



Interviews with Five Ex-Pimps in Chicago



April 2009

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Introduction

In March 2009 Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart sued Craigslist to shut down its exotic services advertising section. When his deputies responded to ads on Craigslist, they were often met by teens who had been falsely recruited or trafficked by pimps, who were now offering them for sale on Craigslist. This research study presents important information about the role pimps and traffickers play in Chicago's sex trade industry.

In the winter of 2008-9 the DePaul College of Law's Schiller DuCanto & Fleck Family Law Center completed in-depth research with five ex-pimps in the Chicago metropolitan area. Pimps were recruited and interviewed by prostitution survivor Brenda Myers-Powell, using a 91-question survey instrument. Participants were provided a cash honorarium for their participation.

This pilot research project was a follow-up to the Center's 2008 research with 100 girls selling sex in the Chicago metropolitan area who were controlled by a pimp. That study raised a series of questions about just who Chicago pimps are, and the operation and organization of the Chicago sex trade. Answers to these questions would be useful to inform law enforcement efforts to end the recruitment, trafficking, and exploitation of vulnerable young girls in Chicago's sex trade industry.

Demographics

Three of our five ex-pimps were Black, one Hispanic, and one White.

One had reached 8th grade, two 10th grade, one was a high school graduate and the other had some college.

Four-fifths of the sample had sold their bodies for sex before getting into pimp, one as early as 12 years old, another at age 14, and two at age 17.

All began pimping at age 18 or younger, with the other beginning at age 23; the average starting age for the sample is 18.2.

Participants in our sample were engaged in pimping for long lengths of time, from a range of 20 to 28 years, with the average being 24 years.

All worked as pimps within the last five years of the survey.

Household Characteristics

Family members in the sex trade. Four-fifths of the sample had family members in the sex trade industry. In two cases, the participant's mother was involved, and in one of these instances the participant's father was the pimp. In the other two cases, it was an uncle and cousin who were pimps, and a brother who ran an escort service.

Neighbors involved in the sex trade. Four-fifths of the sample said there were persons in the neighborhood who were involved in the sex trade industry, including relatives, neighbors, and friends. As one commented, "There were lots of guys making money, driving nice cars, and dressing nice." Those whose parents were in the sex trade said they were surrounded by parents' friends who were pimps, ho's, and dealers.

Domestic violence growing up. One hundred percent of the sample grew up with domestic violence in the household. In all of these cases, the participant's mother was the victim of the violence. "My mother always had a loser who beat up on her and took our money until I got big," one explained. In one instance, the participant's father actually killed his mother, landing the participant in foster care.

Experiencing physical abuse. One hundred percent of our sample experienced physical abuse while growing up, three at the hands of their fathers, one at the hands of his mother's men, and one from different foster parents. Abuse began as early as age 7 and continued for many years, sometimes until the participant left home at 16. One participant speculated that his father failed to show him affection and was abusive because his father did not think he was his child.

Experiencing sexual abuse. Four-fifths of the sample regularly experienced sexual abuse at young ages, between the ages of 7-14. In one instance the participant's father was the perpetrator, in another one of his mother's boyfriends, and in another it was the husband in one foster family.

Household drugs and alcohol. One hundred percent of the participants' households had members who abused drugs or alcohol. In all cases, it was either the participant's mother, father, or both. These parents were heavy drinkers and functional alcoholics. While drinking, one participant's father killed his mother "while I was hiding behind the couch." One participant's mother was later on heroin.

Participants' own drug and alcohol use. One hundred percent of our sample began using alcohol at young ages and later, drugs. For some, drinking began at age 8 or 9, followed by drug use from 19 years on, although adolescent use of marijuana, or weed, was common.

Getting in: Becoming a Pimp

Participants were asked why they thought they had been attracted to pimping and what were the job satisfactions. Given the characteristics of their households growing up, their comments are not surprising. Here are some of their observations.

When I was a young boy I was fascinated by James Bond movies. I wanted to be James Bond. I wanted the fast women the nice cars, and to dress real sharp and of course, travel around the world. But no one told me that you had to go to college to do these things or that I had to be a good guy. My only example that even came close to that kind of life style was the pimps and the players in my neighborhood. They all had the nice cars and the women and the sharp clothes and I wanted to be just like them. It gave me power and then it gave me respect, because everyone couldn't do it. And it gave you a sense of love, and last but not least, it gave me money and fame.

All my life I was pushed around, beat up, and treated like s—. I was never showed any love or care, but when I got these ladies who let me control and run their lives, and even gave me their money, and would do whatever I said, I had all the cards in my hand. Every man wished they were me. For the first time in my life I was number one (participant who was in foster care after the death of his mother).

