

Report says many opportunities to help sex trafficking victims are missed

Children trapped in sex trafficking or who are at risk for sexual exploitation need coordinated help from teachers, parents, government officials and community leaders, according to a report issued Wednesday by the Institute of Medicine.

The nation is without reliable estimates for the prevalence of under-age prostitution, the report noted.

“These young people live in the shadows behind hotel room doors. It’s hard to find them,” said Dr. Ellen Wright Clayton, a Vanderbilt University professor who co-chaired the Committee on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Minors in the United States.

The committee issued a call to action in the 466-page report, concluding that efforts to prevent the crime are largely absent and that programs to identify the activity are “under-supported, insufficient, uncoordinated and unevaluated.” Teenage prostitutes are too often processed like criminals when they should be treated like victims, the committee concluded.

“What we do know is that it is a big problem,” Clayton said. “We know that there are a number of risk factors that predispose young people to get involved with this. We know that these kids run into a variety of different adults in their lives who have the opportunity to recognize this, ranging from their parents, their teachers, their health care provider, to social services, to juvenile justice.”

Youths considered at risk for exploitation include those who have been abused or neglected, those in foster care or juvenile detention, those of LGBT sexual orientations, those who are racial and ethnic minorities, those who are homeless or runaways and those considered “throwaway” children who have been told to leave their homes.

Sex trafficking is a problem in this state, according to a [2011 report](#) issued by the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation. It noted that one ring discovered in 2010 in Middle Tennessee was trafficking girls as young as 12.

The report issued Wednesday by the National Academy of Science and the Institute of Medicine is the culmination of two years of research.