

# INVESTIGATION

## Juvenile Prostitution: An Overlooked Form of Child Sexual Abuse

-by Byron Fasset  
and Bill Walsh

*The authors maintain that juvenile prostitution is a form of child sexual victimization and must be treated as such. It is not just a younger version of the "world's oldest profession." It is the exploitation of children for sexual gratification and/or money.*

### The problem of juvenile prostitution

The patrol car, with its headlights turned off, slowly approaches the suspicious vehicle reported to 911. Not knowing if they will find young lovers or a rape in progress, the officers shine their flashlights to illuminate the car's interior. They find neither. What the officers do find is a well-known local businessman engaged in oral-genital sex with a thirteen-year-old girl. A radio check reveals that the man has no criminal history, not even a traffic violation on his record. The girl is another story. A call to the Juvenile Division reveals that she is a runaway from a nearby suburb. In fact, the girl is a chronic runaway, twelve incidents in the last eighteen months. Her juvenile record includes arrests for drugs, burglary, assault on a police officer, and prostitution.

How do you think the officers will handle this call? Release the man and take the girl into custody? Charge them both with public lewdness or engaging in prostitution? Arrest the man for sexual abuse of a child and take the girl into protective custody? Take no action? The answer is any of the above. Depending on the jurisdiction, training, departmental policies, and the attitudes of the individual officers involved, any of the above can and does occur. What these officers do, or fail to do, may be part of the problem.

In this article, the authors will address what they believe may be one of the most overlooked forms of child sexual victimization today: juvenile prostitution. In the last decade we have produced improved strategies for identification, investigation and intervention in child sexual victimization. This progress has not however, included much advancement in the area of juvenile prostitution.

The authors maintain that juvenile prostitution is a form of child sexual victimization and must be recognized and treated as such. It is not just a younger version of the "world's oldest profession." It is the exploitation of children for sexual gratification and/or money. Though the element of consent may appear to be present, if the child is under legal age, it is still sexual victimization of a child by an adult. In many ways it differs from what we see in more traditional cases of sexual abuse. Thus, if we are ever going to help those children involved, we must understand the dynamics and unique problems for identification, investigation and intervention that juvenile prostitution presents.

This article will primarily present a law enforcement perspective on juvenile prostitution. The observations contained herein are based on the authors' personal experiences in dealing with juveniles involved in prostitution. These children were identified through proactive investigations into the

sexual exploitation of children. While both male and female teenagers engage in prostitution, the issues involved for each appear to be different. This article will focus on the involvement of juvenile females in prostitution and other sexually exploitive activities.

### The scope of the problem

How significant is the problem of juvenile prostitution in this country? In this regard, it is similar to other forms of child maltreatment: nobody knows for sure. National estimates range from 300,000 (Chesney-Lind, 1992) to as high as 600,000 (Cohen, 1987). If the problem is truly this large, we must ask the following questions: Why don't we hear more about it? Where are these children? How do you find them? Whose responsibility are they? What should be done with them?

There are no state agencies charged with the responsibility of identifying and investigating juvenile prostitution, or recording its incidence, as there are for other forms of child abuse. As a result, the issue is often overlooked. Every day the children involved are allowed to slip through the cracks and rarely get the help they need. Recently, a director of a runaway shelter told one of the authors that approximately 250 juveniles served by his agency in the last year have admitted being involved in prostitution at one time or another.

### Why are they overlooked?

Incidents where juveniles are involved in prostitution are often undetected by many professionals for a myriad of reasons. One reason is that they may be mistaken for adults. Outfitted with fake identification and the right clothes and makeup, these teenagers can easily pass as adults. They know this to be true and use it to their advantage. For example, if they are arrested by the police for prostitution or any other crime, they know it is better to be booked into jail as an adult rather than placed in detention as a juvenile. If they are placed in jail, they are routinely allowed to pay a small fine or bond and be back on the streets in very little time. But if they are processed as a juvenile, the procedures usually call for them only to be released to a parent or other family member. Since many of them have run from home, they do not want their parents to be contacted.

