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# Child-juvenile prostitution: a systematic literature review

PROSTITUIÇÃO INFANTO-JUVENIL: REVISÃO SISTEMÁTICA DA LITERATURA

PROSTITUCIÓN INFANTE JUVENIL: ANÁLISIS DE UNA REVISIÓN SISTEMÁTICA DE LA LITERATURA

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand how infant-juvenile prostitution is being explained by researchers through an extensive bibliographical survey on national and international scientific sources. It was possible to access 20 references in full text form, which were analyzed according to the Content Analysis method. The analysis consisted in answering *how infant-juvenile prostitution is represented by the author in relation to the concepts, causes, effects and solutions described in the references*. It was found that the authors approached the subject as a way of survival, resulting from an unequal society, adult-centered and male chauvinist causing mental and physical diseases in children.

## KEY WORDS

Prostitution.  
Child.  
Violence.  
Sexual violence.

## RESUMO

Este trabalho buscou compreender como a prostituição infanto-juvenil está sendo explicada pelos pesquisadores, utilizando um extenso levantamento bibliográfico de artigos científicos, nacionais e internacionais. Conseguiu-se acessar vinte referências, que foram analisadas integralmente segundo o método de Análise de Conteúdo. A análise consistiu em responder *como esse fenômeno é representado pelo autor em relação aos conceitos, causas, efeitos e soluções apontados nas referências*. Encontrou-se que os autores abordam o tema como um meio de sobrevivência, decorrente de uma sociedade desigual, adultocêntrica e machista, causando adoecimento mental e físico na criança.

## DESCRIPTORES

Prostituição.  
Criança.  
Violência.  
Violência sexual.

## RESUMEN

Este trabajo buscó comprender, por medio de un extenso levantamiento bibliográfico de artículos científicos, nacionales e internacionales, como la prostitución infante juvenil está siendo explicada por los investigadores. Se consiguió acceder a veinte referencias completas, que fueron analizadas según el método del Análisis de Contenido. El análisis consistió en responder *¿Cómo ese fenómeno es representado por el autor, en relación a los conceptos, causas, efectos y soluciones apuntados en las referencias?*. Se encontró que los autores abordan el tema como un medio de sobrevivencia, proveniente de una sociedad desigual, centrada en el adulto y machista, lo que ocasiona en el niño una enfermedad mental y física.

## DESCRIPTORES

Prostitución.  
Niño.  
Violencia.  
Violencia sexual.

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## INTRODUCTION

Sexuality is present in human beings from an early age. Children present sexual behavior depending on their stage of development<sup>(1)</sup>. The manifestation of such behavior is the child's right and it is up to the adults to ensure and respect it. The provision for healthy sexual development consists of allowing the child to experience and learn about proper sexual activities of his/her own age group. Their development can become altered when the child experiences inappropriate practices for his/her age range by virtue of interference from adults, characterized by violence and/or sexual abuse.

Violence against children is the result of historical and political concepts regarding the state of *being a child*. Society has never treated children with the same rights as adults. Adults exercise in their daily life a domain of authority that is beyond the exercise of authority of parents, teachers, etc. The inferiority of the child in comparison to the adult is discussed in studies on the history of childhood throughout the world<sup>(2)</sup>. Adult's hegemony over children is a form of veiled subtle authorization, favoring the occurrence of distinct manifestations of violence against children, whether within the family or in the outside world.

The international mobilization for the rights of children resulted in the Convention on the Rights of the Child at the UN Assembly in 1989. This triggered the commitment to the effectiveness of the declaration in several countries. In Brazil, the Statute of the Child and the Adolescent was set up by Law No. 8,069 on 13 July 1990, regulating act 227 of the Brazilian Constitution of 05 October 1988. From that moment on, the child became a *subject of law* a citizen to whom the State, society and the family must ensure rights<sup>(3)</sup>.

For centuries violence had been regarded as a social phenomenon. Only as a result of resolution WHA 49.25 enacted by the World Health Assembly (WHA) in 1996 did violence become acknowledged as a public health problem. It was considered as an aggravation of the health condition. Thus, it was included in the International Classification of Diseases of the World Health Organization (WHO), under the name of *External Causes* (Chapter XX - Aggressions / X85-Y09)<sup>(4)</sup>.

The WHO defines sexual violence as:

Any sexual act or attempted unwanted sexual act, or acts to traffic the sexuality of a person, using coercion, threats or physical force, practiced by any person, regardless of his/her relationship with the victim in any scenario, including, but not limited to, home or work<sup>(4)</sup>.

