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**Poverty Stricken Children in Thailand Being  
Forced into Prostitution**

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**Keyword List:**

child prostitution, children in Thailand, poverty in Thailand, Thai brothels, sex tourism

**Abstract:**

It is no longer a secret that there are children working as prostitutes in the brothels in Thailand, however it is still a problem. The poverty that ails Thailand has reached such extremes that parents are selling their own children into the business and others are going willingly simply to avoid starvation. There is an ongoing debate over whether or not the government in Thailand is ignoring the issue or not. The truth is that prostitution brings in a lot of money for the country, money that they are desperately in need of. The children have become victims in the situation because of the HIV and AIDS crisis. Clients of the prostitutes are creating a demand for younger and younger children in an effort to avoid potential prostitutes that may have contracted the disease previously. This paper will also research what is being done to stop the sale of children, such as educating them about the dangers of prostitution.

**Introduction:**

The idea of children working as prostitutes is something that is beyond imagination for most of us. Unfortunately, it is a common reality for the youth in Southeastern Asia.

Prostitution has become a chance to escape from the poverty that dominates this part of the world, but it is an escape into something much worse. There are approximately 200,000 to 300,000 children working as prostitutes in Thailand (Jubilee Campaign 2001). The main reason these numbers are so high is because the demand for younger girls is becoming greater. There are too many people that are out to make an extra buck and not enough that are willing to stand up for the children of this world.

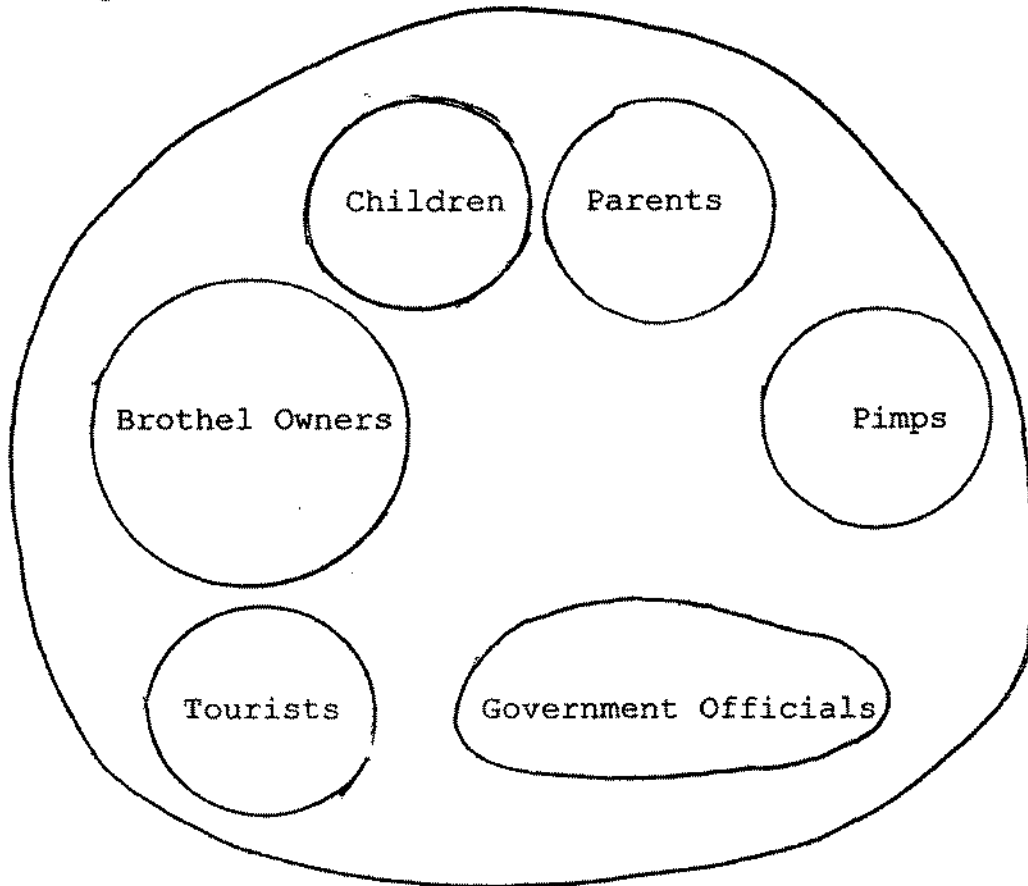
The following research will take a more detailed look into the lives of these children and the conditions that are impacting them. As well as how they get into prostitution, why they cannot escape, and what life is like after the fact. There are several reasons why the problem of children working as prostitutes has escalated to the point that it is at and this research will identify just that. Although, the one good thing that comes out of this is that the bigger the problem, the more likely someone is to do something about it. There are a number of organizations that are very dedicated to saving these children and are working on ways to help.