Another factor that may contribute to the failure of these juveniles being properly identified is the division of investigative responsibilities in many law enforcement agencies. Prostitution is usually investigated by vice divisions and treated as a nuisance crime. In some situations, once a prostitute is identified as a juvenile, the vice officer may feel that it's just not worth the effort to make the prostitution arrest; inexperienced in the juvenile justice system, these officers may believe, "Nothing ever happens to juveniles anyway." The juvenile may be released in the field or charged with another violation, i.e., possession of drugs, etc., and thus never officially

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identified as being involved in prostitution. If asked, most police departments would probably say they have very few cases involving juvenile prostitution. Maybe, in fact, those that they do have are being overlooked.

Another reason these juveniles are not identified as prostitutes is that sexual activity between these girls and adults is often not viewed or investigated as a crime. Adults who engage in acts of prostitution with juveniles are usually not viewed as offenders. In some cases, the argument can be made, the child dressed, looked, and acted like an adult. Therefore, the customer did not knowingly engage in sexual activity with a minor and should not be arrested. While this may be true on occasion, it does not excuse the adult's behavior. These customers, or "tricks" as they are commonly called, should be charged with the appropriate criminal charge (solicitation or sexual victimization), and let a judge or jury decide accordingly. Sometimes the customers are not fooled. The authors have heard of some customers who prefer juvenile prostitutes for sexual activity and actively seek them out, even asking them their age.

Another obstacle to detection is the belief that the juvenile consented to the activity, thus no crime took place. We would not accept this argument in any other case of child sexual victimization, nor should we accept it here. This indifference to the victimization of these girls may be partially due to an attitude about the juvenile's demeanor and her past. It is difficult for some law enforcement officers to view a seductively dressed, profane, thirteen-year-old girl as a victim. Juveniles who engage in prostitution are often involved in other criminal activity, including selling and using drugs, robbery, theft, and other related crimes. Similar to some adolescent sex offenders, many juveniles involved in prostitution are both offenders and victims. While they are sometimes identified and dealt with as offenders, they are rarely viewed or treated as victims. Often, they are viewed as unworthy of the protection society affords to other victims of child sexual abuse. This reasoning is not only faulty, it is contrary to what the law provides. A conversation one of the authors recently had with a fellow officer about juvenile prostitution may reveal an attitude shared by many police officers. The officer said, "What's the big deal? They're just little whores." Rarely is the question as to why they are acting this way ever asked.

### Who is involved?

To effectively intervene with juveniles involved in prostitution, we must first understand the dynamics of their victimization. There seem to be some common steps on the road to prostitution. To begin

with, most of these juveniles have a history of multiple runaway episodes and prior involvement with the juvenile justice system. Frequently they have many personal problems and have been labeled as a "troubled" or "bad" kid. Involvement in prostitution requires that they are away from home, either voluntarily or otherwise. Some of these children are throwaways--they have been forced to leave home. If they are running, these children are not running to something, but from something. Many have suffered physical and sexual abuse. It is common for them to have drug or alcohol problems. A check of their school records often shows poor school performance, truancy or complete withdrawal from school. As expected, these children often come from dysfunctional families with multi-faceted problems. Without parental support, these children are vulnerable, emotionally and physically, and must provide for themselves in any way that they can. Being hungry, cold, and lonely can make people do things they may later regret.

Runaways who become involved in prostitution have run from inner cities, suburbs and small towns alike. In the cases the authors investigated, the girls have first become involved in prostitution between the ages of 12 and 16 years of age. They have come from all races and socio-economic groups. Poverty, while sometimes a factor, is not always the rule. In one recent investigation, the girl involved was from a middle-class suburban family where the father was a police officer. The problem of juvenile prostitution appears to be more prevalent in larger cities, as they may appear a more attractive destination for runaways, affording anonymity and hiding places lacking in small towns. Often, cities only prove to be a place that will provide the combination of factors needed for this type of victimization to exist.

