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What are the Risk Factors for Becoming a Prostituted Teen?

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Pimps target girls who are naïve, lonely, homeless, and rebellious.

Melissa Farley (2000), Researcher

Consider the case of "Hilda," a teen prostituted in Michigan.

At age 12, Hilda began running away from her father's home with her older sister after their mother abandoned them. They wanted to get their mother's attention and let her know that they needed her in their lives, so they skipped school, stayed at different places, got high and drunk, and had sex with older men. They both were placed on probation for truancy and running away. Hilda's older sister has turned her life around, but Hilda is still on the run – and getting worse.

For two years, Hilda was on intensive probation and had a college-age mentor. While on structured probation, Hilda attended school, raised her grades, participated in drug rehabilitation, and only occasionally ran away. Eventually, Hilda "slipped" in rehab; eventually the program kicked her out for being "disruptive." The courts did not pursue any further action to get her more services. She was informed that she had one more week left on probation; in that last week she ran away and skipped school every day. When she returned, she was told that the courts were "sick of dealing with her" and believed that she never would change.

Since being given the message that she is "hopeless," Hilda has missed every single day of school, has become increasingly involved with drugs, and has entered into prostitution. One of her customers, a 50-60 year old man formerly employed by a major corporation in Michigan, has paid 14-year-old Hilda on two occasions to have sex with him. Hilda says she never is returning home.

As the case of "Hilda" illustrates, no single factor predicts a teen's likelihood of entering the underworld of prostitution. Perhaps surprisingly, among street prostitutes surveyed in Los Angeles in May 1997, 90% reported that they had grown up in families that attended church, had attended parochial schools, or were raised in church-based orphanages (Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns, 1999).

Typically, a variety of factors converge to produce a climate conducive to youth becoming involved in prostitution. These factors include truancy, delinquency, running away, homelessness, abuse and/or neglect, dysfunctional home environment, and a tendency to be rebellious.

Truancy

A child who has been expelled from school or is no longer interested in pursuing an education is at a high risk for becoming involved in prostitution (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2002). Of prostituted teens in Michigan, 42% report high levels of truancy before and after turning to prostitution, although only 7% had totally dropped out of school (Michigan Network, 1995). Unsupervised, unguided, and unmotivated, these children view prostitution as an easy way to make money.

Delinquency

According to the Michigan Network (1995), prostituted youth report having engaged in a variety of acts of delinquency including drug use (54%), gang involvement (32%), and violent behavior (42%). Some youth had been charged with misdemeanors (14%) and felonies (8%). Michigan youth also reported having problems with their peers and lacking social skills (Michigan Network, 1995).

Running Away

An estimated one to one and a half million children leave home each year. These children may be runaways, youth under the age of 18 who leave home without the permission of their parents or legal guardian, or "throwaways" – those youth who are forced to leave home or who are not actively sought after when they do leave home. In the United States, a child is thrown away from home every 26 seconds (Flowers, 2001; Robertson & Toro, 1998; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999; Schaffner, 1999).

When children end up on the streets, they give up their childhood. They are forced to take on roles that normally are held by adults. On the streets, youth must find food, shelter, clothing, and other necessities for themselves.

However, there are very few legitimate ways that runaways can support themselves. Financial aid programs usually are unavailable to minors, and keeping or getting a job is difficult without a permanent place to live. When applying for a job, many have to leave blank the name, phone number, address, education, work experience, and reference questions on the application form. Some youth do not want to let people know their real name or provide information about adults they know for fear that they will be sent home. With no permanent place to call home, they have no address or phone number. Many drop out of school when they leave home, and many are too young to have any previous work experience. Even if they do get a legitimate job, many do not have sufficient identification to cash a check. Also, because they lack connections, youth often cannot borrow money to "get by" (Cutler, 1994; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999; Robertson & Toro, 1998).

Hungry, cold, and lacking opportunities, runaways turn to delinquent behavior in order to survive. Some get involved with theft and drugs trafficking. Others turn to prostitution to survive. Outreach workers serving children living on the streets of Los Angeles estimated that 5,000 homeless, abandoned, and/or runaway youth are engaging in some form of "survival sex" (Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns, 1999).