Among the different types of violence, sexual violence is one of the most complex as it tends to be associated with physical, psychological and moral damage. It involves the power of domination, coercion and inequality of power and gender<sup>(4)</sup>.

## Sexual violence

affects about 12 million people each year throughout the world. In the U.S., it is estimated that there is a sexual violation every 6 minutes and that about 25% of women have experienced some type of non-consensual sexual contact during childhood or adolescence<sup>(5)</sup>.

Sexual violence may be in or outside the home environment. Sexual abuse against children is usually within households, most often by someone that he/she knows and in most cases, is kept as a secret for fear of reprisal from the adult. The family as a rule, is the locus of protection during the child's development, but quite often sets the scene of the violence<sup>(6)</sup>.

A study was conducted between January 1996 and March 2002 by the Reference Center on Children and Adolescents (CERCA). The study was composed of 87 sexually abused female adolescents, and the results showed that almost 70% of the abuses that occurred were committed by fathers or stepfathers.

Although it causes perplexity, literature assures that the most frequent offenders are exactly those that should, in theory, have the primary responsibility for ensuring safety and integral development for the child or adolescent<sup>(5)</sup>.

In Brazil, the rate of sexual exploitation of minors is high. The Minister of Health, in testimony provided to *CPI* on the basis of the information received from the Watch Americas Organization, stated that Brazil today has 500 thousand prostitutes under 17 years of age. This numeric indicator may be questionable, since prostitution acts in a concealed way; therefore, it is difficult to obtain accurate records concerning the problem. The claims based solely on statistical data are used in a very recurrent way in popular and political speech-making in order to *scientifically* legitimize the seriousness of this issue in the present situation. The numerical value of the data *presupposes that the importance of the subject is given by its length and less by its social and human significance*<sup>(7)</sup>.

The enticement to sexual exploitation represents organized crime when it becomes a network of relations whose enticers are taxi drivers, hotel owners, bar or radio managers, model agencies, street peddlers, abusive parents, the police, politicians, public authorities and opportunistic citizens who deceive parents with promises of employment<sup>(7)</sup>.

Child prostitution in the Brazilian regions can at times take on those similarities, but also sometimes assumes differences. Among the forms of enticement the following can be highlighted: living on the street, sex tourism, international traffic, promises of employment, kidnapping and slavery. In the Northern and Midwestern states, slave traffic predominates in the mining areas. In the Northeast, sexual tourism stands out. In the Southeast, child-teenage prostitution results from living on the street and from sex tourism. In the South, children and adolescents in the interior, and their parents, are often lured by false information<sup>(7)</sup>.

According to some researchers and government authorities, the major cause of child prostitution is attributed to poverty, or *the profound socio-economic inequalities in the country that foster the exploitation of people by the people*<sup>(5)</sup>. In this context, the child becomes a commodity. In the context of poverty, the child may be a means of alleviating hunger and cold in his/her family<sup>(8)</sup>.

However, the economic factor alone does not explain the involvement of children in the illegal trade of their body. Otherwise, one might assume that all poor children would be prostitutes. Poverty, in fact, is the main risk factor, but this phenomenon is embedded in a more complex context. There are situations where it is integrated into drug trafficking, and there are cases where its beginning takes place within the household itself. In any event, children who have been made prostitutes have a common history to tell: a history of violence<sup>(8)</sup>.

The sexual exploitation of children is not a recent problem, but only in recent decades has society organized to overcome it. The problem assumed such degrading proportions that it became a priority of the Ministry of Justice. The Ministry of Justice has been seeking help from different sectors of society, including researchers. Given the complexity of the matter, the phenomenon must be investigated, as security measures and legal actions are not sufficient to resolve the issue. The problem of child prostitution is not only a phenomenon of social character, but is a public health issue as well, which requires examination at the psychological and anthropological levels.

To protect children from sexual exploitation, it is necessary to study and clarify in depth the particularities of child prostitution. The present work is a preliminary study with the purpose of investigating how this topic is being explained by researchers to help guide empirical studies that can better explain the psychosocial dynamics of child prostitution. Hence, we hope to break the silence that often envelopes this phenomenon.

## OBJECTIVE

To identify in the references of the bibliographic survey national and international scientific publications, examining how child prostitution is addressed in relation to: concepts, causes, effects and solutions. Link and analyze the categories found by using the method of Content Analysis.