I wanted to be respected like my daddy. He dressed very well, he drove the best Cadillac. I wanted all of that. I grew up in it (Participant whose father was a pimp).

I saw a need and I knew I could fill it.

For one participant, pimping became a way of survival at age 15 or 16.

I wasn't attracted at first, it was a means of survival. It was easier than me committing a felony or going to the penitentiary (Participant whose mother was selling sex. "She did what she had to do to support six kids").

Participants did mention some of the negatives or the downside of power and control.

Having to keep control all the time, having to be hard when all you wanted to do was chill, and the violence of protecting your merchandise and territory.

I was robbed a couple of times. I went to jail once, and the hardest thing that happened to me is one of my ladies was murdered just like my mom. That was really hard for me. I wanted to stop but I couldn't.

The law, the sleazy Johns, the hours you keep. It was an unpredictable life.

A money-making girl got killed by a trick and that was hard.

All five of our participants said they were recruited into the sex trade. In some cases it was other pimps on the street who suggested the participants join the trade in this way, in another case it was an uncle who worked in a strip club. The participant whose parents were in the business remarked, "It was a way of life in my household and neighborhood; it was almost hereditary."

Life in the Business

Recruiting girls and women. Participants explained that recruitment "never stopped. It is part of the daily routine." Not only did the pimps recruit, but their women also recruited new girls and women as well. One participant explained, "If she was interested in my appearance, she was suspect to get copped. Every woman was a suspect [a potential recruit]."

Some participants, however, said they focused on the vulnerable.

One participant, who started recruiting early in his career out of high schools, progressed to "neighborhood girls who weren't doing well and had low self-esteem."

I don't feel I forced anyone or made anyone do anything they didn't want to do. In fact I helped girls no one else would I always picked up throwaways and runaways and dressed them up and taught them how to survive.

I looked for girls who needed things, who would do what ever to come out of the messed up homes and escape from their messed up parents, and I pulled those girls. Women who had been abused by some sucker, who wanted better treatment and nice things.

Participants recruited everywhere and anywhere, at skating rinks, Laundromats, basketball games and other events that attracted lots of girls, and in parks. Others participating in more organized businesses ran ads and one said his business trafficked from abroad. One participant recruited off Craigslist, contacting young women advertising there and recruited them into his "stable."

One participant described how he recruited.

I would tell them I was an agent. I would say I designed clothes. I even told them I sang with certain bands. It was more challenging when I got girls who were older. I really became more creative the older the girls were.

Another participant, who supplied girls for an escort agency, looked for young pretty blondes, who made the most money. "If she was a brunette, I would talk her into trying blonde."

Participants knew the girls were young. “They all claimed to be 18, but I knew for a fact that some were 15 years old.” One said “as young as 15,” another “as young as 14. It was the nature of the business.” Still another said, “If they were bleeding they could work for me.”

All said they were intimate with the girls, all of whom regarded the pimp as “their man.”

Numbers. Pimps controlled many girls and women at one time.

Participant 1: 2-6 girls and women

Participant 2: 3-15

Participant 3: 3-5

Participant 4: 3-20

Participant 5: 4-8

Participants estimated the total number of girls and women they had recruited, controlled and managed over time to range from 75 up to over 300 or 500.

Earnings. The business was lucrative. One participant said he earned \$220,000-\$250,000 a year, another \$300,000 a year, a third \$300,000-\$400,000 a year, another 400,000 a year, and a fifth \$500,000 a year.

No participant ever paid federal or state income taxes on these earnings.

Organization of the business. Two-fifths of the sample worked for highly organized businesses and reported to higher-ups in this business. This meant that some of the take had to be shared with their bosses. In one instance, the pimp supplied girls for three escort sites, providing 40% of the take to the owner/manager. One supplied girls for a strip club and for escort services. In that instance, the business kept 40% and the girl or woman 60%, but the pimp had to pass on three-fourths of the business take, keeping only 10% of the night’s take for himself. These were “a very organized and scary bunch of gentlemen.” Another was a gang member, who made “contributions when necessary to keep my girls out of harm’s way.”

Financial arrangements with the girls and women. Four-fifths of the pimps said that the girls and women did not keep any of the money they made. One laughed at the question and answered, “The girls kept none. That’s funny!” In the organized industries, 40% went to the escort business and the girls earned 60%. However, the girls and women were required to give most, if not all, of their share to the pimp, as a means of control, allowed to keep only 10% for themselves. Another explained, “You can’t control our stable if you allow your ho’s to keep a dime of the money.” Still another said he set an earnings quota for the girl or woman of \$1,000-\$1,500 a day, but they kept nothing of it. “I met all their needs. I was their doctor, lawyer, manager, and financial advisor.”