It will become evident through the research that will be provided that this problem is not just an effect of the Thai Government. People all around the globe fuel it, and to stop it will require assistance from all around the globe as well. The major focus of this research is targeted at the children themselves and not with the problems with prostitution. These children are being exploited and most of them never chose to live their lives in a brothel. Although, there have been several advancements in the protection of the children in Southeast Asia, there is still an underground market that threatens thousands of them each year.

The social system that this paper will focus on is child prostitutes in Thailand. The elements that make up this system are children, the parents of those children, brothel owners, pimps (that are working in the brothels), the tourists that visit Thailand, and the government officials (see Figure 1: social systems model of child prostitutes in Thailand). The boundary of this model is specifically, children from Southeast Asia between the ages of ten and eighteen that are working as prostitutes in Thailand. The relationships among these elements are parents dealing with raising their children in poverty and the conflicts that they face in doing so; the abuse that is inflicted upon the child prostitute by the pimp in order to keep them under their control; the continuing demand from the tourist

**Figure 1: Social Systems Model:**

Social system: Child Prostitutes in Thailand



Boundary: Children from Southeast Asia between the ages of ten and eighteen that are working as prostitutes in Thailand.

Relationships:

- tourists demand for prostitutes
- Parents dealing with poverty
- Child abuse
- Government denial of prostitution

industry for these prostitutes and the Thai governments denial of and lack of intervention in the child prostitution industry.

The following articles are cited in the reference page but were not used in this paper, (Department of Corrections 2002), (Berge 1999), (Morris 2002) and (Schaeffer 2002).

**Method:**

The research presented in this paper is secondary research that was gathered from several different sources. I began my search at the San Diego State University library in the periodicals section. After sorting through all the information on the search engines I found a few good journal articles that I felt would contribute nicely to this paper. I also gathered information off the Internet. There was an endless amount of cites that had something to offer, but I narrowed it down to those that best applied to the topic of my research and were able to contribute to what I was trying to show through this paper. I then began my search for charts and graphs that gave a visual explanation of some of the statistics that are included.

I went about creating my model by first figuring out what the beginning and ending states were for these children. I continued by citing the research, that I have found, that gave possible ways they got to the ending state.

**Results:**

The main factor contributing to children working as prostitutes is poverty (Royal Thai Embassy 1997). In many developing countries, poverty is an ongoing battle; it just so happens that in Thailand, families have found that there is a great demand for their children that will pay instant money. According to the Royal Thai Embassy (1997), the parents of these children are being tricked by procurers that show up at their households and offer them a sum of money for their child. In many instances the children do not refuse because they feel indebted to their parents for raising them (Raedler 2001; Schaeffer 2002:691). In other words it is very custom in these countries for children to do whatever is needed to help support the family. This stems from traditional Thai attitudes that view girl children as subordinate to the needs of the family (Murray Nodate:2). In contradiction to this statement, the Jubilee Campaign (2001), which works to fight for these children, believes it is a problem of criminality. Meaning that the parents commit these acts out of deviance and not necessity. In one survey it was revealed that many of these children were not sold into prostitution because their families were starving and homeless, but because they wanted to buy consumer goods such as refrigerators and television sets (Jubilee Campaign 2001). This is the fight that goes on between the Thai government and

the civilians. According to research done by The Humanist, the government views it women as a cash crop and benefits greatly off the promotion of sex tourism which is why they tend to deny that any illegal activity is going on (Leuchtag 2003:11).

