



# Research Bulletin

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## Prostitution study finds Chicago girls trafficked through coercion, violence

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**D**uring the last 10 years, victim advocates have worked to shed light on the problem of poor and vulnerable young girls trafficked into the United States sex trade. However, little data is available on those forced to come into the country for this purpose. Cases that do surface reveal the many ways that traffickers use false information and promises, violence, and coercion to bring women into this country for prostitution. Research and anecdotal evidence indicate that many young girls born and raised in the United States are subject to the same kind of recruitment tactics to meet this need.

Between July and December 2007, the Authority collaborated with the Schiller DuCanto & Fleck Family Law Center at DePaul University College of Law to research how young girls are recruited into the sex trade in the Chicago metropolitan area, including strategies used, and levels of coercion, control, and violence that hold them in prostitution. Researchers examined how dishonest recruitment tactics and outright coercion are employed to meet the demand for prostituted young women in Chicago. Researchers also set out to determine the types of venues in which young women traded sex and where and how far they were transported.

### Methodology

Researchers interviewed 100 young women between age 16 and 25 who reported being involved in the Chicago sex trade and being controlled by an individual serving as their pimp. Two survivors of prostitution interviewed young women on the streets, and at Unhooked, a court-mandated, anti-prostitution program operated by Footprints, a division of Christian Community Health Centers. Unhooked provides an eight-hour curriculum to women and girls as an alternative to prosecution and/or incarceration.

### Age at recruitment

Among those interviewed, the average age of entry into the sex trade was 16 years old. Most participants started in the sex trade before the age of 18 (73 percent). More than half of the sample entered at ages 16 years old or younger and one-third of the sample entered the sex trade between the ages of 12 and 15 years old (Illinois law defines a juvenile as 16 years old or younger).

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Of those interviewed, 67 percent said they were recruited into the sex trade. The other 33 percent started on their own, but had a pimp at the time of the interview.

Ten percent of those interviewed were recruited by family members, including sisters, brothers, and foster parents, 19 percent said a friend or girlfriend recruited them, and 23 percent said they were recruited by a boyfriend (Table 1).

### Who is recruited?

Some young women were recruited as runaways by boyfriend/pimps and solicited by “customers.” Others, needing money for basic necessities or drugs, were swayed by girlfriends or relatives who were already in the business. Many participants were victims of childhood sexual assault, abandoned by their mothers, or homeless. Four participants were in foster care or group homes. Said one interviewee:

*“I used to turn two or three tricks after I left school when I was a freshman with some guys in my neighborhood so I could eat and buy clothes. My mom was on drugs. She never had money to feed or clothe me. Once you get out here you are lost and you don’t know any other way. People should know that us girls are not different. If anything, we are better because we didn’t give up.”*

### Recruitment experiences

Participants said they traded sex in several venues and in multiple sites just after recruitment. While 60 percent of the participants began working on the streets, many also worked at hotels, parties, through escort services, and in their own homes. Twenty-eight percent of participants were escorts after recruitment. Nearly all of them had a pimp after they were recruited (93 percent).

Fifty-eight percent of participants indicated that during recruitment they were at times transported by their pimps from where they lived to another location to trade sex. Twenty-six percent said they were taken to other states.

Participants were asked how many customers they had per day on average during recruitment. During the period of recruitment, the number of transactions participants had each day ranged from two to 20, with an

Table 1  
Sex trade recruiters

<b>Among recruited participants</b>	67%
Boyfriend	23%
Friend/girlfriend	19%
Pimp	12%
<b>Family member</b>	
Sister	4%
Cousin	3%
Brother	1%
Uncle	1%
Foster parent	1%
<b>Other</b>	
Escort service	1%
Stranger	1%
Friend of mother	1%
<b>Participants not recruited</b>	33%
<b>Total</b>	100%

average of seven. Thirteen percent indicated that they had sex an average of 10 times or more per day during recruitment.

### Violence and coercion

Some participants reported experiencing violence during recruitment. Twenty-four percent of the sample said they were slapped and 20 percent reported forced sex. One young woman, recruited by a foster parent at age 12, reported being hit with belts, sticks, and electric cords.

Coercion was defined as the use of threats or verbal abuse or providing or denying certain benefits. Thirty-five percent of participants said they were coerced into joining the sex trade. Almost one-third were told that they owed their recruiters because of the provision of food, clothing, or gifts, and 29 percent were threatened with harm. Twenty-three percent said their pimp threatened to end a romantic relationship with them—an other form of coercion.

Nearly 60 percent of those interviewed said that promises made by pimps during recruitment into the sex trade were broken. One participant said:

*“He told me that I would not have to perform sexual acts all the time. As it turned out, I did.”*

Table 2  
Comparison of violence by pimps during recruitment and at time of interview

Violent acts	During recruitment	At time of interview
Slapping	24%	71%
Punching	14%	48%
Pulling hair	11%	31%
Pinching	4%	17%
Spanking	10%	26%
Kicking	10%	43%
Kidnapping	5%	18%
Ripping clothes	8%	24%
Throwing objects	11%	28%
Threatening sexual assault	9%	23%
Sexual assault	20%	47%
Other	2%	9%

### Experiences at time of interview

At the time of the interview, 12 percent said they were trading sex for survival, a drop from the 25 percent who said they had engaged in survival sex when they were starting in the sex trade.

