



Photo: by Chuck Cherny, Chicago Tribune

Prostitution: Facts and Realities

Increasingly in Chicago, advocates and service providers are becoming aware of the connection between homelessness and prostitution. At any given time, approximately 50,000 people are prostituted⁹ in the city of Chicago, almost all of whom are homeless.¹⁰ Often, the women and youth involved in prostitution seek shelter in abandoned buildings or abusive homes of partners, pimps or customers and do not have a safe, affordable place of their own. Access to safe and affordable housing can be a viable form of escape and a first step on a road to recovery. Furthermore, safe housing for youth and women at risk can reduce their vulnerability to exploitation.

In a recent *Chicago Tribune* article entitled, "Sex Slavery Called a Replacement of Drug Trafficking," the author stated, "With as many as 2 million women worldwide forced into sexual slavery, the sex trade seems to have replaced narcotics as the favored illegal trade activity."¹¹ Prostitution, a commercial transaction in which the body of a woman or youth is the commodity,¹² is a \$14 billion a year industry in the United States, with an estimated 1.5 million customers a week.¹³ Forms of prostitution include stripping, escort services, massage parlors, sex tours, trafficking, pornography and survival sex. At least 90 percent of prostitution is pimp controlled or run by organized crime,¹⁴ whose members utilize violence as a form of social control of the women and youth. Many prostituted women and youth experience multiple rapes and violence by customers, pimps and strang-

PROSTITUTION:

A Violent Reality of Homelessness

by Erika Schoot and Samir Goswami

FACTS:

- 84 percent of those prostituted report current or past homelessness¹
- 50,000 people are prostituted² in the city of Chicago at any given time, almost all of whom are homeless.³
- 95-99 percent of those prostituted have chemical dependency issues⁴
- 66 percent of those prostituted suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder⁵
- 14 is the average age of entry into prostitution⁶
- 90 percent of those prostituted are survivors of sexual violence such as incest and sexual assault⁷

"I was homeless for six years. . . . It was rough plenty of nights where I didn't have anything to eat. I had places to stay, but they were never my own."⁸

ers.¹⁵ Of those prostituted, 83 percent are victims of assault with a weapon.¹⁶ These highly organized networks often prey upon and force the most politically and socially marginalized members of society into prostitution.¹⁷

Vulnerability

Since the average age of entry into prostitution is 14,¹⁸ many of those prostituted become enslaved as children. Chicago vice squad officers estimate that almost 100 percent of juveniles engaged in prostitution have pimps.¹⁹ Many pimps and customers, the majority of whom are men, wait at bus terminals and train stations, seeking out vulnerable boys and girls.²⁰ The National Runaway Switchboard reports that one out of every three teens on

the street will be lured into prostitution within 48 hours of leaving home.

Homeless youth are emotionally and financially exploitable and therefore especially vulnerable to coercion and recruitment into survival sex, which is any exchange of sex for survival needs such as food, shelter, gifts, money or drugs. Between 100,000 and 300,000 children are sexually exploited through prostitution in the United States per year.²¹ Approximately 90 percent of those prostituted are survivors of sexual abuse.²² As one survivor states, "The cycle of prostitution was easy for me to get into because I had been molested as a child. I felt a sense of revenge getting paid as an adult, because I had no

control as a child." Since 50 to 90 percent of women in homeless shelters are fleeing domestic violence,²³ and 75 percent of homeless youth are fleeing physical abuse at home,²⁴ many have few alternatives and are at risk of being entrapped in prostitution.

Barriers to Escaping the System²⁵

Exploitation and Sexual Slavery

Prostitution is a highly organized and lucrative international business. Many women and youth involved in prostitution have been forced into a system of sexual slavery for someone else's commercial benefit—they are often physically, materially and emotionally prevented from escaping.

Trauma, Abuse and Physical Health

The exploitation and violence inherent in prostitution often results in severe physical, emotional and psychological trauma with long-term effects. At least 66 percent of prostituted women suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); by comparison, only 20-30 percent of Vietnam War veterans suffer from PTSD.²⁶ Subsequently prolonged exposure to abuse and violence, common in prostitution, is a significant barrier to escape. Many women and youth have various physical and mental health needs and also require treatment for sexually transmitted diseases.²⁷

Chemical Dependency

A survivor who worked at an escort service for five years states, "I only had two dates that weren't physical contact. I couldn't stand some of the men, so it was easier to be high—I then turned to street

(continued on reverse)

prostitution to keep up the habit.” In order to cope with past or current sexual violence in their lives, many prostituted women and youth use drugs or alcohol; and those already addicted may be coerced into prostitution by pimps and johns in exchange for drugs. Eventually some may trade sex for drugs on their own to satisfy their addictions.

Criminalization

Many women are incarcerated on prostitution-related charges, including charges for drug possession and usage. Upon release, many of these women do not have a stable place of their own or the support needed to achieve self-sufficiency, and are often prostituted again.

Access to Services for Youth

Currently there is no place a homeless minor can legally access long-term services. Youth on the run can stay at emergency shelters only for a finite period of time. Such a lack of options makes youth more vulnerable to pimps and prostitution.

Community Response

Residents of Chicago’s 14th and 18th districts are currently banding together and marching against women and youth who are being prostituted on the streets. Such action fails to address and eradicate the commodification of women and youth and further victimizes those prostituted.

Breaking the Barriers: Housing

Affordable Housing Development

The definition of who is homeless should be expanded to include those who are trapped in systems of prostitution. Subsequently, an already critical lack of affordable housing seems even more critical, especially when characterized as part of a solution to assist those surviving and fleeing violent and abusive systems or as a

preventive measure that decreases vulnerability. Collective advocacy around affordable housing development should also include representation of those who are trapped in systems of prostitution.

