

PROJECT "GUARDIAN"

THE  
SEXUAL EXPLOITATION  
OF MALE YOUTH  
IN LONDON

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October 1997

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This research was funded by the Ministry of Community and Social Services. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the Ministry.

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

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*by Louise Sas and Pamela Hurley,  
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### WHAT WAS PROJECT "GUARDIAN"?

In September of 1993, a police investigation began with the accidental discovery of 40 discarded videotapes in the Ausable River just north of London. When viewed by police, these tapes revealed explicit sexual acts involving young boys, teenaged males, and adult men. The police investigation into the origins of these tapes and the identities of the individuals portrayed in the sexual acts was initially referred to as Operation "Scoop". The criminal activity targeted by police in the early stages of this investigation was child pornography. Within the first two months, the first two suspects were arrested and, over a period of time, a total of 22 young male complainants and ten accused adult males were identified on these pornographic videotapes.

As the police probe expanded, it became evident that there was more going on than child pornography alone. As information surfaced, the focus of the investigation was broadened to deal with the larger problem of sexual exploitation of male youth in the London area (this included but was not limited to pornography). (See Chapter 13 for a more detailed account of the police investigation.)

In recognition of the magnitude of the investigative work that would be required to follow the numerous leads, in particular the time that would be involved to view the videotapes and identify the participants, the London Police Department, under the initiative of Chief Julian Fantino, sought and received provincial funding from the Ministry of the Solicitor General. Funding was provided to allow for an increase in the number of officers involved in the investigation and to extend the geographical jurisdiction they could cover as part of their investigation. The Ontario Provincial Police, Metropolitan Toronto Police, and the London Police Department joined efforts in this broadened investigation which then became known as Project "Guardian" (hereinafter referred to as PG).

The expressed goal of PG was to disrupt the illegal activities of any known person involved in the sexual exploitation of children, and to gather sufficient evidence for successful prosecution under the *Criminal Code* of Canada. The investigation began in September 1993 and ended in November 1995. In total 64 defendants were charged under the umbrella of PG, involving over 84 young complainants, and a total of 5305 charges were laid.

## HOW DID THE COMMUNITY REACT TO THE POLICE INVESTIGATION?

The revelation that so many male youths had been sexually exploited in our community resulted in mixed reactions. For many, it gave rise to feelings of anger, shock and even expressions of incredulity. How could so many cases of sexual exploitation of male children have gone on without anyone knowing about it? This particular question, which still remains unanswered, has been asked by almost everyone who has followed the London Free Press coverage of PG.

For many parents, PG was a rude awakening. They were forced to face the reality that even in the "Forest City", a place which has always been touted as a safe environment to bring up children, the sexual exploitation of dozens of male youths carried on without detection or interruption, for years! Of particular concern was the powerful influence of the so called "network" of PG adult males and youths. There was a highly successful system of peer recruitment, as well as adult offered enticements, both of which fostered compliance, secrecy and escalation of involvement in young males lured into homosexual sex trade.

Others in our community (see Chapter 14 for a summary of the report by the Homophile Association of London Ontario and the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Ontario) reacted negatively to the police investigation, expressing the view that adult male homosexuals in London were being scapegoated and their actions unfairly misrepresented by the PG investigation findings. The concern expressed by HALO was that the police investigation was motivated more by "homophobic" attitudes than by a genuine concern for the complainants. Their position was that the majority of the sexual encounters targeted by the PG investigation were acts which occurred between consenting males

It was our hope of that studying this multi victim/multi offender child exploitation "network" would lead us to a greater insight into the victimization of male children (under age 18) by adult males, and would possibly offer suggestions for different avenues for early intervention with youth at risk.

