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Prostitution: Myths and Realities

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My pimp knocked me out with a baseball bat. I woke up and he was sewing my head up. He wouldn't even take me to the hospital. How could I get away? He'd kill me first; besides, he was all I knew. I had been with him since I was 12.

Vanessa, age 18 (Source: Hotaling, 2000)

MYTH: *Prostitutes are adult women.*

REALITY: The average age for girls beginning to engage in prostitution is 14 (Giobbe, 1992). Many young boys and men also are prostituted (ECPAT International, 1996).

MYTH: *Prostitution is glamorous; it's a "chosen" lifestyle that employs willing participants who make a good living.*

REALITY: Prostituted teens are abused and threatened by pimps who must control them in order to keep them "turning tricks" (Paul & Lisa Program, Inc., 2002). More than half of prostituted juveniles report being beaten regularly by their pimp, and 93% report being beaten by a trick (or customer) (Facts About Juvenile Prostitution, 1993). A study of prostitutes in Portland, Oregon revealed that 78% had been victims of rape by pimps and male buyers an average of 49 times per year (Council for Prostitution Alternatives study, as cited in Raymond, 1998). A study of prostituted individuals in 5 countries revealed that 92% wanted to escape immediately from a life of prostitution (Farley, Baral, Kiremire, & Sezgin, 1998). Furthermore, prostituted teens do not make a lot of money; the money spent on prostituted teens goes into the pockets of the pimp or other exploiter (Greene, 2001).

MYTH: *Only "bad" teenagers who already are promiscuous are prostituted.*

REALITY: Teens who are vulnerable are prostituted; even teens from middle- and upper-middle-class homes can be vulnerable to prostitution (Hofstede, 1999). Pimps and madams use a highly calculated approach, gradually building a comforting relationship with the vulnerable teen until she or he is dependent upon them financially and emotionally -(Barry, 1981). Then the teen is introduced to the world of prostitution (Saikaew, 1996).

MYTH: *Prostitution is a big city problem affecting the poor.*

REALITY: Those who are poor may be especially vulnerable to prostitution, especially if they are young girls on the street. Increasingly, however, prostitution is a suburban problem involving individuals from middle-class homes (Hofstede, 1999). The economic status of the families of prostituted children and teens generally is middle class (Saikaew, 1996).

MYTH: *Prostitution primarily takes place on street corners in so-called "red light districts."*

REALITY: Counter to common perceptions, street prostitution constitutes only about 10 to 15% of all prostitution activity in the United States (National Organization for Women, 1981). Other prostitution activities involve brothels, out-call services, dating agencies, massage parlors, phone sex, hotel and tourist-related services, strip clubs, pornographic bookstores, sex clubs, and lap dancing. Recruitment for prostitution takes place wherever teens "hang out"—for example in malls or parks—and especially where runaways might be, such as bus or train stops. Acts of prostitution can occur anywhere: in fancy hotels, in abandoned buildings, and in hallways, as well as on the street. The internet is the newest place children and teens are likely to be recruited into prostitution or other forms of commercial sexual exploitation (Paul & Lisa Program, Inc., 2002).

MYTH: *"Hookers" create the demand for prostitution.*

REALITY: The demand for prostitution is created by men—men of all races and all cultural, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds. These are individuals who believe they have a "right" to service. They include family members, neighbors, supervisors, and highly-placed men such as CEOs of corporations and politicians, among others.

MYTH: *Sex with prostituted children and teens is safer than sex with prostituted adults.*

REALITY: Children actually are more prone to sexually transmitted diseases than are adults (Saikaew, 1996).

MYTH: *Pimps drive big flashy cars and wear gold chains, white shoes, and non-traditional suits.*

REALITY: Pimps cannot be discerned by race, color, or financial status. Pimps masquerade as talent scouts, professional businessmen, sports persons, teachers, photographers, and others. Often, they remind someone of the "man next door" (Paul & Lisa Program, Inc., 2002).