(Illegal activity being the exploitation of children in the prostitution industry). Much of the poverty that overcomes places like Thailand is a direct result of lack of education. Those that are able to become educated are the ones that have a fighting chance against falling into poverty. The total number of illiterate youths in Thailand could be an indicator as to where prevention needs to begin. See Figure 2. The education that these children need does not even need to be confined to the classroom. In one community based Centre for Girls in Phan, Thailand, volunteers as well as other children have found a new way to educate the youth about the dangers of prostitution. Each week plays are presented, in a child friendly way, that reenact children getting lured to Bangkok and held as slaves or molested by a teacher and getting help from another adult (Son 2001:1). The important thing is that these children learn what is right and what is not. Some of them have gone into the prostitution business willingly, not aware of what it was actually going to be like (Son 2001:3). If they are at the very least educated about the brothels then some of them could be saved.

**Figure 2: Number of Illiterate Children in Thailand**

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**Educational Indicators:**

Education Compulsory Age (years):	6-11
Illiterate Total (15+) 1995:	6.2% (Total:6.7%; Urban:3.3%; Rural:7.5%; ~1990)
Illiterate Males (15+) 1995:	4.0% (Total:4.4%; Urban:1.9%; Rural:5.0%; ~1990)
Illiterate Females (15+) 1995:	8.4% (Total:8.8%; Urban:4.5%; Rural:9.9%; ~1990)

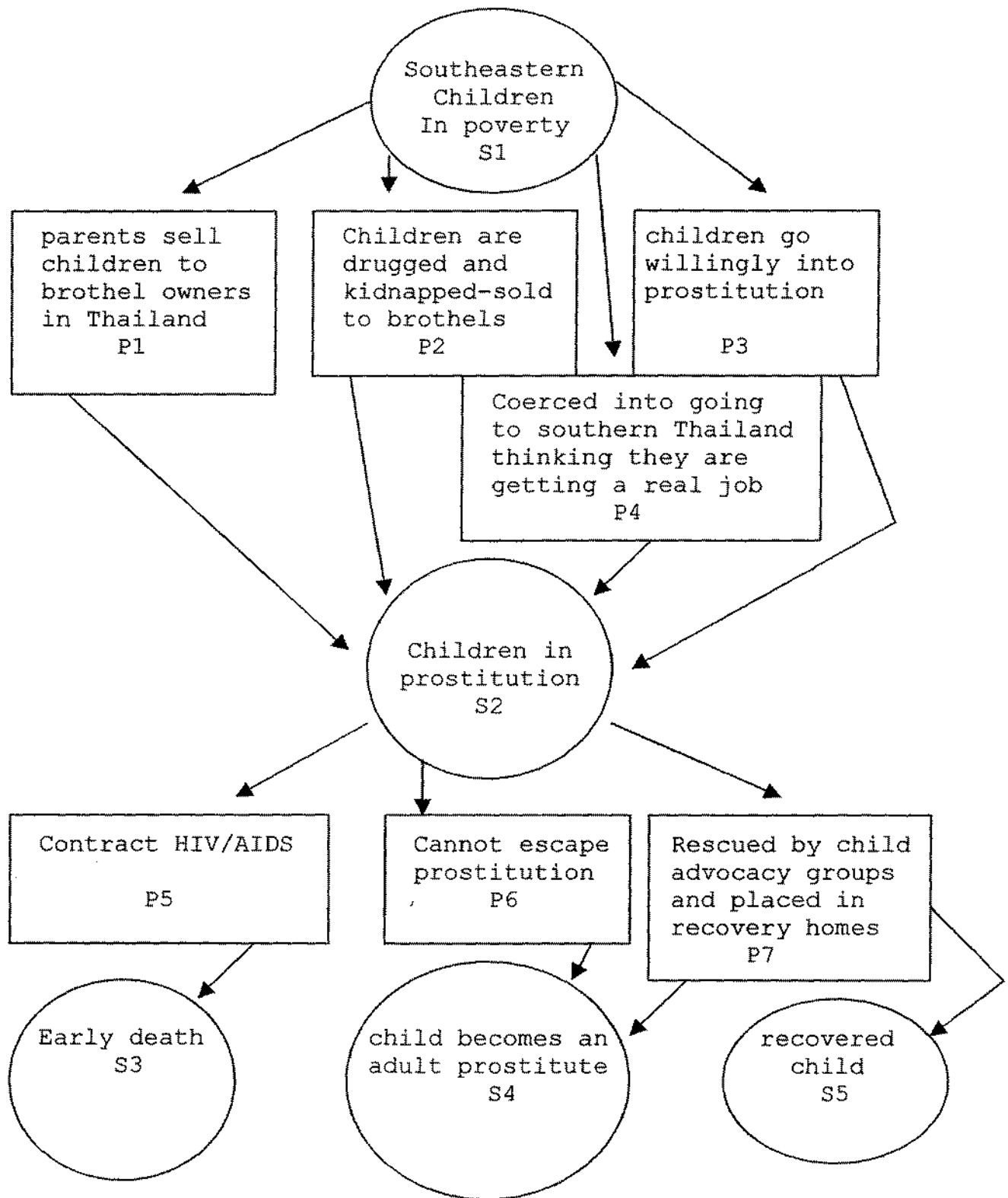
**Source:** Berger, Herve. 1996. "County Profiles on the Situation of Youth" (United Nations, New York). Retrieved April 2, 2003 (<http://esa.un.org/socdev/unyin/countrya.asp?countrycode=th>)



