

*Jessica Roman is a student intern at ICYF. She is a senior in Family-Community Services in MSU's College of Human Ecology. Jessica collected data, met with community groups, and identified resource materials for this briefing report. She has also represented ICYF at meetings of the Teen Crisis Task Force and the Mayor's Youth Advisory Board in Lansing.*



*Catherine Nachtman is a student intern at ICYF. Katie coordinated the Fall 2000 Active Voices of Youth Leadership Conference, which brought in approximately 50 young participants from around Michigan. She has also attended meetings on the zero tolerance program with the Student Advocacy Center in Ann Arbor and written articles for Streamlines, the ICYF newsletter.*



## **Prostituted Teens: A Problem for Michigan Too**

*Jessica Roman, Catherine Nachtman, and Nancy E. Walker*

---

*You feel like a piece of hamburger meat—all chopped up and barely holding together.*

14-year-old teen on the trauma of prostitution (Weisberg, 1985)

### **What is the Scope of the Problem?**

In 1998, the Department of Health and Human Services estimated that there were 300,000 prostitutes under the age of 18, while the United States Department of Justice estimated that the number of prostituted teens ranged from a low of 100,000 to a high of three million. The disparity in these estimates illustrates the point that it is extremely difficult to determine the number of teens who are prostituted. Factors that may be used to estimate the total number of prostituted youth include (a) teens arrested for prostitution, (b) young people in homeless/runaway shelters, and (c) youth in assistance programs. For example, each year between 1.2 million and 2 million teenagers hit the streets as runaways and "throwaways;" at least half of them turn to prostitution to survive (Gay, 1998).

Calculation of the scope of the problem is complicated by other factors as well. For example, most prostituted teens are not arrested for the crime of prostitution. Also, many teens who exchange sexual favors for food, drugs, or shelter do not consider themselves "prostituted;" rather, they believe that they are doing what they must do in order to survive. Therefore, estimates of the number of teens who are prostituted may represent serious undercounts.

No matter how the numbers are calculated, however, the costs of addressing this problem are staggering:

- National studies show that average arrest, court and incarceration costs add up to nearly \$2,000 per arrest for taxpayers (Buffalo Prostitution Task Force, 1999).
- It is estimated that cities spend an average of nearly \$12 million per year controlling prostitution (Pearl, 1987 [1985 dollars converted to 2001 dollars]).
- For larger cities, including Detroit, the average annual cost of controlling prostitution may exceed \$18 million (Pearl, 1987 [1985 dollars converted to 2001 dollars]).

## How Serious is the Problem of Prostituted Teens in Michigan?

Official records provide little useful information for estimating the scope of the problem in Michigan. For example, the FBI's Uniform Crime Report shows only one juvenile male and no juvenile females arrested for prostitution in Michigan during the year 2000. In 1998 the Uniform Crime Reports indicated that there were 219 runaway offenses and 5 prostitution and commercial vice offenses in the entire state.

Other data sources suggest that these numbers are ludicrously low. For example, neighborhood eco-scans in Michigan indicate that prostitution-related offenses are far more common than FBI data suggest (Carl S. Taylor, researcher, January 22, 2002 interview). Juvenile Court Judge Bruce Newman of Flint, Michigan, noted that police often avoid arresting underage prostitutes because it requires "about three times as much paperwork," and "the juvenile detention center is usually full" (Hansen, 2001).

Various sources of data for 1998 show disparate estimates of the scope of the problem in Michigan, ranging from a low of 57 prostituted youth to a high of more than 2,000:

- 57 juveniles were arrested for prostitution and commercial vice, according to the Geospatial and Statistical Data Center (2001).
- 112 juveniles were arrested for prostitution and common law vice, according to the Michigan State Police.<sup>1</sup>
- At least 458 juveniles are likely to have been involved in prostitution, given the fact that 917 juveniles were arrested for runaway charges (Michigan State Police, 1998) and one-half to two-thirds of runaways end up prostituting themselves (Flowers, 2001).
- Up to 2,323 juveniles may have been involved in prostitution, given the fact that 3,484 youth were arrested for running away (Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, 2001) and one-half to two-thirds of runaways end up prostituting themselves (Flowers, 2001).

Some data also are available by region. These numbers also likely represent undercounts of the true extent of the problem of prostitution in general and prostituted youth in particular.

### Detroit

According to telephone survey data collected by the Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns in 1999, prostitution-related arrests in Detroit numbered 1,972 in 1996; one year later, they had decreased to 1,559 (Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns, 1999).

---

<sup>1</sup> Prostitution-related arrest data may not be a reliable source of information because arrest data are dependent on enforcement decisions and reporting practices of individual police departments, which vary considerably (Hofstede Commission Report, 1999).

