher. Dominique Roe-Sepowitz of Arizona State said preliminary research of ad content suggests that three to five percent of the sex ads on Backpage.com are suspected to involve minors.

Backpage.com [says](#) it reports to NCMEC at least 300 ads a month that it believes involves minors. NCMEC officials confirm that number — and say some months it receives as many as 800 referrals from Backpage.com — but the organization [says](#) Backpage.com's efforts are inadequate and many other ads suspected to involve minors are not reported or deleted in a timely fashion.

In 2014, NCMEC said, it received reports of about 1,700 missing children reported to have some link to sex trafficking. The organization no longer uses the 100,000 figure created by its former president, a spokeswoman said.

Indeed, when a task force sponsored by the Justice Department wrote [a report](#) on the issue that was published by the National Academy of Sciences, it concluded: “No reliable national estimate exists of the incidence or prevalence of commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors in the United States.”

## The Pinocchio Test

In response to The Fact Checker's findings, Carol Smolenski, executive director of ECPAT-USA, said the organization will remove the figure from its Web site and no longer use it. “Everyone is just hoping to have a number, but I don't want to be out there with something that can't be defended,” she said.

This is an excellent response, in line with actions taken by [NCMEC](#), [Shared Hope International](#) and lawmakers such as Sens. [Amy Klobucher](#) (D-Minn.) and [Rob Portman](#) (R-Ohio) after The Fact Checker previously exposed faulty data in the human trafficking debate.

We understand the impulse to come up with shocking figures to jolt policymakers into action. But a cause can be

hurt by data that is suspect or misleading.

In this case, the “100,000” figure was conjured out of thin air, based on old data from a largely discredited report. Can one even say “tens of thousands”? We’re not sure, based on the available data.

Generally, we’d say this statistic was worthy of Four Pinocchios. But given ECPAT’s pledge to stop using the figure, we’d say the point has been made. Lawmakers and the media should follow ECPAT’s example.

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Glenn Kessler has reported on domestic and foreign policy for more than three decades. He would like your help in keeping an eye on public figures. Send him statements to fact check by [emailing him](#), [tweeting at him](#), or sending him a message on [Facebook](#).

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