The authors have observed low self esteem in all the girls involved in prostitution investigated to date. It appears that this poor self image makes them perfect victims for sexual exploitation. Like many victims of sexual victimization, these children are vulnerable because they crave attention and affection. Unlike most other such victims, these girls are usually exploited for financial as well as sexual purposes. It is not unusual for these "pimps" to have sexual relations with the girl prior to involving them in prostitution. This sexual victimization serves several purposes besides the gratification of the pimp. It is used to break down the child's inhibitions. After a time, the girl may be asked to engage in sexual activity with a friend of the pimp. Gradually, the girl will be taught that people will pay her for sex. Pimps will then teach the girls about contraception, and different sexual techniques and the price to charge for each.

Following is part of a taped conversation between a thirteen-year-old girl and her pimp. This

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conversation was recorded after the girl was arrested for prostitution and agreed to cooperate in the investigation of her pimp.

Girl: "Baby, I did four tricks today, okay. I got four hundred dollars . . . and this other guy, he's waiting for me right now, he wants, he wants to do a fifty"

Pimp: "Baby do you love me?"

Girl: "Baby I do love you You know I love you, okay?"

As with the preferential child molester, the pimp seduces these children. Finding these children on the streets and befriending them, the pimp gradually gains their trust and then exploits it. The pimp is a self-taught expert in human nature and child psychology. He can spot weaknesses and needs in these girls and knows how to manipulate these weakness to his advantage.

In a way, the pimp becomes what the child needs--a friend, a lover, or a substitute for the child's parent. He will provide what the victim perceives as comfort, affection, understanding, and protection. Initially, the pimp will make the girl feel special and loved and make no demands on her. He will emphasize the freedom she has away from

home and the fact that they only have each other to depend on. As time progresses, the pimp begins to separate the child from any other sources of financial or emotional support. He will further alienate the child from her family and friends, which will allow him to increase her vulnerability and dependency on him. During this time of transition he will convince her of his love and devotion to her.

The child can only be introduced into the world of commercial sexual exploitation after she is emotionally and financially dependent on the pimp. Commercial sexual exploitation includes working in nude modeling studios, dancing in topless clubs, and engaging in prostitution. Prostitution may take many forms. Some girls will work the streets

known for prostitution activity. Others will work out of a motel room, for fear the police will identify them as minors. Girls who work in modeling studios often engage in prostitution in addition to nude modeling. It appears that all these activities are related. The authors have seen girls start in one activity and as time goes on, move back and forth, between all three. Some girls may be involved in more than one activity at a time. Regardless of how the girl starts out, the primary method used to convince the child to enter this lifestyle is love and affection, and not force or pure financial gain as some may believe. The girl may be told that they, the girl and the pimp, need money so they can be together. Often promises of marriage or a life together are made.

Following is more of the taped conversation between the girl and pimp introduced earlier.

Pimp: "Baby please . . . are you okay?"

Girl: "Yes, I'm fine . . . let's be happy, it went smooth as hell, I can't believe that I did it. So I got four hundred dollars in my pocket and it's waiting with your name written all over it. This is gonna be our money for our apartment baby and then we can get married and everything."

Once succeeding in involving the girl in this lifestyle, the pimp is faced with the problem of controlling his victim to ensure that she will continue to obey him and provide him with money. It appears that this control is usually done in three phases.

The first phase is the withholding of the perceived love and affection that he used to convince her to start. As a law enforcement officer or a therapist, this is a very difficult obstacle to overcome when working with these children. The emotional hold these pimps have over these young victims is enormous. These children truly believe they are loved and not being exploited.