Between the months of January and March, 2000, the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office made a concerted effort to crack down on "johns" in the city of Detroit. More than 100 officers set up "stings" in 50 locations throughout the city. As a result, the city seized the cars of 1,400 alleged customers of prostitution, resulting in the city receiving \$1.3 million in fines. In order to retrieve an impounded car, each individual had to wait 48 hours, pay \$950 to the county (with the fine doubling and tripling for second and third offenses), pay \$100 in storage and towing fees, pay a \$500 misdemeanor ticket, and, in some cases, undergo HIV testing and/or counseling (Shepardson, 2001).

## Grand Rapids

*All people care about is the spread of HIV and STDs to the "nice" people in town. Where do they think prostitutes get the diseases in the first place?*

Prostitution survivor in Grand Rapids  
(Prostitution Round Table, 2002, p. 10)

The Prostitution Round Table (PRT), funded by the Nokomis Foundation, has been collecting data on prostitution in Grand Rapids. PRT (2002) reports:

- 470 arrests of women for involvement in street prostitution during the past 2 years
- 222 prostitution-related charges issued by Grand Rapids police in 2000-2001
- 70 men (ages 21 to 75) arrested for prostitution-related offenses in a *one day* sting operation
- 70 females (both minors and adults) known to police officers as persons who regularly engage in street prostitution
- 40-50 women on probation for prostitution-related convictions at any given time in Grand Rapids
- 403 women in 1999 served by Rose Haven, a local organization providing outreach and housing services to women involved in prostitution
- 270 women engaged in prostitution in the Burton Heights area during a 16-month period

### "LUCILLE"

*Growing up in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in an alcoholic family, "Lucille" watched her mother being beaten countless times and was beaten herself if she intervened. She was subjected to incest at the hands of her father, uncles, and others. At 16 she was pregnant and spending time at a boyfriend's house to escape the abuse at home. There she met a "friend" who told her she could make a lot of money on South Division Street, a place known for prostitution. The woman took her to a bar on South Division. Lucille, eight months pregnant, was sure no one would want her, but, sure enough, someone did. She was scared, but she did what the man wanted and he gave her \$200. "I never made money so easy," she recalls. "I was hooked."*

(Snow, 2000)

## Lansing

In the spring of 2001, the Lansing Police Department uncovered a prostitution ring that involved more than 20 girls between the ages of 13 and 17 years. One 13-year-old

reported taking part in 30 sexual acts in one night on Lansing's streets. Generally, the girls share a number of characteristics:

- Most had struggled in school and had not attended school in months.
- Their pimps promised the girls cars and jewelry.
- All the money they earned—averaging \$600 per night in Lansing and \$1,000 per night in Detroit—went to their pimps.
- Several contracted as many as 3 sexually transmitted diseases, and some became pregnant.
- Most walked the streets alone at night and engaged in sex with elderly men.
- Some reported being held at gunpoint.
- All reported lack of parental involvement. The girls were looking for an adult who would show interest in them; this need was met by their pimp.

In Lansing, prostituted girls who want to find a way off the streets do not have anywhere to go. Most do not want to return to their families, but Lansing lacks a long-term shelter for youth under the age of 16.

## Why Do Teens Turn to Prostitution?

Nationally, two out of three prostituted teens are runaways (Silbert, 1980), and 90% of those prostituted are survivors of sexual violence such as incest and sexual assault (Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, 2001). Approximately 84% of those prostituted report current or past homelessness (Farley & Barkan, 1998), as the case of "Christine" (below) illustrates.

### *"CHRISTINE: " SOMETHING LESS THAN HUMAN*

*In 1981, I became a statistic: I became a runaway teen, escaping sexual and physical abuse. When I ran away, I no longer had a place to live with my parents nor did I have a living relative who would take me in. Filled with a sense of bravado, invincibility and bravery, I left, figuring that my life couldn't be in any more jeopardy than it already was at what I'd called home. In leaving I hoped there would be no more broken bones, no more sexual abuse, no more rationalizations of molestation and cruelty. When I left that day, I had no more than a change of clothes and under one hundred dollars. No longer did my name, childhood identity, school or grades matter. All became irrelevant in the world I was about to enter.*

*As a runaway teen, your old concerns quickly disappear and are replaced by new, life threatening ones. There were no familiar faces and no one who wanted to talk to a teenage girl who was homeless; even my name became irrelevant. Instead, my concerns were more pragmatic, involving finding food, shelter, and water and passing time without the money to financially support these needs. I'd resorted to sleeping in cemeteries, and stealing food out of dumpsters and from convenience stores in order to eat. Getting drinking water and a chance to wash my face became quests of endurance. I had to hide from security guards, store and restaurant employees and others who didn't want a homeless girl "loitering." As a runaway teen, I was viewed as something less than human. Still, it was safer than going home.*

*Into my hunger, loneliness and desperation came a man named "Bruce."*

*Attractive, well dressed and very charismatic, he approached me in a suburban mall and offered to "help" me. He could provide me with food, shelter, clothing, work—and I really wanted to work. I wanted desperately*