The purpose of my State/Process Dynamic Model is to show how children from Southeast Asia end up as child prostitutes and what happens to them after the fact (See Figure 3: State/Process Dynamic Model for child prostitutes in Thailand). It begins with the state of Southeastern children in poverty, which is where it stops for some children that will never be affected by the following processes. There is one positive process that is not included in the model but was present in the research. That is that volunteer groups that support and educate children in poverty about the dangers of prostitution, reach these children before the business does (Son 2001). The processes that others will go through are being sold to brothels by their parents, being coerced to go to Thailand through agents, forced entry by drugging and kidnapping, or going willingly (Bennett 1998:2). The latter being the one that is getting a lot of attention from child help groups. There are more school scholarships and loans that are aimed at preventing children from choosing a life of prostitution in order to pay off debts or support their family (Son 2001). In the model it shows three possibilities as to what happens after these children become prostitutes. They will either, contract HIV/AIDS, remain in prostitution, or be rescued by child advocacy groups.

The main reason there has been a recent demand for these young children is because of the rise in HIV and AIDS (Bennett

Figure 3: State/Process Dynamic Model for Child Prostitutes Thailand



1998:2). "Many men believe that sleeping with young children, especially females, puts these men at less risk for contracting HIV/AIDS" (Bennett 1998:2), implying that they have not had as many prior sexual encounters. Although, this is a very ignorant misconception considering that they are working as prostitutes and serving as many as ten customers each day (Bennett 1998:4). According to Murray (Nodate) "People think that the fear of AIDS has reduced the demand for the commercial sex industry, because AIDS is associated with brothels, but in fact the sex trade has just moved away from the brothels to other locations." It is not uncommon to buy sex from a hostess or a hairdresser nowadays (Murray nodate:1). Another reason that this misconception has flourished is because child sex operators have tried to alert to tourists' anxieties by assuring them that the children have regular checkups and that you cannot catch AIDS from a child, neither of which is true (Hechler Nodate:3). The result of AIDS becoming so widespread in the brothels of Thailand is that the owners are now moving to nearby nations and trafficking in children (Hechler Nodate:3). The amount of Burmese and Laotian children that are being rescued from prostitution has dramatically increased in the past few years. Between 1991 and 1993 alone it was estimated that 20,000 Burmese were trafficked and sold to slavery and the numbers increased by about 10,000 each year after that (Jubilee Campaign

