

What is the number of child prostitute in Thailand ?

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Controversy of the Number of Child Prostitutes in Thailand

The number of child prostitutes has been in controversy on public stage since 1989 when Centre for the Protection of Children's Rights (CPCR-1996) estimated that there were about 840,000 child prostitutes in Thailand. Another much less number, around 39,000, was estimated by NGOs, officials and academic (Archavanitkul and Havanon 1990). Debate arose when official authority refused the estimate by CPCR. The main argument is that the figure was overestimated due to the fact that Thailand at that moment had about 4,000,000 girl populations aged between 11-17. If there were 840,000 child prostitutes, it would mean every one in five of Thai girls in this age group were sex workers (Chutikul 1995 cited in CPCR 1996: 30)

To end the controversy, an attempt to estimate number of child prostitutes was made for the first time in 1994 by Guest (1994) of the Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University. The estimate was based on the Population Census in 1990 by dividing girls into four at risk groups and the total number of sex workers (150,000-200,000) from the survey conducted by Sithitrai and Brown (1991). Of this number, around 70,000 or 35% began working in this career since they were below 18 years old. It was estimated that a number of Thai child prostitutes in 1990 was 36,000.

In 1996, CPCR still confirmed the estimation of 800,000 child sex workers in World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children. This time it

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was explained that the estimate covered children aged below 11 and foreign children trafficked into prostitution. The 800,000 was 40% of the total 2,000,000 prostitutes in the country. The number was basically calculated from the estimated number of 50,000 establishments throughout the country of which 20,000 were registered having about 700,000 sex workers plus underground establishments of about 30,000 with around 1,300,000 sex workers. (CPCR 1996: 29-30). Table 1 shows estimates of the number of child prostitutes in Thailand from several organisations since 1989. It is noticeable that the different estimates were a result of different estimated number of establishments, total numbers of sex workers, and last but not least, estimate of proportion of child prostitutes.

Table 1: Estimates of the Number of Child Prostitutes in Thailand, 1989 - 1996

| Name of Organisation | Year of Estimate | Total Number of Child Prostitutes | Total Number of Prostitutes | Total Number of Establishments |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. CPCR* | 1989 | 840,000 (40% of Total) | 2,100,000 | 60,000 |
| | 1996 | 800,000 (40% of Total) | 2,000,000 | 50,000 |
| 2. CDC**, Ministry of Public Health | 1992 | 15,144 (20% of Total) | 75,041 | 6,026 |
| | 1995 | 16,276 (20% of Total) | 81,384 | 6,563 |
| 3. IPSR***, Mahidol University | 1993 | 36,000 (18% of Total) | 200,000 | n.a. |

Table 1: (Continued)

| Name of Organisation | Year of Estimate | Total Number of Child Prostitutes | Total Number of Prostitutes | Total Number of Establishments |
|---|------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 4. National Commission on Women's Affairs | 1994 | 30,000-40,000 (20% of Total) | 150,000 -200,000 | n.a. |
| 5. Department of Social Welfare | 1995 | 20,000 (20% of Total) | 100,000 | n.a. |
| 6. ECPAT**** | 1996 | 200,000 | n.a. | n.a. |

n.a. - not available

Note: * CPCR - Centre for the Protection of Children's Rights
 ** CDC - Department of Communicable Diseases Control
 *** IPSR - Institute for Population and Social Research
 **** ECPAT - End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism

Source: CPCR 1996 (Table 5 page 30).

Procedures of the Estimation

In this estimate, a '*child*' refers to a person aged below 18 which is the definition used internationally. The estimate includes both Thais and non-Thais, either they are boys or girls and estimate employs 3 indicators as follows:

- *A proportion of child prostitutes* from the total number of sex workers in the country.

- *Information or data with special reference to age of women when they entered into sex work.* This would make an estimate of the number of women entering sex work at early age possible.
- *A proportion of foreign prostitutes in each province.* This would make the distinction of the number of Thai child prostitutes and foreign ones possible.

Various sources of data are used to obtain 3 indicators mentioned above. It can be summarised that *among Thais*, the ratio of child prostitutes is 16% and the ratio of sex workers who first enter into commercial sex business when they were aged below 18 is 50%. *Among non-Thais*, based on our observations and interviews with the sex workers, it is estimated that foreign child prostitutes are about 30% from the total number of foreign sex workers in the country at the time of the survey but 75% of the total number entering into prostitution when they were minors.