*to be off the street and to have something to do. In essence he knew exactly how to manipulate a desperate teenage girl with his promises to fulfill all my needs. The manipulation began within minutes of meeting him. When I questioned whether or not this "work" was prostitution, he retracted the offer and began to walk away. Desperate, I ran after him, pleading with him to give me another chance and to forgive my insult.*

Source: Excerpted from Leighton and DePasquale (1999)

## What is the "Profile" of a Prostituted Teen?

No class of adolescents is immune from the reaches of prostitution. Prostituted adolescents originate from suburban, rural, and urban areas of the United States and come from all socioeconomic classes (Flowers, 2001). Studies show that middle and upper class teens increasingly are entering into prostitution (Weisberg, 1985), often to service an expensive lifestyle (United States Department of Justice, 1999). For example, a study in Minnesota revealed that one in four female prostitutes had a parent with some level of college education (Weisberg, 1985).

Prostitution is a problem for individuals of all races and ethnic groups, and for both genders. Most prostituted teens, however, are White girls. One study of prostituted teens in Minneapolis and San Francisco, for example, found that 60-80% were Caucasian, 10-15% were African American, and 2-11% were Native American and Hispanic. Asians and Pacific Islanders comprised a small number of the prostituted teens in these cities, but their rate of prostitution is on the rise (Flowers, 2001).

Available statistics on prostitution *arrests*, however, reveal a different pattern (see <http://www.bayswan.org/stats.html>). Of those arrested for prostitution-related offenses, 70% are prostituted females and 20% are prostituted males, but only 10% are customers. Although a minority of prostitutes are women of color, the majority of those sentenced to jail are women of color. Although "street workers" account for only about 20% of prostituted women, 85-90% of those arrested for prostitution work on the street.

Both male and female teens prostitute themselves, although there are geographic variations. For example, teenage males are especially likely to be prostituted in New Orleans and San Francisco (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography, and the Trafficking of Children for Sexual Exploitation International [ECPAT], 1996), whereas teenage females are more likely targets in the Midwestern and Eastern United States (Marsha Liss, U.S. Department of Justice, Criminal Division, Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section, personal communication, January, 2002).

## Promising Approaches for Addressing the Problem of Prostituted Youth

This briefing report describes several promising approaches for addressing the problem of prostituted youth. One approach currently available in Michigan is **Alternative for Girls**, located near the old Tiger Stadium in Detroit.

Alternatives for Girls is a community-based, private, non-profit organization with a paid staff as well as more than 300 volunteers. The organization provides three programs designed to reach young girls:

- **The Prevention Program** serves girls in southwest Detroit between the ages of 5 and 17 who are at risk of dropping out of school, abusing drugs and alcohol, becoming pregnant at an early age, engaging in gang activities, and/or becoming involved in an abusive relationship. AFG also provides services to the families of girls enrolled in the program. Under the guidance of trained adult volunteer leaders, the girls participate in weekly Girls' Club meetings and other activities

designed to bolster self-esteem, strengthen personal values, work on interpersonal skills, and improve school performance. In 2000, the Prevention Program served 161 girls ages 5-17 years. For the second year in a row, 100% of the Prevention Program participants who reached the age of 17 graduated from high school. This statistic is particularly impressive given the fact that Detroit's overall high school dropout rate is approximately 60%.

- **The Crisis Shelter/Transition to Independent Living Program** serves homeless girls and young women between the ages of 16 and 20 who are not in foster or judicial care. For most young women, the program begins with short-term shelter and counseling at AFG's 12-bed facility. During the 30-45 day shelter stay, and continuing for 12-18 months, trained staff assist the young women through an intense and structured program. Individual guidance and group programs are offered to help clients develop independent living skills, obtain and maintain employment, re-enter school and, when appropriate, enhance parenting skills. AFG has the only long-term independent living program exclusively for teenage girls in the city of Detroit.
- **The Street Outreach Program** has two components: The Young Women's Leadership Project and the Safe Choices Project.

The Young Women's Leadership Project trains and employs young women as peer educators to work with at-risk peers. Most peer educators came to AFG having participated in some type of high-risk activity, such as school truancy, substance abuse, or gang involvement. As part of the project, these young women receive training designed to bolster their self-esteem and develop their leadership potential so they can positively influence their peers.

The Safe Choices Project provides staff and volunteers to work directly on the street with homeless young women engaged in high-risk activities, such as prostitution and substance abuse. Using a van as a mobile base, teams comprised of staff and trained volunteers drive throughout the streets of southwest Detroit and the Cass Corridor offering necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter, along with HIV prevention materials, crisis intervention, transportation to medical services, and referrals. In addition to the services offered through the mobile unit, the project provides support groups, activities, and case management services.