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My name is Raymond Bechar, I'm the author of the book, *Unspeakable: The Hidden Truth Behind The World's Fastest Growing Crime*, which is an expose of underage prostitution and child trafficking. I also served as a member of the Connecticut Legislature's Domestic Violence in Immigrant Communities Task Force.

In my work as a human rights advocate, specializing in the fight against underage prostitution and human trafficking, I have come to realize there is an urgent need to aggressively address the issue of the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, or CSEC, here in Connecticut.

To clarify, the US Department of Justice defines CSEC as "Crimes of a sexual nature committed against youthful victims (younger than 18 years old) primarily or entirely for financial or economic reasons. These crimes include, for example, trafficking for sexual purposes, prostitution, sex tourism, mail-order-bride trade and early marriage, pornography, stripping and sexual performances."

For most, it is easy to believe that CSEC crimes are not prevalent or widespread domestically. However, according to the FBI, the average age of females entering prostitution in the United States is 13, and for males it may be even younger. The number of CSEC victims, especially here in Connecticut, is extremely difficult to calculate because it is a hidden crime - often not recognized by criminal justice.

However, those who work closely with these victims understand the explosion of CSEC crimes taking place in our society. One of these dedicated people is Kelley O'Connell, Sergeant Detective with the Boston Police Department's Human Trafficking Force. Recently, Detective O'Connell summarized the expansion of CSEC crimes by stating, **"The Girl is the New Drug."**

"The girl is the new Drug." What she is saying, is that for many in the criminal realm, it is far more profitable and far less dangerous to deal in prostitution - selling human beings - than it is to sell drugs.

This is true for several reasons. And these reasons also explain the explosion in CSEC crimes across America and here in Connecticut.

Reason #1

Lesser threat of Prosecution. Unlike the investigatory and prosecutorial machines that have been long established to fight against drug crimes, there is very little motivation or institutional awareness for those in the criminal justice system to investigate and prosecute CSEC, human trafficking, or prostitution crimes.

Reason #2

Reduced suspicion. Having possession of a large stash of drugs is itself a serious crime. Having two fifteen year old girls with you, is not. In other words, it is very easy to move the "product" being sold without being caught.

Reason #3

There is no product to buy. Unlike drugs, which must be resupplied and purchased every time a criminal dealer makes a sale, young girls can be sold 10, 15, 20 times a day - at a 100 percent profit each time.

Reason #4

Prostitution is becoming more 'mainstream' in our society. It is seen more often as a lifestyle choice or victimless crime. This perception is often reinforced with terms like "High End Call Girl," or "Pimp My Ride." This gradual removal of prostitution's taboos have made it more acceptable for younger and younger girls to be recruited into this abuse. And this is an important distinction to make. Underage prostitution is pedophilia. It is a sex crime. Simply because there is money changing hands does not make it "just prostitution." Paid pedophilia is just as wrong, just as abhorrent, and should be just as illegal, as any other sex crime against a child.

There are many other reasons for the increasing number of CSEC crimes, but the last I would like to site is Craigslist and the Online Availability of victims. Gone are the days when most victims are made to walk the streets, waiting for cars to pull up on the corner. While this still occurs every night in towns across Connecticut, the vast majority of prostitution here is occurring online. The internet has further sterilized this form of modern day slavery by making it possible to buy and sell young victims with total anonymity. Perpetrators use Craigslist and their cell phones to have a victim delivered to their home or hotel room within minutes. Today, finding a young person to perform sex for money is easier than ordering a pizza.

The combination of these factors has created a perfect storm against CSEC victims in Connecticut.

That is why I not only urge passage of S.B. 153, but that language be added which reflects legal standards similar to Federal law, specifically those set forth by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 - or TVPA. TVPA goes beyond the legal test of "coercion" as is the current Connecticut standard, making illegal commercial sex acts which are "induced by force, fraud, or coercion or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age"

In short, this standard adds the dynamics of 'force' and 'fraud' to those methods by which a young person can be induced to perform commercial sex acts. It also states very clearly that anyone 17 years of age or younger is protected within the legal safe harbor.

In conclusion, CSEC crimes and the inability for criminal justice in Connecticut to prosecute them are best exemplified by the Federal case of United States vs. Dennis Paris. Tried in Federal Court here in Hartford, it remains one of the largest cases ever tried within TVPA. In this case, multiple victims, some as young as 14, were involved in underage prostitution in and around Hartford. These victims were not kidnapped. They were not smuggled in from foreign countries. They were from Vermont, New Hampshire, and some were recruited out of Connecticut high schools.

We have a long way to go in fighting CSEC crimes in Connecticut. The effort to protect these young victims will include building awareness in law enforcement, schools, and our greater community. It will also involve passing and enforcing new laws which ensure the prosecution of those who exploit and abuse young people by promoting sexual services for money AND those on whom the sexual acts are performed. Known as 'pimps' and 'johns,' both are equally guilty of commercial sexual exploitation.

This new fight against an ever increasing crime which has long victimized our young people begins here - with our lawmakers taking courageous steps of leadership.

Please do not allow this opportunity to slip away. Right now, these victims are here, in Connecticut. They are in grave danger. And they're waiting for your help.

Thank you.