(1) An Estimate of Numbers of Foreign Sex Workers in Thailand

This estimate bases on the latest annual census of the establishments and sex workers conducted by the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) in January 1997. The establishments were defined as business offering their services openly. Everyone in the establishments was enumerated as a service worker and would then be identified whether they serviced selling sex. The census was conducted throughout the country during 1-30 January using geographical mapping method. The results of the surveys in 1996 and 1997 are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Number of Establishments and Sex Workers in 1996 and 1997

| Number | 1996 | 1997 |
|----------------|--------|---------|
| Establishments | 7,318 | 7,816 |
| Employees | 98,114 | 105,454 |
| Female | 90,851 | 92,577 |
| Male | 7,263 | 12,877 |
| Sex Workers | 66,190 | 65,983 |
| Female | 64,245 | 63,746 |
| Male | 1,945 | 2,237 |
| % Male | 2.9% | 3.4% |

Source: Communicable Diseases Control, Ministry of Public Health.

Assumptions: This is an estimate of the number of foreign sex workers working in Thailand. It is not an estimate of girls being lured into prostitutes because the recruitment process of trafficking in girls are varied. At one end, women and girls are voluntarily to join sex work but are cheated and abused later but at the another end, many are directly and brutally forced to work. In addition, many of sex workers may experience more than one of these conditions at the different time.

According to our experiences during the last 5 years of field work covering more than 20 provinces throughout the country, we found that the number of sex workers are undercounted ranged from 20% in some provinces to 100% in one province. The estimation procedure is very straightforward as follow:

- (a) Estimating the under-enumerated rate in each province.
- (b) Calculating the total number of sex workers province by province. It is found that the average rate of the undercount was 30.3% and the total number of sex workers were 90,916.
- (c) Of the total number of sex workers in each province, estimate of the proportion of foreign prostitutes was undertaken. Based on our field experiences, we found that the proportion of foreign sex worker was very much varied from province to province ranging from 0% to 50% of the total number of sex workers. There were 6 levels as follows:
 - + None or very few were found in 4 provinces.
 - + A few of 5% of all the sex workers were found in 20 provinces.
 - + An average of 10% of all the sex workers are found in 22 provinces.
 - + A somewhat high level of 20% of all the sex workers were found in 17 provinces.
 - + A high level of 30% of all the sex workers were found in 5 provinces.
 - + A noticeably high level of 40% or more were found in 8 provinces.

Findings: The total number of foreign sex workers in Thailand in 1997 was 18, 248 or 20% of all the sex workers in the country which were 90,916. The study estimated that 90% or 16, 423 of them were from Mekong Subregion countries namely Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The rest were from other countries including Eastern European countries, Russia, the Philippines, China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Of the 16, 423 from Mekong Subregion countries, 30% or 4,927 were estimated to be child sex workers under the age of 18 and 75% or 12,317 of them began their sex services when they were under 18 years old.

It should be stressed here that this estimate reflects the number of alien sex worker at any one time in 1997 so that it is not a cumulative number. In addition, the estimated numbers derived here are quite conservative as compare to previous estimation. If this estimate is used to trace the number of trafficked women from neighbouring countries started since 1990 (Archavanitkul 1994, CPCR 1996), it can be concluded that:

Between 1990 to 1997, there were at least 80,000 children and women from Mekong Subregion countries and minorities along Thai-Myanmar border drawn into sex industry in Thailand.

(2) Estimated Numbers of Children in Prostitution in Thailand

Effort was made to estimate numbers of child prostitution by gender for both Thais and non-Thais in Thailand as presented in Table 3. Again, the estimated numbers reflect conditions as of the time when the survey took place. The ratio of male sex workers, for Thai sex workers (3.4%) was derived from the MOPH's census whereas the ratio for aliens was estimated around 1% based on our observations.

In conclusion, the estimated number of child prostitutes in Thailand at any one time in 1997 was around 18,000. This number may be considered very low if previous estimates were compared. However, if the number of sex workers who entered into prostitution when they were aged below 18 is measured, the estimated number would rise up to 50,000.

Table 3: Estimated Numbers of Thai and Foreign Sex Workers by Gender At Any One Time in 1997

| Sex Workers | Thai | | Foreignes | | Total | |
|---------------------------------|--------|-------|-----------|------|--------|-------|
| | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male |
| Number of sex workers | 70,197 | 2,471 | 18,066 | 182 | 88,263 | 2,653 |
| Total | 72,668 | | 18,248 | | 90,916 | |
| % early age sex workers | 50% | 75% | 75% | 75% | 55% | 75% |
| Number of early age sex workers | 35,099 | 1,853 | 13,550 | 137 | 48,649 | 1,990 |
| Total | 36,952 | | 13,687 | | 50,639 | |
| % child sex workers | 16% | 50% | 30% | 50% | 18.9% | 50% |
| Number of child sex workers | 11,232 | 1,236 | 5,419 | 91 | 16,651 | 1,327 |
| Total | 12,468 | | 5,510 | | 17,978 | |

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