Eventually, these young victims come to realize that this person really does not love them. This sometimes happens when the girl notices the pimp paying attention to other girls. When they challenge that love, or try to leave, the pimp will then use violence and fear to control them. During this phase, these children will suffer unimaginable brutality at the hands of the pimp or even some of the other girls. Some girls are beaten to the point of requiring hospitalization. Others have been subjected to gang rape, have been branded with hot objects, or had their faces intentionally disfigured. As with domestic violence victims, they feel that they have nowhere to turn because they have been separated from their family and friends. Because of their juvenile records, they also fear the police and usually will not call them for help.

The last phase is when the beatings and the violence are no longer effective. Now the pimp may use drugs as a form of control over his victims. On occasion, threats to hurt the girl's family or friends have been made to insure the girl's compliance. If the girl is pregnant or has a baby, that will also provide the pimp with additional leverage. Unfortunately, if left to continue in this lifestyle, the girl faces a likely future of unwanted pregnancies and abortions, sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS, a criminal record, jail, prison, violence, and death.

## The professional response

*The police* For law enforcement, juvenile prostitution investigations are among the most difficult sexual victimization cases to handle. They are inherently riddled with problems. Law enforcement must realize that juvenile prostitution is a crime. The real criminals who must be apprehended and prosecuted are the pimp and the people who engage in sex with the juvenile prostitute. But who

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should handle the specific problem of juvenile prostitution? Vice detectives may be experienced and well-trained in dealing with adults involved in prostitution, but most are ill-prepared to deal with juveniles. They usually lack experience in dealing with children and with the dynamics of sexual abuse. Additionally, cases involving juveniles are usually heard before family court or juvenile judges and involve different laws and procedures than these detectives are familiar with. Vice detectives rarely are involved with runaway shelters, child protective services or juvenile probation, and therefore may not know how these agencies can be used. Conversely, child abuse detectives may have the experience to deal with children, but not the training to investigate prostitution.

In some states, legal obstacles may discourage or prevent officers from trying to deal with or take action against juvenile prostitutes. Laws that are written to protect children may actually prevent officers from providing that protection. For example, some laws prohibit the officer from taking a picture of a juvenile prostitute for future identification. Needless to say, this hampers any information-gathering function. Laws regarding confidentiality for persons seeking treatment for sexually transmitted diseases, while necessary, may inadvertently prevent juveniles involved in prostitution from being identified. Because of these and other laws, officers may start to feel their actions accomplish little and stop taking enforcement action.

*The courts.* Even if the police come around to view these children as victims and try to take appropriate action, the courts may not. Another inherent problem in dealing with these types of cases is the attitudes of the courts and prosecution. Because of the lifestyle and past record of these young victims, judges and juries may not feel they are credible victims or witnesses. This is often the case in spite of physical and testimonial evidence that supports their credibility.

Many times criminal prosecutions of pimps and tricks are not pursued because the girl does not want to cooperate and testify. We often see a similar situation with battered women in cases of domestic violence who are reluctant to testify. In both cases, arrest and prosecution should be considered even when the victim does not want to testify.

*Intervention.* If the police and courts do succeed in taking one of these victims off the street, the next problem is what to do with her. This child has experienced unimaginable abuse and needs help. When she was taken away from her pimp, an enormous void was created in her life. This void has to be filled as quickly as possible. In many cases, the child may not be able to return home. Sometimes, circumstance will prevent this from ever happening. If forced to return to the home she ran from, she

will probably only run again. She cannot be mainstreamed back into society without intensive services. But who should provide these services?

Child protective services (CPS) is ill-prepared to deal with this girl. By design, CPS is primarily geared to working with young children. The average caseworker is not trained to deal with these older children, often teenagers, who are chronic runaways, drug or alcohol abusers, and potentially violent. When CPS becomes involved with these juveniles, it is obvious that the resources they have available to them are inadequate. Intervening with these children is often very difficult: they not only do not think they need help, they do not want any. Foster and group homes are usually not good placements for these children. With their budgetary constraints and overworked staff, CPS is often forced to concentrate on the younger children.