## REALITIES OF PROJECT "GUARDIAN"

Six realities emerged early on in the investigation that in our view called for further inquiry and examination:

- ① "A picture is worth a thousand words." No immediate disclosures by male youth about the sexual activities were made to the authorities. A few adult individuals came forward, once the investigation was well underway, and offered their own stories of early involvement in the sex trade as children.
- ② Discovery of the videotapes was accidental, and the finding of these tapes was crucial in that it provided material evidence of the sexual exploitation of the youth in the absence of any disclosures. What if the tapes had not been found, how much longer would these activities have continued before they came to light?
3. Two thirds of the male youth complainants were "known" to the CAS, as a result of having received varying levels of service. Many were indeed wards of the CAS, and numerous CAS histories were characterized by poverty, familial dysfunction, alcoholism, and violence. These early profiles of the youths suggested that there are male youth at risk for involvement in the sex trade.
4. Safe sex was not practiced on the videotapes that were viewed by the police, nor was it mentioned in the accounts given by the complainants. As a result many of the youths were exposed to sexually transmitted diseases, and most importantly to HIV infection. One youth had already been diagnosed with HIV, and one defendant was suffering from AIDS at the time we were writing the grant proposal.

5. At a time when there is a strong backlash against child witnesses in the courts, and children's accounts of sexual abuse are routinely challenged as fictitious, distorted, malicious or implanted, PG emerges as proof that sexual exploitation of youths by adults is a reality. Some of the adult defendants were well respected professionals in our community, with credible public personas, while many of the youths were vulnerable marginal participants in the community, who as a result of a variety of predisposing factors found themselves in trouble with their families, their schools, and their communities. In the absence of guilty pleas, as a group, how credible would they appear on the stand? No doubt, the same vulnerabilities that predisposed them to become victims of sexual exploitation also would have likely impeded their credibility in a court of law.
  
6. Despite increased education and awareness of the problem of sexual exploitation of children in our society, the proliferation of child abuse prevention programs in our own schools, and greater professional sensitivity to the problem of sexual victimization of children, PG flourished, successfully recruiting at least 80 young males (those identified by the police investigation) over a fifteen year period. How did we miss this? Did we not ask the right questions of the youths when they presented in our offices if indeed they did present? Why did these male youths feel unable to utilize the adult relationships in their lives, professional or otherwise to extricate themselves from the sex trade? How could we not know what was going on?

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objective of the present study was to reach a better understanding of the systematic sexual exploitation of male youth in London that became known as PG and to attempt to address these six realities.



(many of whom were hustlers) who were of age to be able to make such personal decisions.

Child focused professionals in our community were at a loss to explain the existence of this multiple offender/multiple victim sexual exploitation of male youth in our community. Their initial shock and dismay was, no doubt, due in part to the sheer number of cases of sexual exploitation that surfaced. The professional community, in particular those involved in providing services to children and adolescents, found themselves reacting to the discovery with feelings of professional failure.

One of the hindrances to the early detection of large-scale sexual victimization of male youth likely has to do with the fact that most professionals are trained to work with individual cases as a point of focus. Whether in clinical practice, investigations, or even case management, single case analysis is what comes naturally, even when we are dealing with child sexual abuse. Analyzing the characteristics of each case in isolation has been, by far, the most popular method of response. Furthermore, professionals rarely have the time to share their experiences and observations, and as a result clues are often missed. It is obvious that in our community, it has been difficult for us to see the "forest" because of our continuing emphasis on examining each tree in isolation. This analogy can be applied to PG. The "forest" obviously existed, in the form of a large scale network of sexual exploitation of male youths which remained obscured, and the "trees" were the male youths who were victims of this sexual exploitation, many of whom were known as individual clients who presented to local agencies for services.

No doubt, the most disquieting factor which appears to have shaken professional confidence is the realization that there was a total lack of awareness (of these clandestine sexual activities) on the part of professionals who came into contact with these young males. Indeed, many professionals learned after the fact, that male youths on their caseloads, in their classes, or in even in their care, were trading sex for consideration, right under their noses.

## From Shock to Action

Recognition by many of us that our community failed to identify and protect these male children from sexual exploitation led to a common resolve:

We need to learn from this experience so as to be more effective and aware in the future.

Our three agencies (the Children's Aid Society of London & Middlesex, the London Police Service, and the London Family Court Clinic) viewed the existence of the PG investigation as offering a unique opportunity, for exciting research on the phenomenon of sexual exploitation in male youth in our community. PG was a clear example of hidden sexual victimization of male children that can exist. Clinical research has noted that male victims of sexual abuse have been shown to be even more reluctant than females to disclose abuse, resulting in a very high proportion of cases unreported. This was certainly the case in PG. Instead of disclosing, many males mask their shame and cope with their sexual traumatization through the psychological mechanism of denial. As a result, their abusive situations remain unrecognized and their private emotional trauma untreated. Unless the right questions are asked and clues are recognized, sexual victimization flourishes.