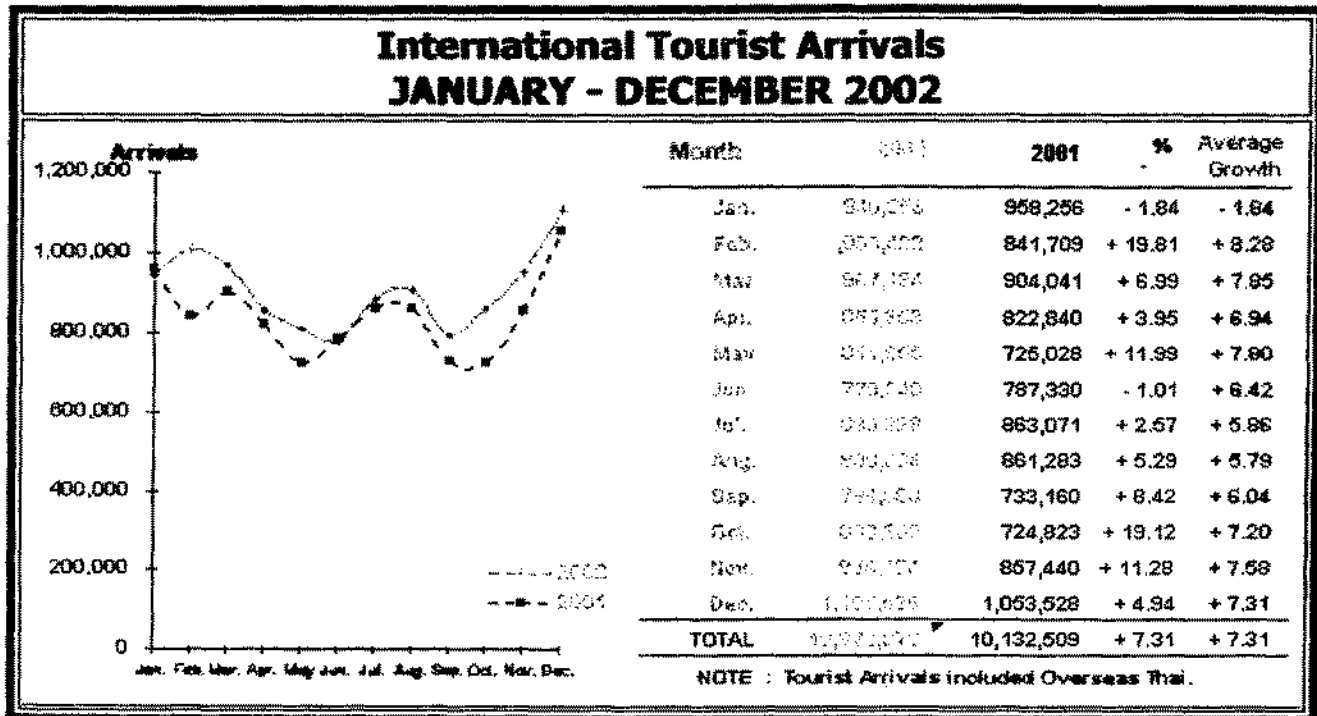
2001:2). The AIDS epidemic has spread so rapidly among these child prostitutes because most of them are not given regular health checks and the use of condoms depends solely on their ability to persuade the client to use one (Bennett 1998:5). There are no regulations in the brothels that require the customers to wear condoms.

Besides the problems with poverty and the AIDS epidemic that are going on in Thailand, child prostitution has been able to increase because of the tourist industry. Over 10,000 tourists travel to Thailand each year and the numbers remain stable throughout each calendar month (Tourism Authority of Thailand 2000). See Figure 4. The majority of these tourists are male and nearly half of them are booked with some sort of group tour (Tourism Authority of Thailand 2000). See Figure 5. It is also evident in Figure 5 that the most common reason for these tourists to visit Thailand is on holiday, which greatly exceeds business in purpose of visit.

The Internet has been a major factor in the increased sex tourism because it allows for pedophiles in all different countries to work together and help one another find the best places to go (Preda Foundation Inc. 1997). According to Hechler (Nodate), the travel industry and the Tourism Authority of Thailand have overtly promoted sex tourism in the past, which may account for the popularity it has now. In 1987, the TAT

Figure 4: Number of Tourist Arrivals Over a Two Year Period

## Thailand Tourism Statistics 2002



**Source:** Tourism Authority of Thailand. 2002. "Thailand Tourism Statistics" Retrieved April 2, 2003 (<http://www.tat.or.th/stat/main.htm>)

