

Policy Alternatives for Addressing the Problem of Prostituted Teens

Nancy E. Walker, Jessica Roman, Thomas Judd, Susan Peterson, and Catherine Nachtman

"Why do we need policies that focus on those who exploit and prostitute teens? It's like when you turn a light on, the roaches go away; when the light goes off, the roaches come back."

Dr. Carl Taylor, Professor, Michigan State University

Why is juvenile prostitution so widespread nationally and in Michigan? The answer to that question is based on a simple economic principle: Supply and demand. Passing laws with stiffer penalties for johns, pimps, and others who profit from prostituting children weakens the demand for prostitution. Policymakers can play a central role in this process by focusing on strategies directed toward permanent solutions.

The state has an interest in preventing and protecting young people from spending their lives on the streets. Once on the streets, young boys and girls from urban, rural, and suburban homes are cut off from conventional educational and vocational training that could provide them with a legitimate source of income (Norton-Hawk, 2001); as a result, many of them turn to prostitution in order to survive. Community organizations can lead efforts to provide high quality outreach programs for these youth.

What Can Policymakers Do?

Fund Programs for Intervening with Prostituted Teens

- Fund efforts to investigate juvenile prostitution rings.
- Fund training for law enforcement personnel to identify prostituted teens and to improve skills for communicating with them. Focus on rehabilitation, not arrest.
- Fund emergency and transitional shelters with personnel who are qualified to help prostituted children.
- Fund rehabilitation programs, job skills programs, health initiatives, and educational programs for prostituted teens.

Fund Programs for Intervening with "Johns"

- Fund "sting" operations to arrest "johns".
- Fund "john schools" to resocialize customers of prostitution.
- Increase penalties for customers of prostitution.
- Authorize automobile seizures and forfeitures when "johns" are arrested.

Fund Initiatives that Clamp Down on “Pimps” and Madams

- Fund “sting” operations to arrest pimps and madams. Court records show that pimps are the least likely to be arrested and prosecuted, even when the prostitute is a child (Hansen, 2001).
- Enact legislation that increases penalties for promoters of prostitution. Promote prison penalties for the involvement of a juvenile in prostitution, even for first time offenders (Hofstede, 1999).
- Increase funding for civil enforcement. Juvenile prostitution has been shown to take place or be promoted out of businesses such as strip clubs and escort services. Investigate and terminate businesses that foster juvenile prostitution.

What Can Communities Do?

Focus on Prevention Efforts Aimed at Youth at Risk for Prostitution

- Encourage better communication, cooperation and collaboration among schools, law enforcement, and state agencies, with a focus on prevention.
- Train teachers and school administrators to spot risk factors associated with children running away.
- Encourage immediate action by schools, law enforcement, and state agencies when a child reports abuse.
- Bring teachers, parents, leaders, and community members together on a regular basis to educate each other on the impact of the sex industry in everyday lives of youth.
- Sponsor seminars/workshops for adults and youth on such topics as:
 - How pimps, madams, and others influence vulnerable youth to engage in prostitution
 - The importance of “street smarts”
 - The harmful effects of prostitution
- Encourage adults in the community to value the input of youth and to empower them as civically-engaged citizens:
 - Invite youth to be active participants in school and community meetings
 - Highlight youth voices in the media
 - Ensure that youth serve on community advisory boards
- Provide job training and jobs, shelters, counselors, and mentors for runaway and throwaway youth.

Actively Encourage Efforts to Intervene with Prostituted Teens

- Provide a counselor in every school, an establishment in every community, and a 24-hour toll-free crisis line for youth to contact in times of need. Advertise these resources and make them easily accessible to youth.
- Provide job training and jobs, shelters, counselors, and mentors for runaway and throwaway youth who have prostituted themselves.

Implement Programs for Intervening with “Johns”

- Establish resocialization programs for “johns” based upon successful models such as San Francisco’s First Offender Prostitution Program (FOPP).

What Can Families Do?

Get to Know Your Teen

- Spend time with your teen; share activities and interests.
- Know your teen's friends.
- Hold weekly family meetings during which each person's voice is "heard," regardless of age.
- Encourage parent-teen conversation time at the end of the day.

Learn the Early Warning Signs of Prostitution

- Be on the alert for sudden or extreme changes in teen attitudes, behaviors, moods, routines, language, and/or appearance:
 - Extreme mood swings or increasing secretiveness and withdrawal or confrontational rebelliousness
 - Progressively longer stays away from home, especially at night
 - Extreme secrecy about activities
 - Coming home drunk or on drugs
 - Looking for places to live where there is more freedom
 - More provocative dressing and/or excessive use of makeup
 - Packing changes of clothes to go out for the evening
 - Sexualized behaviors
 - Unexplained body bruises, which might be evidence of abuse
- Watch for "clues" around the house:
 - Unexplained money
 - New and expensive clothing or trinkets – especially when explanations do not "add up"
 - Drug-associated objects
 - Matchbook covers with hidden cellular/pager numbers inside
 - Business cards or receipts for places unusual for a young teen to frequent, such as nightclubs
 - Long-distance phone bills for cell numbers

Improve Your Parenting Skills

- Participate in parenting classes.
- Encourage your school district to provide parenting classes and host parent get-togethers.

Establish and Participate in Support Groups When a Problem is Identified

- Participate in parent-teen support groups that address such issues as conflict resolution, anger management, chemical abuse, runaway and throwaway youth.
- Create a directory of "tried and true" support groups.
- Provide support and respite care for families under stress.

Seek Counseling Whenever Appropriate

- Engage in parent-teen mediation to resolve disputes and improve communication.

- If your teen is engaging in prostitution, seek counseling from professionals knowledgeable about prostitution.