## THE MANDATE

The mandate to develop a research proposal for an in depth study of the sexual exploitation in PG was spearheaded by the collaborative efforts of the London Police department, the London Children's Aid Society (hereinafter referred to as CAS), the London Family Court Clinic. The Victim/Witness Assistance Programme was instrumental in offering its support and advice to this endeavour as well.

## Research Goals

Within the overall stated objective, the following research goals were outlined:

1. To examine the system of recruitment and the extent of grooming of young males in PG which preceded their sexual exploitation.
2. To examine the nature of the sexual acts that took place between the male youth and the adult males.
3. To examine the types of consideration that were exchanged in return for sexual favours.
4. To examine the ages and demographic characteristics of the male youths who were drawn into the sex trade, and to look for predisposing factors that contributed to their vulnerability.
5. To examine the nature of the relationships between the defendants and the youths, with respect to the number of mutual partners, the duration and intensity of their co-involvement, and the sub-culture with in which these sexual activities went on.
6. To examine the impact on the youths of their involvement in PG, through examination of the victim impact statements provided to the court.

## Community Objectives

Arising from our findings, the following overall community objective emerged:

To reduce the incidence of sexual exploitation of male youth in our community.

## GOALS

1. To make recommendations with respect to the early identification of youths at risk for sexual exploitation.
2. To make recommendations for the modification of current child abuse prevention programs in our schools so that they would address the issue of male victimization and sex for consideration.
3. To make recommendations with respect to a future protocol for handling cases involving multiple victims and offenders, so that there could be an immediate interdisciplinary response at the investigative stage and later at intervention stage.
4. To provide advice for the provision of critical support following disclosure/ discovery of male victimization, as male victims are frequently avoidant of agency intervention and clinical services.
5. To suggest alternative options for gay male youth under age 18 to pursue their sexual interests without having to resort to sex for consideration with adult males who exploit their sexual curiosity in order to meet their own sexual needs. This report is only a modest beginning, which points us in the direction of future avenues of research.

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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*by Louise Sas and Pamela Hurley,  
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### SUMMARY

Project "Guardian" was a multi victim/multi offender (hereinafter referred to as MVMO) case of sexual exploitation which implicated numerous male children and adult males in one predominant geographical area, London, Ontario. It involved, for lack of a better term, a network of perpetrators involved in sexually abusive practices and, in many cases, the sexual exploitation of children for profit. The use of pornography, in the form of videotapes, was linked to financial gain in some of the PG cases.

These characteristics of PG are not unique, but are similar to two MVMO patterns described in a 1994 British Columbia study, that was prepared by Child & Youth Mental Health Services, specifically on the topic of Multiple Victims of Child Sexual Abuse.

The findings in this research report provide much needed information about the recruitment strategies, and the nature of the sexual exploitation which can take place between adult males and male youths. We believe that this information adds to the body of knowledge that already exists on MVMO's in Canada, and because of the magnitude of PG and wealth of data accumulated represents a significant contribution.

Due to the complexity of PG (i.e., the multitude and nature of the abusive adult/youth relationships), the investigation was compounded by many external issues. This chapter will attempt to summarize some of these issues and offer recommendations.

The research has taken over two and one-half years to complete. Many of the clinical findings, in particular in the area of childhood risk factors for victimization, recruitment strategies and psychological entrapment of youths by offenders, are disturbing, yet offer

important insights into what must be done to better protect children from sexual exploitation. The research leads us to believe that there are legislative, systemic and attitudinal reforms needed. Although there were numerous findings, the following are highlights of the major insights:

1. The PG youths were for the most part, disadvantaged, marginalized youths who were at high risk for sexual victimization due to their childhood histories of chronic neglect, familial dysfunction and in some cases early abuse;
2. Many of the PG youths were well known individually to local professionals and mandated agencies such as the CAS and police, and had received varying levels of service over the years;
3. The peak age for recruitment into PG was 13, but was as young as 8 for some youths;
4. The majority of youths were recruited into PG by other peers who were already involved;
5. The material goods, "perks" and psychological manipulation employed by the adult males were highly successful in silencing the PG youths about the sexual exploitation;
6. The sexual activities and abusive relationships were clandestine and difficult to uncover;
7. None of the PG youths came forward on their own to disclose the sexual abuse;
8. The PG youths were found by police and social workers to be difficult to engage and support;
9. Once the "story" came out, there were many misconceptions, and a general lack of understanding on the part of both professionals and the public at large, of the dynamics of sexual exploitation of male youth;
10. The short term impact on the victims of the sexual exploitation appears to have been very negative.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Changes to the Legislation

#### Protecting Children

A review of CAS files for two-thirds of the PG youth indicated that many of these youths had never had their basic needs met by their parents. Chronic neglect within the context of an environment of familial alcoholism, drug abuse, and mental health problems contributed substantially to the vulnerability of these youths to sexual exploitation. Their childhoods were tragic.

We, therefore, strongly support the efforts that are underway in Ontario to modify the Child and Family Services Act so that there is a clearer definition of neglect, a definition which allows for children to be identified as "in need of protection" based on grounds of parental neglect, negative parental behaviours, and witnessing family violence. In particular we concur with the view that the CAS should be empowered to apprehend children that are at risk because of parental neglect, and that the legislation should emphasize the professional duty to report neglect and not just abuse of children.

The negative repercussions of long term parental neglect can not be overstated. Sufficient research now exists on the deleterious effects of chronic lack of care, supervision and emotional commitment by parents. Our findings on PG youth provide yet another clear example of the impact of neglect on a group of male youth and their resultant vulnerability to sexual exploitation.

#### Sharing Information About Children

Obtaining and disclosing information has become a complex minefield for organizations serving families and children. Efforts to share information, even in the interest of children's safety, can be hampered by current legal limitations on information disclosure

that are contained in the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FIPPA). This has been further complicated by service providers needing to adhere to different legislations affecting their organizations. This often results in confusion about protocol and has led to agencies developing their own individual policies.

Many of the youths in PG were clients receiving services from social agencies and as a result different pieces of information (about the sexual exploitation) were known to professionals in the city. Collectively these pieces could have defined the situation more clearly and highlighted the risks for these youths. However PG escaped detection by the professional community. This unfortunate outcome certainly begs us to question whether better information sharing might have identified the sexual exploitation network earlier and resulted in an organized response.

We strongly recommend that relevant legislations, such as the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, be reviewed with the view to ensuring a freer flow of information between agencies when children's best interests are at stake.

### **Age of Consent for Sexual Relations**

Currently the legal age for consent in Canada, under the *Criminal Code*, is 14 (unless there is a care taking role or a relationship involving an authority figure in the child's life). The findings in PG on the recruitment strategies and enticements offered strongly suggest that 14 year old youths were too young to make intelligent informed decisions about the repercussions of engaging in sex for consideration with multiple partners. The obvious power imbalance that existed between the defendants and the victims in PG speaks to the need to better protect children by placing criminal responsibility on adults who target vulnerable youths as sexual partners.

We recommend that consideration should be given to raising the age of consent for sexual activity to 16.



