

The Seattle Times

Winner of Nine Pulitzer Prizes

Opinion

Originally published Thursday, September 26, 2013 at 4:30 PM

Guest: Treat sexually exploited children as victims, not prostitutes

Washington state must do more to ensure child victims of sex trafficking are in fact treated as victims of sexual exploitation, according to guest columnists Jeanne Kohl-Welles and Debra Boyer.

By Jeanne Kohl-Welles and Debra Boyer

Special to The Times



EVERY night in King County, 300 to 500 children are out on the streets, lured and forced into prostitution.

We must do more to ensure child victims of sex trafficking are in fact treated as victims of sexual exploitation and provided protection and services — a lifeline essential to helping them get off the streets.

Our state has taken major steps to combat human trafficking, but there is a major barrier to services for commercially sexually exploited children. Child victims of sex trafficking who have been forced into prostitution continue to be treated as offenders and placed in the juvenile-justice system rather than provided services afforded other victims of child sexual abuse and sexual assault.

While we still need better data-collection methods, we know that since 2008, 210 children have been arrested as prostitutes in Washington.

While we've made policy changes to better support these victims, their legal status remains unclear. As they go through the justice system, they yo-yo back and forth between being treated as victims and as criminal offenders.

Offender-focused treatment for these sexually exploited children results in mistrust of those responsible for their well-being and safety. That mistrust drives them back to pimps and traffickers.

The juvenile-justice system has never been completely successful in addressing this problem. It still falls short of offering the noncriminal response needed by traumatized and exploited children.

We need to move children who are exploited sexually and commercially out of the juvenile-justice system, which is designed to work with criminals.

We need to formally and legally redefine them. They are not offenders, they are victims — a status already established under federal law. They would still be arrested and charged if they committed another crime — stealing a car, or selling drugs, for instance.

But children are not prostitutes. They are prostituted through coercion, not choice, and the law should reflect that. If we take this step, both symbolically and legally, we can reduce mistrust of service providers and reduce the chances of child victims returning to the streets and pimps.

We should legally define this type of sexual exploitation as what it is, child abuse, and place it under the purview of Child Protective Services. That agency, along with Adolescent Services provided through the state Department of Social and Human Services and community-based services, could provide housing and treatment for child victims as they come off the streets.

Next legislative session, we expect legislation will be introduced to redefine victims and provide additional support for them. We're going to work with advocates, prosecutors, agencies and the victims themselves to find exactly what solutions will work best. This is the next step in protecting trafficked children and reducing the sexual exploitation of children.

Judge our society by how we take care of our most vulnerable. Few are more vulnerable than sexually exploited children.

State Sen. Jeanne Kohl-Welles, D-Seattle, left, has sponsored legislation combating human trafficking and child exploitation. Debra Boyer is the author of the study "Who Pays The Price?" on child-sexual exploitation in Washington.