## METHOD

In the study in question, the method of Content Analysis was used, consisting of:

a set of techniques of communications analysis to obtain, by systematic and objective procedures, a description of the content of the messages, indicators (quantitative or not) that allow the inference of knowledge relative to the condi-

tions of production / reception (inferred variables) of these messages<sup>(9)</sup>.

This has to do with a qualitative study, whose process of analysis was based on the technique of Thematic Analysis, one of the forms of Content Analysis. This approach consists of *listening* to the author of the text and *learning* the content of his/her message, without interfering.

Thematic analysis consists of the interpretation of the message content, whereby one searches for the meaning of the theme described in the whole of the work and then turns it into a problem in order to duly understand the text, questioning *What is the author trying to imply in the theme?* While answering this question, the *central idea, the fundamental proposition or thesis* is revealed. In general it is unique, having ideas associated and complementary, or secondary, which help explain the reasoning behind the theme. Thus, *thematic analysis serves as the basis for the summary or synthesis of a text*, in addition to a *reading script*, with the representation of reasoning<sup>(10)</sup>.

In light of this, the present study was prepared by following the stages of systematic review, which consists of:

a review designed to answer a specific question and that uses systematic and explicit methods to identify, select and critically evaluate the studies and to collect and analyze data of these studies included in the review<sup>(11)</sup>.

Thus, based on the references in the literature, the main question addressed by this study is: *How is the phenomenon of child prostitution presented by the author compared to the concept, causes, effects and solutions found in the literature.* Each of these items formed the categories of analysis.

There followed then a thorough literature review of national and international scientific publications on child prostitution, by searching for words in the database of DEDALUS / USP, in the Portals of Electronic Journals Scielo and CAPES, and in the national database PeriEnf, as well as the international databases LILACS and MEDLINE.

It is, therefore, the object of scientific study that all references be identified and available in full. The words *prostitution, child, adolescent* and *violence*, as well as the expressions *child prostitution, child labor, violence against children* and *sexual abuse* were used as descriptors for search in said banks and databases.

The interpretation of data was based on theoretical references of authors who conducted studies related to the subject in a holistic approach. That is, the arguments preferred were based on authors who considered cultural, historical and economic influences in the personal behavior and social relationships.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The literature search resulted in a total of 29 articles that dealt clearly with the question of the study. However,

inaccessible articles (on-line and in journals) were excluded from the data collection. Thus, the articles available that meet the desired requirements resulted in a total of 20 articles (11 national and 9 international), identified in the attachment.

Several re-readings of the articles made it possible for the systematic analysis of the findings that resulted in an outline of each study per category, as listed below.

### Concepts

In the references raised, we learned that child prostitution is defined as a *commercial sexual exploitation*, as a *business transaction aimed at the achievement of pleasure and loss of mental health of the person exploited*<sup>(8)</sup>; as well, in a perspective guised to the scope of public health, it is a *form of violence against human beings, with a life accustomed to abuse and violation of their rights, a domination over the adult and man in society*<sup>(8)</sup>.

According to the Optional Protocol for the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 2b) relative to the sale of children, prostitution and child pornography, child prostitution is classified as: *the use of a child in sexual activities in exchange for remuneration or any other retribution*<sup>(12)</sup>.

The implementation of the Parliamentary Inquiry Commission (CPI) on Child and Adolescent Prostitution in 1993 has enabled, in addition to greater visibility of this phenomenon in Brazil, an intense debate that culminated with the replacement of the term *child prostitution for children and adolescent commercial sexual exploitation*<sup>(13)</sup>.

This new concept helps elucidate the real significance of the phenomenon. The idea of *exploitation* refers to the idea of violation of the rights of the children and adolescents. The condition of exploitation makes clear the concept of domination; in this case, of the adult over the child.

The concept of sexual exploitation relates to the peculiar condition of the child as *being in development*, as mentioned in the Statute of the Child and the Adolescent<sup>(3)</sup>. In this condition, the child is not able to take initiatives that go beyond his/her level of understanding of the situation in which he/she is involved.

The ABRAPIA (Brazilian Multidisciplinary Association for the Protection of Children and Adolescents) considers the terminology *child prostitution* inappropriate, in view of the fact that children and adolescents do not prostitute themselves, as they are not in charge of this situation<sup>(14)</sup>.

On the contrary, the commercial sexual exploitation of children constitutes a form of coercion and violence that results in a type of forced labor and a (hidden) form of slavery<sup>(11)</sup>.

The employment of a more trustworthy concept is necessary to better visualize the problem for the purpose of

adapting public measures to reality. The term *sexual nature* in relation to the risk situation of the child involved provides an intervention that considers the socio-economic interests involved.

