

Executive Summary

SISTERS SPEAK OUT: THE LIVES AND NEEDS OF PROSTITUTED WOMEN IN CHICAGO

A RESEARCH STUDY

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In July 2000, the Center for Impact Research (CIR) began investigating prostitution in the Chicago metropolitan area. The first phase of the project established an estimate of the prevalence of prostitution activities, documenting that a minimum of 16,000 women and girls in the Chicago metropolitan area are engaged regularly in the prostitution industry. Due to violence, substance abuse, homelessness, and health problems, women often are unable to safely exit prostitution. The second phase of the project more closely examined the lives of women in prostitution, in order to better understand their needs for services and support.

CIR trained 12 prostitution survivors to conduct in-depth interviews with women throughout the Chicago metropolitan area who were currently, or had recently been, involved in prostitution. In all, 222 women representing various segments of the prostitution industry were interviewed. While this was not a random sample, and is not representative of all women engaged in prostitution, we believe it is large enough to provide helpful information for understanding the lives of women in prostitution, and what can be done to assist them.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Age of Entry

The age at which respondents first exchanged sex for money ranged from four to 50 years. About one-third of the women entered prostitution before the age of 15, and 62% of the sample started in prostitution before their 18th birthdays. Early starters, those women who began between the ages of 12 and 15, were more disadvantaged in a number of ways:

- ▶ Seventy-two percent of early starters ran away from home.
- ▶ Early starters were more likely to have used drugs or alcohol growing up.
- ▶ Only one-fourth of early starters had completed a high school education or GED.
- ▶ Early starters engaged in a greater number of different prostitution activities.
- ▶ Over half of the early starters grew up in a household with prostitution.
- ▶ Eighty-seven percent of early starters had someone suggest that they engage in prostitution while they were growing up.
- ▶ Early starters reported a greater number of health problems at the time of the interview.

Family of Origin

Many women in this sample had run away and grew up in households with loss of life, separation from caretakers, domestic violence, substance abuse, and prostitution.

- ▶ One-fourth of respondents grew up without a mother in the household and 59% without a father.
- ▶ Close to one-fourth of the women had been separated from their primary caretaker for a year or more.
- ▶ Over 60% of respondents reported domestic violence in the household.
- ▶ Eighty-three percent of the women reported substance use by others in the household while growing up, with 86% themselves using drugs or alcohol.
- ▶ Over half of the women ran away from home at least once.
- ▶ One-third of respondents indicated that someone in the household (other than themselves) regularly exchanged sex for money while they were growing up.
- ▶ Seventy-one percent of respondents stated they knew someone in the neighborhood who regularly exchanged sex for money.
- ▶ Over 70% of women reported that, while growing up, someone suggest they engage in prostitution.

Violence

Regardless of the type of prostitution activity, high percentages of women had experienced violence while engaged in prostitution from customers, pimps, intimate partners, managers, police officers, and neighbors.

- ▶ Women on the streets, in drug houses, and in hotels reported high rates of forced sex and physical violence, with almost one-fourth of women in drug houses being raped more than 10 times.
- ▶ Women in escort services and exotic dancing were also subjected to high rates of sexual and physical violence, with 21.4% of women in escort services being raped more than 10 times.
- ▶ Customers were most frequently identified as the perpetrators of violence, across all venues, followed by intimate partners, pimps, police officers, and neighborhood residents.

Pimping

Large numbers of women gave the money they made in prostitution to someone else.

- ▶ Half of those women in escort services gave a “cut” to someone else; three-fourths of these women believed they would be harmed if they stopped.
- ▶ Forty-one percent of women on the street and 44% of women in drug houses gave money to someone else; most believed they would be harmed if they stopped (75% and 80%, respectively).
- ▶ Those respondents who gave a cut to someone, particularly if they feared being harmed, were less likely to feel able to leave prostitution if they wished.

Homelessness

Substantial percentages of women in street prostitution, drug houses, and survival sex were homeless while engaged in these activities. Many women in other activities did not have their own homes and frequently moved from one place to another.

- ▶ Over half of the women on the street and in drug houses said they were homeless.
- ▶ Many women stayed with friends and parents, or at motels and shelters, while engaged in prostitution.

Substance Abuse

Less than 5% of women in each prostitution activity said they never used alcohol or drugs. Many women reported an increase in their use of substances during prostitution.

- ▶ Over 90% of women in both street and off-street activities increased their drug or alcohol usage during those activities.
- ▶ Exotic dancing was the only activity in which a substantial proportion of respondents reported decreased substance abuse.

Trajectories

The majority of women participated in more than one type of prostitution activity, either simultaneously or sequentially.

- ▶ Over half of the women who began on the streets moved on to other activities, both “indoor” and “outdoor.”
- ▶ Women who began as exotic or private dancers often moved to other activities, both indoor and outdoor.
- ▶ No clear patterns emerged to predict which activities would follow others.

Health Problems

The respondents suffered from numerous health problems.

- ▶ Of the 39 different health problems listed, women reported experiencing a mean of 9.85 problems.
- ▶ Over half of the respondents said they suffered from headaches or migraines.
- ▶ About half of the women reported having sexually transmitted infections.
- ▶ Close to 22% of respondents reported being HIV positive.

Substance Abuse Treatment

The women had frequently participated in drug treatment programs.

- ▶ Sixty percent of respondents stated they had tried drug treatment, a mean of 7.64 times.
- ▶ Treatment included detox, outpatient programs, and residential programs.

Criminal Justice System

Many women had prior arrests, many at very young ages.

- ▶ Almost three-fourths of the sample said they were arrested at least once.
- ▶ Close to half of those who had been arrested said it was prior to age 18, frequently for a prostitution-related offense.

Intervention

Respondents provided many ideas for intervention with women in prostitution.

- ▶ Outreach workers were most often identified as a source of intervention.
- ▶ Shelters and newspapers were also identified by many women as effective sources of information.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these research findings, the following suggestions are made for an informed and effective response to aiding women in prostitution:

- ▶ Focus on prevention and early intervention for young girls at risk for entry into prostitution.
- ▶ Include assistance and support to recover from the effects of violence in services for women leaving prostitution.
- ▶ Offer safety planning and a safe haven for the women involved with pimps who are trying to leave prostitution.
- ▶ Provide safe and affordable housing for women leaving prostitution.
- ▶ Make substance abuse treatment part of a more comprehensive treatment alternative for women in prostitution.
- ▶ Intervene with girls and young women when they first enter the criminal justice system.
- ▶ Address the problem of violence against prostituted women by police officers in every police district.
- ▶ Coordinate outreach efforts to women in prostitution, providing them with information about available services through a variety of media.

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