

Shame of children for sale

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CHILDREN are selling sex for as little as \$5 on Queensland's streets in an epidemic that crime fighters tried to cover up. Predators are using cash, drugs, a place to sleep or even just attention to entice the desperate boys and girls, some as young as 8.

A major study confirmed **more than 100 children were involved in prostitution across the state**, but a detailed report on the issue was never made public. **"The whole issue of children in prostitution has been completely overlooked in Australia,"** Child Wise chief executive Bernadette McMenamin told *The Sunday Mail*. "It's been an issue people don't know how to tackle. These young children fall through the child protection system."

The Child Wise charity works to prevent and reduce the sexual abuse and commercial exploitation of children. Queensland youth groups say they are helping dozens of children every week who are selling sex to survive. "People are getting younger and younger," said Kerrie Counihan, head of Cairns group Youth Empowered Towards Independence. "They are 12, 13 and 14. Three years ago it was 15, 16, 17. They'll give sex to get a bed, to get food, to get attention, clothes, money and drugs." The former Crime Commission and Queensland police investigated child prostitution in 2000 as part of the Project Axis inquiry into child sex offending. Their findings were never made public, but *The Sunday Mail* this week obtained a draft report which concludes: "Child prostitution is a significant problem in Queensland." Those surveyed for the study include more than 30 children involved in prostitution, 30 police juvenile aid bureaus and 18 jailed child sex

offenders. Children admitted to selling sex to strangers for between \$5 and \$250, usually on weekends to middle-aged, drunk men who approached them at night. The children were usually picked up on the street or at toilet blocks, skate ramps, shopping centers and parks. Child prostitution was known to occur in Brisbane, the Gold Coast, Ipswich, Sunshine Coast, Bundaberg, Townsville and Cairns.

Most of the children were involved in "opportunistic" prostitution, but some were formal sex workers. One boy said he had "used sex to live" since his mother kicked him out of the family home. "He began engaging in sex for favors before the age of 8 and is still active," the report says. A "lack of both police and community resources" meant the extent of the problem was unclear, but 112 children were known to be involved in prostitution. "The results of the survey would suggest police are unaware of the extent of the problem," the report says. The Crime Commission has since become a part of the Crime and Misconduct Commission. A spokeswoman this week said the report was not released "because it hadn't uncovered any new information", with other non-government studies already revealing the extent of the problem. "The Crime Commission at the time made the decision that there was no point duplicating information already publicly available". The study was mentioned in only a few brief paragraphs of a Project Axis report. Ms McMenamin said the report was commissioned to discredit shocking figures found in non-government reports. When the report instead backed up the findings, it was "buried because it was controversial". Child prostitution had only increased in the years since. "It's definitely worse. More kids are going into care, more are in vulnerable situations, using drugs and homeless." Youth organizations say extra funding would allow them to operate at night and provide company, shelter and food to help break the cycle that leads to child prostitution.