Figure 5: Demographic Profiles on Tourists That Travel to Thailand

Profile							
	Number	Δ (%)	% Share		Number	Δ (%)	% Share
<b>Age</b>				<b>Age</b>			
Male	2,892,022	+ 0.75	55.51	Under 15	252,021	+ 4.12	4.63
Female	2,073,022	+ 0.52	39.47	15 - 24	2,047,126	+ 0.81	37.90
				25 - 34	2,932,547	+ 3.80	53.21
<b>Frequency of Visit</b>				35 - 44	2,605,227	+ 7.91	47.12
First visit	5,490,510	+ 13.09	50.84	45 - 54	2,099,228	+ 10.69	38.26
Revisit	5,308,557	+ 1.96	49.16	55 - 64	1,222,222	+ 12.82	22.37
				65 and Over	422,590	+ 0.06	7.67
<b>Travel Arrangement</b>				<b>Occupation</b>			
Group Tour	4,931,079	+ 16.31	45.66	Professionals	1,615,311	+ 9.49	29.99
Non Group Tour	5,867,988	+ 0.70	54.34	Admin. & Managerial	1,177,760	+ 10.38	21.91
				Commercial Personnel	1,823,054	+ 7.38	33.88
				Labourers/Production	1,819,288	- 5.21	33.85
<b>Purpose of Visit</b>				Agricultural Workers	26,816	+ 8.45	0.25
Holiday	9,638,984	+ 8.59	89.26	Government Official	85,133	- 8.99	0.79
Business	824,979	- 6.10	7.64	Housewife/Unpaid Workers	705,451	+ 16.71	6.53
Convention	106,853	+ 19.15	0.99	Students & Children	1,168,078	+ 2.65	10.82
Official	40,483	- 12.33	0.37	Retired & Unemployed	200,969	+ 17.25	1.86
Others	187,768	+ 9.78	1.74	Other	155,006	- 20.26	1.44
				Not Stated	2,019,201	+ 20.66	18.70

Please click for the features of Thailand Tourism Statistics 1999, 2000, 2001 or 2002

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Source: Tourism Authority of Thailand. 2002. "Thailand Tourism Statistics" Retrieved April 2, 2003 (<http://www.tat.or.th/stat/main.htm>)

named the year "Visit Thailand Year," its slogan was: "The one fruit of Thailand more delicious than durian—its young women." (Hechler Nodate:2). This along with several other provocative advertisements could be found in travel brochures and magazine advertisements everywhere. The tourist industry is what brings in the majority of money to countries like Thailand, so it is not too surprising to see them promoting whatever the tourists want to see. The initial tourist-prostitution relationship began in a town called Pattaya that once used to be a small fishing village. That all changed in the 1960's when American G.I.s began passing through and the town started catering to their every need (Dealey 2001:20). It was not long before other cities in southern Thailand began discovering the money that was being made from promoting prostitution to tourists.

**Conclusion:**

In response to the research that has been presented I believe that a lot of different people are contributing to children working as prostitutes in Thailand. There is not one specific group that can be blamed for everything. It is as much a result of unfit parenting as it is a problem with the five million or so sex tourists that come to Thailand from the United States, Western Europe, Australia, and Japan (Leuchtag 2003:11). The focus also needs to be on preventing the problem before it starts. I believe that programs that help initially with

poverty in these countries will save many of these children's lives. The evidence also suggests that the government is ignoring the problem because of the profit that prostitution brings to Thailand. One statement was made that "these transactions (sex tourism) brought in about \$26.2 billion-thirteen times more than Thailand earned by building and exporting computers" (Leuchtag 2003:11). With numbers as high as these in a struggling nation it is no wonder people are turning their heads to any wrongdoings that are going on. These children are simply innocent bystanders in a hunger for money. Hopefully, with the awareness that the research is creating, child and prostitute will never have to be used in the same sentence again.



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**Appendix:**

The author is a junior at San Diego State University where she is pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology. She is interested in traveling and the social problems that other countries are dealing with. She chose to research child prostitution because it is such a controversial issue, but still a large number of the population are not aware of what is going on. One of the most prevalent places for these activities is Thailand, which is why she focused her research there.