According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, up to 77% of teens involved with prostitution report running away from home at least once before turning to prostitution (Flowers, 2001). A study of runaways in Denver reported that 24% of their

sample said that they had exchanged sex for food, money, or drugs at some point in their lives (Aid for Teens, 2001). A study of street youth in Los Angeles reported that 43% of the respondents had participated in "survival sex" (Robertson & Toro, 1998). At a Hollywood health clinic, 26% of runaway clients reported engaging in survival sex as compared with 0.2% of the clinic's non-runaway clients (Robertson & Toro, 1998). Almost two-thirds of all runaways eventually turn to prostitution as a means of support (Flowers, 2001).

Homelessness

Homeless youth are defined as individuals age 21 and younger who have no stable place of residence and who have run away from their homes (or alternative care placements) or been kicked out of their homes (Smollar, 2001). One national study found that being homeless for more than 30 days was the single most determinative factor causing youth to turn to prostitution (Hofstede, 1999).

Estimates of the numbers of homeless youth are dated. In 1991, the National Network for Youth estimated that the number of homeless youth in the U.S. ranged from 100,000, to 500,000 (Smollar, 2001). Very likely, these numbers represent gross underestimates because studies of homeless youth typically involve individuals in shelters, yet only one in 12 homeless youth ever comes into contact with the shelter system (Smollar, 2001).

The primary cause of homelessness among youth is family dysfunction, including parental neglect, physical or sexual abuse, family substance abuse, and family violence (Smollar, 2001). "These youth do not have families that offer guidance, structure and encouragement; they are isolated from the institutions of society; and although they often develop a sense of connectedness to the street community, that community generally does not provide the assistance and support necessary to foster positive developmental pathways" (Smollar, 2001, p. 4). As a result, homeless youth are particularly vulnerable to prostitution. The street offers an environment where these youth can succeed, where they are accepted, and where they can feel some amount of control over their lives (Fest, 2001).

Abuse and Neglect

"Sexual abuse seems to 'indirectly increase the chance of prostitution by increasing the risk of running away.' As noted in the U.S. Department of Justice analysis of child prostitution: 'It is not so much that sexual abuse leads to prostitution as it is that running away leads to prostitution'" (Flowers, 89). Physical abuse and neglect also increase a child's chance of running away. In a study of runaways in medium-sized Midwestern cities, 59% of their sample felt neglected, 28% reported being abandoned by their parents for at 24 hours, 81% had been pushed or grabbed in anger, 64% had been threatened with a gun or knife, 18% had been asked by a caregiver to perform a sexual activity, and 21% reported being forced to engage in a sexual activity (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). Of a study of 122 runaway and throwaway youth in Detroit, 75% reported some form of neglect or abuse (Robertson and Toro, 1998).

In a 1991 report, 85% of young prostitutes reported a history of sexual abuse throughout their childhood. Estimates of incest amongst prostitutes ranges from 65% to 90% (Aid for Teens, 2001; Farley, 2000). The Huckleberry House Project found that 90% of girl prostitutes have been sexually molested at some time in their lives. Another study discovered that two-thirds of prostituted teenagers were sexually abused. Two in every three prostituted girls said that they were physically assaulted in their homes (Flowers, 2001).

Family Dysfunction

Abuse is not the only dysfunction in the home that may cause youth to run away or become involved in prostitution. According to the U.S Department of Labor's *Report on Child Prostitution as a Form of Forced Labor*, "a child whose parents are separated or divorced or a child whose parents are deceased and is living with a relative or friend" or "a child whose parents are drug addicts, alcoholics, or compulsive gamblers" is at an increased risk of turning to prostitution. The report also says that a child whose family is living in extreme poverty and who is needed by his or her family to make money is also at an increased risk (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2002). The Michigan Network of Runaway, Homeless, and Youth Services found that over 64% reported severe conflict with their parents and 41% reported family substance abuse in the home before they turned to prostitution (Michigan Network, 1995).

Rebellion

Although many youth runaway from home in order to get away from an unhealthy home environment, many teens leave home as an act of rebellion. Adolescence is a natural time for conflict between parents and children. During this time, teens are trying to establish a sense of autonomy, to move away from the dependency that they felt toward their families during childhood and towards the independence and self-reliance that is characteristic of adulthood (Flowers, 2001; Steinberg, 2001).

"One of the most important social transitions that takes place in adolescence concerns the emergence of sexual and romantic relationships" (Steinberg, 2001). Sometimes teens first turn to prostitution for sexual excitement, as a form of sexual experimentation. They are receiving money for acts that are physically pleasing. As stated earlier, during adolescence, youth will push away from their families and turn to their friends for support and companionship instead. These youth may have friends or siblings who are prostitutes. This mindset makes prostitution a business that is harder to leave than to be in (Flowers, 2001; National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2002).