Two-thirds of study participants were being transported by pimps to various locations to trade sex. Pimps transported them to areas throughout Chicago, the Chicago suburbs, and across state lines. An increase was seen in the number of women trading sex in more than one geographical area from the time of recruitment.

Participants had a range of zero to 40 customers per day at the time of the survey, with an average of 10 daily transactions. The number of transactions per day increased over time. When starting in the sex trade only 13 percent engaged in sex with an average of more than 10 customers a day. However, more than half (51 percent) engaged in sex with an average of more than 10 customers a day at the time of the interview. Those trading sex with greater frequency also reported facing increased amounts of violence from their pimps.

### Increasing violence and coercion

Of those interviewed, 64 percent said they were in a romantic relationship with their pimp. Many reported experiencing violence from their pimps. Seventy-one percent experienced slapping, 48 percent experienced punching, and 47 percent experienced forced sex (Table 2). More than half stated that fists or feet were

used against them, as well as other objects, such as wire hangers, broom sticks, baseball bats, telephone cords, hammers, screwdrivers, and brass knuckles. Said one participant:

*“He gave me a black eye once. [But he] said he won’t hit me on my face again. It messed with his money.”*

Over time, the amount of violence endured by the participants at the hands of their pimps increased. After recruitment, the women were three times as likely to be punched, kidnapped, or to have their clothing ripped and four times as likely to be pinched or kicked.

Over time, women experienced higher numbers of customers and higher levels of violence from pimps. There was a correlation between increased number of customers and increased levels of violence from the period of recruitment.

At the time of the interview, the majority of participants said they were subject to coercion by their pimps, including threats, monetary withholding, and verbal abuse. Pimps threatened 61 percent with ending their romantic relationship. Fifty-nine percent were told that they were indebted to their pimps for food, clothing, and gifts. Thirty-six percent of participants said their pimps threatened to kick them out of the house. Sixty-six percent of the sample said they were forced to live in a certain place, and 53 percent of participants were not allowed to keep any of the money they earned.

Nearly 30 percent of study participants reported being given drugs by their pimps in efforts to get them addicted. Giving or withholding drugs were highly correlated with higher levels of violence.

Forty-three percent of participants reported at the interview that they could not leave without physical harm and an additional 20 percent were not sure if they could leave without harm. Forty percent said they were watched when they were not working, and 20 percent were not sure if they were being watched or not. Thirty-seven percent said they were not allowed to visit friends or family. One interviewee reported:

*“He said I could leave when I was ready after I made the money I needed, but...I never see my money. I am always behind on what I owe or need to get ahead.”*

### Exiting the sex trade

Nearly 65 percent of participants said that at one point or another they had wanted to leave the sex trade. When asked why they did not leave, some cited drug addiction, while many more reported fearing violence from their pimps. Others explained that they had no way to leave—no home, no money, and no one to care for them. They could not visualize how to make an exit from the sex trade. Some reported that they were looking for someone else to take care of them. Said one participant:

*“I need immediate help to stop this lifestyle. I don’t want to continue this in fear that I may not survive.”*

### Prostitution myths

This study contradicted several common prostitution beliefs. First, women traded sex in many places and venues simultaneously. Second, the study dispelled the myth that high-end prostitution activities, such as escort services, are free from pimp control and violence. Finally, the longer women were prostituted, the more sex they had to have with more customers in more locations, with more violence and coercion from their pimps. This downward spiral indicates prostitution is far from being a victimless crime or an attractive lifestyle.

### Recommendations

Based on this study, the researchers developed the following recommendations to address issues facing young women in the sex trade.

#### Prevention

Communities need to intervene early to help young women who are being sexually assaulted or otherwise abused and provide them with a safe haven and a future away from coercive and violent boyfriends who are, in reality, their pimps.

#### Assist young women

Young women in the sex trade should be regarded as domestic violence victims in need of assistance. Safe housing, treatment for trauma, education, and job training is needed. Alternatives to charging, sentencing, and incarceration should be created along with social service programming and safety planning supported by adequate resources. Given the nexus of drugs and prostitution, prostitute-specific drug treatment programs should be made available that also address pimp control, safety planning, and domestic violence issues.

#### Hold pimps and recruiters accountable

Law enforcement should increase efforts to prosecute pimps who recruit young girls locally, hold them in the sex trade through violence and coercion, and transport them throughout the metropolitan area and across state lines. Community members can help rid their neighborhoods of recruiters, traffickers, and customers. Finally, more research is needed to learn about pimps and traffickers, as well as the customers who buy sex.

*View and download the entire report on this study, “Domestic sex trafficking of Chicago women and girls,” at [www.icjia.state.il.us](http://www.icjia.state.il.us).*