## **Training and Education**

### **For Professionals**

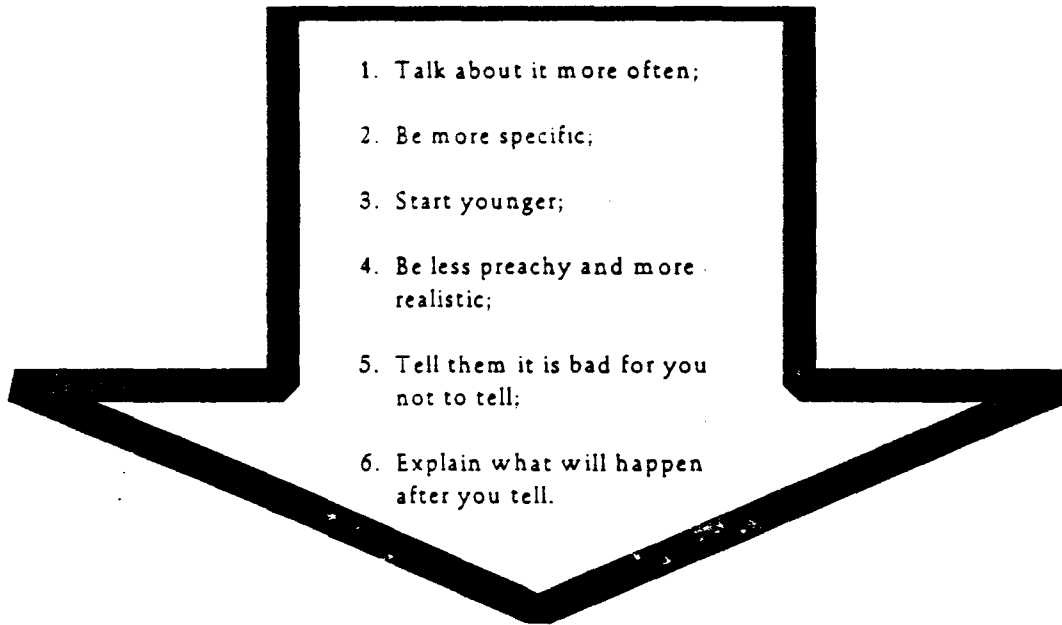
The dynamics underlying the sexual exploitation of children are not well understood. This is especially true of the sexual exploitation of male youth. Specialized education must be offered to professionals who work with youth, so that they are able to identify potential victims, offer assistance to high risk youth, and intervene therapeutically and appropriately to protect victims. Additional training must be offered to police officers and child protection workers who routinely investigate cases of child sexual abuse, in particular, in situations of MVMO which necessitate highly sophisticated techniques of abuse investigation. Agencies must ensure that there is ongoing educational opportunities for their staff so that everyone understands the various legal mandates, the clinical issues, and appreciates the overriding concern of ensuring the "best interests of children".

### **For the Public**

There is an acute need to provide the public with concrete accurate knowledge regarding the sexual exploitation of children. Concrete examples of high risk victim behaviour, recruitment strategies by offenders, and the negative impact on victims should be offered as part of public presentations so that parents and others are sensitized to the pattern of engagement. On a local level, communities should seek grants to finance these educational efforts and involve community professionals with expertise to lead the education efforts.

An educational campaign should embark on a yearly program to educate the community at large about the risks to children of sexual exploitation.

## Primary and Secondary Prevention Programs



Over the last 15 years, there has been a proliferation of prevention programs geared to protecting children from sexual abuse. The above illustration, taken from a study on disclosure patterns (Sas et al. 1995), contains suggestions from children for school prevention programs. One content area which has not, in our view, received sufficient attention is the issue of child sexual exploitation.

Prevention programs in our schools must address the problem of sexual exploitation.

Having reviewed many programs currently in use in Ontario, the following recommendations to current existing prevention practices are offered:

Child Abuse Prevention Programs in our schools must:

1. Address the issue of sexual exploitation of both males and females, explaining peer recruitment strategies, unwritten contracts and perks (sex for consideration), use of pornography, and the actual sexual behaviours that are engaged in;
2. Address same-sex abuse, as the majority of males who are abused are victims of adult males;
3. Begin teaching prevention concepts earlier, and give clear examples of dangerous situations, places and social circumstances, which could translate into high risk for prepubertal boys and girls;
4. Identify health risks as well as other safety risks, without sensationalizing the information;
5. Make schools more disclosure friendly places, where children can disclose abuse or involvement in sexual exploitation, and receive support and direction;
6. Provide information to gay youth about associations, agencies or professionals that could provide information and support if they are experiencing or questioning about their sexual orientation;
7. Include a system of monitoring school grounds and developing an awareness of the high risk hang outs for recruitment in their neighbourhoods.