Transitional Housing with Services

Women and youth in need should have access to transitional housing programs where they can access services in the form of job training and education, support groups, trauma and abuse counseling, and substance abuse treatment.

Breaking the Barriers: Law Enforcement

Women and youth should not be criminalized for being forced into prostitution. For the women and youth, prostitution should be regarded as a system of violence, not a lifestyle option. The focus of law enforcement should be to increase the arrests of pimps, johns and organized networks that profit from the trafficking of women and youth. The U.S. federal government should convene a task force on prostitution to conduct research on alternatives to incarceration, identify gaps in services and recommend strategies to address criminal elements, trafficking and profiteering.

Breaking the Barriers: Services

Comprehensive Service Mechanism

The Continuum of Care, a planning body in Chicago for homeless services, should be cognizant of the inextricable link between prostitution and homelessness. Advocates should have representation at the continuum level to raise awareness and to press for resources for prostitution-related services. Partnerships should form between home-

less shelter service agencies and sexual assault service agencies to provide systematic counseling and intervention services to those entering the shelter system. Members should also collaborate with national and international organizations that are combating the sexual exploitation and trafficking of women and youth.

Family Violence Option (FVO)

Illinois should adopt the FVO, which allows for increased flexibility in applying program requirements of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) for recipients escaping domestic violence. The FVO should be expanded to those women escaping systems of prostitution.

Youth Programs

Illinois law needs to be changed to allow for the partial emancipation of homeless youth so they can legally access services. Standards should be set for youth programs, and funding should be drastically increased to provide needed services, including prostitution-related services, for homeless youth.

Substance Abuse Treatment

Haymarket Center in Chicago is an exemplary treatment facility that works to thoroughly address addiction issues. Long-term residential and extensive outpatient services, similar to those offered at Haymarket, should be expanded throughout the city with further attention given to abuse and trauma counseling.

Breaking the Barriers: Community Action

Instead of scapegoating women and youth on the streets, residents of communities in Chicago should concentrate their efforts on discouraging clients and pimps, who have physical, emotional and material control

over the women and youth being prostituted. The atmosphere created by the presence of prostitution in a given community creates a culture that perpetuates violence towards and the commodification of women that extends beyond those being prostituted to all women and youth in the community. Communities should focus their efforts on deconstructing such a culture by concentrating on pimp and john behavior.

Conclusion

As a society we need to stop glamorizing pimping and cease viewing prostitution as an individual lifestyle choice. Prostitution is a system of violence committed against a woman or youth as a result of a society that condones misogyny and racism. A truly egalitarian society, void of violence and homelessness, cannot be achieved without eradicating the commercial sexual exploitation of women and youth.

¹ Melissa Farley and Howard Barkan, “Prostitution, Violence against Women and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,” *Women & Health* 27, no. 3 (1998): 37-49.

² Use of the term prostituted reflects the view that prostitution is an act committed against an individual and not a lifestyle choice.

³ Genesis House, Fact Sheet (1998).

⁴ Genesis House, Fact Sheet (1998).

⁵ Melissa Farley, Isin Baral, Merab Kiremiri, and Uluk Sezgin,

“Prostitution in Five Countries: Violence and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder,” *Feminism & Psychology* 8, no. 4 (1998): 405-26.

⁶ D. Kelly Weisberg, *Children of the Night: A Study of Adolescent Prostitution* (Lexington, Mass., Lexington Books: 1985).

⁷ Harlan, Rodgers, and Slattery, *Issues of Sexual Violence and Exploitation* (1981), quoted in PRIDE (From Prostitution to Independence, Dignity, and Equality), TeenPRIDE and the Prostitution Intervention Project Handbook, 2000.

⁸ From a survivor of prostitution, name withheld to respect confidentiality.

⁹ Use of the term prostituted reflects the view that prostitution is an act committed against an individual and not a lifestyle choice.

¹⁰ Genesis House, Fact Sheet (1998).

¹¹ Chicago Tribune (02/23/2000).

¹² Chicago Coalition for the Homeless recognizes that many adult men are involved in systems of prostitution. However, addressing the service and advocacy needs of men is beyond the scope of this analysis.

¹³ Genesis House, Fact Sheet (1998).

¹⁴ Evelina Giobbe, WHISPER Oral History Project (Minneapolis: 1987).

¹⁵ Genesis House, Fact Sheet (1998).

¹⁶ <http://www.prostitutionresearch.com/>

¹⁷ Chris Grussendorf, SE Escape.

¹⁸ Weisberg, *Children of the Night*.

¹⁹ Based on conversations with Chicago Police Department vice squad officers.

²⁰ Harlan et al., “Issues of Sexual Violence and Exploitation.”

²¹ World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography, and the Trafficking of Children for Sexual Exploitation (ECPAT): Europe and North America Regional Profile (meeting held in Stockholm, Sweden, August 1996), p. 70.

²² Harlan et al., “Issues of Sexual Violence and Exploitation.”

²³ Heartland Alliance for Human Rights and Human Needs, *Promises Made, Promises Broken* (1990).

²⁴ Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, *Alone after Dark: A Survey of Homeless Youth in Chicago* (1994).

²⁵ The following list of barriers is by no means exhaustive. Prostitution is a complex system, with many barriers to escape.

²⁶ Farley and Barkan, “Prostitution, Violence against Women.”

²⁷ Many women and youth need to be treated for physical injuries caused by johns and pimps, as well as for health needs caused by exposure to violence and homelessness.