Some expressions used by authors such as *health damage, exploited person, a form of violence, and domination by the adult* portray the condition of the victim<sup>(13)</sup>. The explanation of these expressions in the definition of *prostitution* supports the idea that the child must be helped, rather than censored.

### Causes

Among the causes identified by the authors regarding the problem of child-juvenile prostitution, the situation of extreme poverty, derived from social inequalities, was the most frequently cited. The authors emphasize prostitution as a means of survival in the face of a lack of basic economic conditions, as well as mentioning other associated factors. Men's supremacy over women and the domination of the adult over the child are influential factors, since male-chauvinism and *adult centrism*, in essence, violate the rights of others.

In addition, violence and sexual abuse during childhood are also factors that propitiate the initiation into sexual exploitation. The child who suffers violence, whether sexual or not, becomes susceptible to exploitation of any nature, since violence tends to prejudice his/her psychic integrity.

There is a close relationship between the sexual abuse experienced by the child in the family environment and his/her initiation into prostitution. The child who has a history of

sexual abuse experiences a process of debasement of self-esteem, which, when combined with a complicity with the abuser and obedience to him/her, makes him/her vulnerable to prostitution<sup>(15)</sup>.

According to the result of a statistical report created by ABRAPIA, in the period from February 1997 to January 2003, there were a total of 3,328 complaints of sexual exploitation reported. The report considered *sexual exploitation* as all sexual violence with economic purposes, including: child prostitution, pornography on the Internet, sexual tourism, trafficking of children and adolescents and sale of pornographic material<sup>(16)</sup>.

Taking into account that many cases of sexual violence are not reported, these data reflect only part of reality.

In addition to poverty and sexual abuse in childhood, the use of psychoactive substances (alcohol and drugs) was also mentioned by the authors as factors which predispose to prostitution. The involvement in drug trafficking and alcohol dependence may be factors that trigger prostitution or that arise from it, being at times the cause and at times the effect, of the phenomenon.



The coexistence of the child with relatives or friends who are drug users can lead him/her to the consumption of drugs, and to sustain his/her habit, which may cause he/she to get on the path of prostitution. *The younger the child gets into the network of drug trafficking, and consequently prostitution, the worse it may be for their life expectancy*<sup>(17)</sup>.

The involvement of children or young adults with drugs may be due to permissiveness in the family during early childhood. In this case, the child lives without boundaries. When family control is lacking, abuses begin to happen. If the first years of life are frustrated by lack or excess of family boundaries, the child does not complete his/her cycle of personality development. This incomplete process of personality development hinders or prevents the child from feeling secure, independent and capable of facing new situations alone. At puberty, the youngster feels the need to show that he/she is self-sufficient. The impetus for independence and the feeling of omnipotence leads him/her to drugs. Drugs provide the illusion of supplying all of their needs. In addition, he/she may no longer feel the lack of affection or care because he/she is under the illusion that the drugs are enough for him/her<sup>(18)</sup>.

The effect of the drugs may provide females the ability to cope with the situation of *life in the streets*, as the sexual exploitation they face has caused emotional and physical damages as well as humiliation and low self esteem creating a negative self-image. The drugs are then used as a coping mechanism or tool to block these damages<sup>(19)</sup>.

## Effects

The effects on children and adolescents involved in the situation of sexual exploitation, as mentioned by the authors, had to do with: social discrimination, insults, stigmas, reduction of self-esteem, development of psychopathologies, drug-dependence, physical harm, early pregnancy, abortion, reluctance in reinsertion into their homes and school, economic dependence of sexual partners (clients with whom they are involved affectively), traffic and sexual tourism, and child-juvenile pornography.

The attitudes of people regarded as *normal* in relation to minority groups take on different forms of discrimination. This is based on a logic that demeans those who are stigmatized because of the *danger* that the person stands for<sup>(19)</sup>.

People who oppose this pattern of social behavior are marginalized by the ordinary citizen. These people, with limited knowledge, analyze the context in which the phenomenon manifests itself, irregardless of its essence. They are not capable of identifying the causes, the interfaces and the complex structure that cause the child or the youngster to engage in illegal situations.

The discriminated child who is identified with the stigma of *prostitute* lives sidebyside with situations of exploitation, humiliation, suffering and exclusion. Besides being held responsible for the *option* that allegedly he/she chose, he/she is prevented from attaining the social place that was destined

to him/her. The liability of the child constitutes an institutional violence as this exonerates society and the State from the establishment of public policies for their protection<sup>(13)</sup>.