Placing the child in a typical runaway shelter may also cause problems. First, most runaway shelters provide only short-term solutions. Also, mixing runaways with juveniles that have been involved in prostitution may result in the latter recruiting the former as the authors recently discovered. Where do we place them to get the help they need?

Sometimes these children are placed in long-term, residential treatment facilities. This allows caseworkers to work with these children in a secure environment and allow them a chance to end the control the pimps have over them. Unfortunately, there are few of these types of facilities available for victims of juvenile prostitution, and costs may be prohibitive.

## **Suggestions for improved identification and intervention**

The suggestions that can be offered for improving any community's response to child prostitution are necessarily going to be broad. The specific methods of implementation in each community will be different. In every community, the relevant leaders should be involved, including the chief of police, the director of child protective services, the district attorney, the mayor, and other key authorities with the knowledge and power to effect change.

1. To deal effectively with this problem, all professionals involved must first realize that juvenile prostitution is a form of sexual victimization and must be treated accordingly.
2. Law enforcement must make a commitment to identify juvenile prostitutes and attempt to get them the help they need to escape that lifestyle.
3. Law enforcement and prosecutors must make a commitment to arrest and prosecute pimps and the persons who engage in sexual activity with juveniles. They must also work to develop strategies that will overcome the issues of the victim's credibility.
4. Law enforcement agencies must train their staff,

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both investigators and patrol, on the issue of juvenile prostitution. Those agencies that do not have the manpower or resources to have a unit that specializes in the investigation of the sexual exploitation of children should insure that detectives who investigate child abuse and prostitution communicate and cooperate in investigations involving juvenile prostitution.

5. Professionals who work with runaway children must understand the relationship between runaways and juvenile prostitution. Systems should be developed that flag chronic runaways, who should be interviewed to see the reasons for their behavior before they become involved in prostitution or other dangerous and destructive activity.
6. Law enforcement must develop a working relationship with the area runaway shelters. Communication between shelters and the police may lead to increased identification of girls involved or at risk of juvenile prostitution.
7. Law enforcement must utilize those investigative techniques that are required to make strong cases against pimps and tricks. These include surveillance, videotaping the pimp's activities, undercover investigations, and one party consensual phone calls.
8. All professionals must work to improve the response of their respective discipline to this problem.
9. Community treatment and supportive resources

for these children need to be developed

## Summary

Juvenile prostitution is a serious problem in this country. Many involved children have histories of running away from home. There is also a widely held attitude that it is a victimless crime. It is not. It is the systematic sexual exploitation of children for sexual gratification or financial gain. Attitudes of professionals, especially law enforcement, must change regarding the way they view and respond to this problem. Much work and research is needed in this area. The purpose of this article was not to give the answers to the problem of juvenile prostitution, but to raise the questions.

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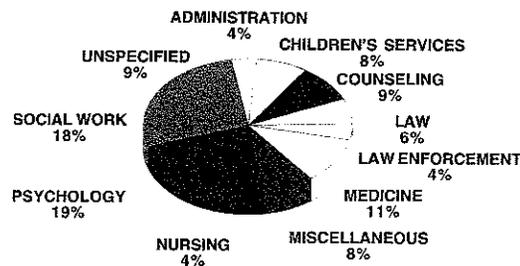
Author's note: This article contains comments, observations, and opinions which are solely those of the authors and do not reflect the official position of any organization with which they are affiliated.

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## Membership Report

Many of the achievements of 1993 were reported in the last issue of *The APSAC Advisor*: the 50% membership growth, 100% growth in staff, outstanding success of the First National Colloquium. These two graphs reflect our growth since 1989, and the current distribution of our members by profession. Together they provide a snapshot of one of the most exciting professional societies in the nation.

APSAC MEMBERS BY PROFESSION, 1993



APSAC MEMBERSHIP GROWTH 1989 - 1993