## Handling of MVMO's by Communities

A consultation report produced by the Institute for the Prevention of Child Abuse (1992) highlighted the complexity of MVMO investigations and made many recommendations on how a community should proceed to ensure that there is integrity in the investigation. Four different MVMO cases were reviewed by them: the Mount Cashel Orphanage in St. Johns Newfoundland, where there was abuse of young boys by the Christian Brothers; the Prescott case in Prescott, Ontario, which involved abuse perpetrated by numerous adults and adolescents on a number of children in that community; the Martensville case in Saskatchewan; and two child welfare cases in Hamilton and Oshawa involving bizarre cult-like sexual abuse allegations. There are a number of special issues in these MVMO's that were highlighted in the IPCA report. It noted that there were challenges in interviewing the child victims, there were difficulties sorting out the historical data, there was evidence of vicarious trauma for the investigators, significant delays and obstacles in the court system leading to secondary victimization of the child witnesses, and intense media scrutiny of all phases of the investigations. As a result, an investigation such as this one must be approached with a high level of expertise. Project "Guardian" was a MVMO that had many common features with all of the above cases.

Many of the recommendations from IPCA's consultation paper are consistent with our own findings on a best practices model for handling MVMO cases and are summarized as follows.

A "Best Practices" Model for MVMOs

1. There must be an inter-agency investigative protocol which includes significant authorities such as the CAS, Police, Crown Attorney's office, local Boards of Education, and Health Unit;
2. There must be a comprehensive system of data collection and documentation which is shared when there are suspicions of abuse of children;
3. Consultation must occur early on with appropriate provincial ministries if financial or technical support is required;
4. There must be a media strategy which delineates a protocol for police officers, child protection agencies, and other involved professionals, so that the community is educated about the issues, but the investigation is not compromised;
5. There must be a model for the provision of crisis services for identified victims and their families, as well as ongoing support/court preparation and availability of therapeutic treatment as required;
6. There must be appreciation for the high level of stress (i.e., vicarious trauma) inherent in dealing with these cases and there must be a provision of support and relief for staff involved in the case.

## Developing a National Strategy

Lastly, it is important that we learn from each other's experiences. but it is not enough that each community develops a protocol for MVMO cases of sexual exploitation. In 1996, in Stockholm, Sweden, the *World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children* was held. Several key recommendations emanated from that congress. In particular, it was stressed that the best interest of children always be the primary consideration in all police action involving children and that investigations of child sexual abuse must always be victim-oriented.

We need a national strategy to combat child sexual abuse.

It was also recommended that countries keep detailed statistical data on child victims by age and gender, giving special attention to international sexual exploitation networks. A national databank on victims and offenders is very important if we are to understand the extent to which sexual exploitation of Canadian children occurs, and be able to intervene in a meaningful manner.

In 1997, in Buenos Aires, at an international conference on crime against children, several national strategies were suggested for Interpol member countries (see Appendix 2). In order for these recommendations to be implemented, a government commitment (financial and philosophical) must be made. Unless changes occur at all the levels outlined in Figure 10, it is our belief that we will not be truly successful in our goal of making our communities a safer place for our children.

Figure 10  
**Identified Areas Needing Reform**

LEGISLATION	Reforms to the <i>Child and Family Services Act</i> , <i>Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act</i> , and the <i>Criminal Code</i> to: a) better protect child victims of chronic neglect; b) allow for more information sharing in respect of high risk children; and c) raise the age of consent for sexual activity for youths.
TRAINING AND EDUCATION	To increase training and education for professionals and the public on the dynamics of organized child sexual exploitation and child sexual abuse in general
PRIMARY AND SECONDARY PREVENTION EFFORTS	To increase and modify prevention efforts for children in our schools to more realistically deal with the problem of child sexual exploitation
HANDLING OF MVMOS BY COMMUNITY AGENCIES	To develop protocols for communities on inter-agency coordination, information sharing policies and procedures to guide community efforts in respect of multiple victim child sexual abuse occurrences
NATIONAL STRATEGY TO COMBAT CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION	To develop a national strategy and standards for dealing with child sexual exploitation, and to be involved in international efforts to protect children.

In conclusion, there are many lessons in Project "Guardian". The findings allow for an opportunity for not only our community, but other communities and our country to implement meaningful changes that will reduce the incidence of sexual exploitation of children.

Let us not lose the momentum.

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