The misery resulting from such discrimination paves the way for the onset of the child's low self-esteem, reducing his/her potential to face and handle the situation of stress that the condition of exploitation generates. This low self-esteem influences the child in relation to his/her self-image, triggering a lack of emotional commitment and the development of psychopathologies such as depression.

In a competitive society, it is inevitable that self-esteem, in part, stems from the social position and the prestige that the individual holds. Socio-economic status and the reality of belonging to a minority group affect the development of self-consideration and identity<sup>(20)</sup>.

The child builds his/her conception of who he/she is based on observations of himself/herself, in comparison with others, and in the reaction of others towards him/her. Each reaction increases or decreases his/her feelings of self-value. The attitudes of others in relation to his/her capabilities are vital to him/her.

The attitudes of pity and contempt make the child feel at fault. The image that the child has of himself/herself becomes negative, depending on the relationships they form with others<sup>(21)</sup>.

In addition to the psychological harm, the exploited child suffers from constant physical harm resulting from maltreatment on the part of his/her abusers or his/her own customers. They may become vulnerable to sexual diseases and/or early and unwanted pregnancy. Allied to this risk situation, the return of the child to his/her family encompasses great difficulty, because they come from a family that is disintegrated; they need help to be restored to a condition where they can receive the child again<sup>(22)</sup>.

## Solutions

The solutions pointed out by the authors consisted of interventions relative to the family's approach to the restoration of family ties, development of effective public policies against social injustices and social exclusion, access to education and decent working conditions, interdisciplinary articulation of public health with other services, specific training for health professionals, preventive actions, recovery and protection of health, promotion of awareness of children's rights, tracking and control of child pornography, punishment of defrauders and development of more research on the subject.

Regarding the family, the authors argue that this should be appreciated as an essential area towards the production of social identity and development of self-esteem of the child, aiming at the development of the citizen. The family is responsible for the support necessary for the biopsychosocial development of its members, playing a constructive role in formal education and in the absorption of ethical, moral and humanitarian values. It is neces-

sary to sensitize public entities to build programs that focus fully not only on children but also on their family.

The problem of child prostitution is one of an order of magnitude that goes beyond the scope of health. To facilitate the implementation of public policies, governmental interventions should cover several sectors of society articulated among themselves under the regency of the federal government. The latter should build an institutional network of care that integrates different sectors of society: health, the judiciary, and the third sector and its citizens.

Some measures have already been implemented, such as the Dial Denunciation, the Guardianship Councils, the Women's Police Stations and some health care centers, but the services continue to be articulated in a network and to engage other important sectors of the society, such as education. One must qualify teachers to identify signs of sexual violence. In general, the child establishes emotional bonds with the teacher. This closeness favors the disclosure of the child's secrets, a reason why the teacher must be prepared to deal with the revelations, which are usually subtle, discreet and filled with implicit contents.

Moreover, it is indispensable to encourage sex education in schools to promote debate on ethics in the exercise of sexuality. Because we are living in a complex time of changing sexual values due to the many changes in attitude, conduct and the way we perceive sexuality in recent decades, new concepts lead to understanding the phenomenon of prostitution in a more complex scope<sup>(23)</sup>.

In addition to the educators, health professionals also need to develop mechanisms to identify signs of violence. Research can help develop tools to construct violence indicators. The government and the companies should and can provide resources to stimulate other research with different approaches: epidemiological profiles of violence, conceptual studies, and proposals for intervention in health care, among others.

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## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The elucidation of the concepts, causes, effects and solutions identified by the literature review performed has allowed us to understand that the phenomenon of child prostitution is set in a context that reveals a social condition of existence and survival in a violent environment. The phenomenon of children and adolescent commercial sexual exploitation is not only an individual or social phenomenon, but a phenomenon that is configured in a variety of psychosocial, economic and historical factors.

The frequent associations between prostitution, poverty, drugs, diseases and life on the streets are associated with structural violence. This is inherent to the kind of socio-economic organization and policy of a society ruled by inequality, which generates social exclusion. In this society, sexually exploited children suffer multiple oppressions. Because most of them are female, and because most of them are not adults yet and, quite often, because most of them live on the streets, many of their rights are denied.

Sexual exploitation is the result of structural violence; therefore, it is up to the State to fulfill its role as promoter of the rights of this minority group, however large, bestowing upon it effective public policies that enable access to social benefits.

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## ANNEX

### References that made up data collection

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