One participant who worked in an organized escort business commented:

You have to stay on top and maintain control or you lose your edge on the girls and the people you work for won’t respect how you run their business. A bad day was when I had to send someone to track a girl for my money. That could turn out bad for her. If she had the money she would only get fined and slapped around. If she didn’t, she was in trouble. She might get sent to one of our places where all her money is collected by us and we gave her just enough to get by. It was like a punishment.

Living arrangements. Four-fifths of the participants had the girls and women living with them, or maintained the girls at a separate apartment.

Transportation. Four-fifths of the sample said they transported girls and women to prostitution sites. Only one worked only in Chicago. The others moved girls to different states, especially to warm states in the winter, and to major conventions.

Transferring girls and women. Only two of the participants said they regularly transferred girls and women to another pimp, if they “didn’t make the grade, were overweight,” or “if they were slow they had to go.” One participant didn’t transfer them often, but only if they went to jail too much or became difficult. In the organized businesses, participants said the girls and women were moved from one site to another to avoid law enforcement, or to maintain control.

Attitudes towards the girls and women. One participant, who worked in an organized escort business, believed the girls and women were “stupid.” Another stated that “some women are made to be whores and some guys like me are made to pimp.” And another believed he was helping vulnerable girls survive.

The customers. All the participants characterized the customers as mainly “white men and Orientals with money” They had, said one, a fantasy about sex with a Black woman. The only Black customers would be ball players or individuals in show business. All customers were, said one, highly educated men with money, “who by buying sex could get what they wanted without any strings attached.” “White men,” said another, “paid the most.”

Participants said they never helped find customers. “Didn’t have to, sex sells like wild fire.” “You don’t have to it’s like sticking your pole into a fishing hole. Somebody was going to bite.”

Alcohol and drug addiction. Only one participant said he was not addicted to alcohol or drugs while involved in pimping. Alcohol was more prevalent than drug abuse. One said he was on and off the wagon throughout his entire time, and another developed an alcohol habit over time. Only one participant said he was addicted to drugs (cocaine and heroin).

Dealing with law enforcement. One hundred percent of the sample said they were arrested by the police and two were convicted of prostitution-related offenses, theft by deception and running a house of prostitution. One participant said he was arrested three times. “While my girls were in the car they tried to make my ladies sign something saying I was a pimp, but they didn’t, so they had to let me go.”

Participants who worked in organized prostitution said that money was provided to the police: “We paid so we could run our business-police, detectives, and an alderman or two.” To ally suspicions, from time-to-time police officers would make an actual arrest. A participant who supplied women for a large escort service commented, “We knew when we were getting busted. It was part of the game. We would bond out and go set up shop again. We were informed by Chicago’s finest when we needed to take a fall.” The others were adamant that they did not provide funds to the police.

Getting Out

Three participants said the aging process and alcohol and drug addiction forced them out of the business. For the other two, it was crack that made it difficult to get the money any more from the girls. Here are their comments.

I was spiritually bankrupt. The drugs could no longer quiet my conscience. My mother wouldn't kiss me or see me any more. [Now he lives by selling clothing and perfumes. He belongs to a 12-step program and does motivational speaking with children and parents about the streets.]

My health got so bad from drinking. I had to stop drinking and after I stopped drinking I didn't have the stomach for it. I couldn't do that sober, treating people like cattle. It was difficult for this participant to leave safely, because he owed money to some people, but "after they saw how sick I was, they left me alone." [Now he lives on SSI as he has a lot of medical problems. His financial problems may not enable him to keep his condo, which is the only thing he has left.]

Age. I'm not as young as I used to be. Like I said, it's about control and a little fear. The older you get the less people fear you, so you get replaced. [He works at an off track betting place and part-time on a boat in Indiana.]

Crack changed the game. It became too hard to control and get money from girls who were addicted to drugs. So I changed my game to selling drugs. That was too dangerous, so now I really do sell clothing.

The game changed when crack cocaine came out. So I started selling crack. I didn't like the business, so I quit. [This participant sells jewelry, clothes, and perfume, and allows women to take care of him.]

Regrets? Only 40% of the sample regrets their participation in the sex trade as pimps.

I feel I could have spent those years doing something else besides controlling women. I wish I would have educated myself.

I feel like I must have really been an asshole, because I have no friends from back then. I have a few new friends from Alcoholics Anonymous. I wish I had treated people better sometimes. I can't sleep thinking about some of the stuff I did. It's impossible to protect all girls from guys like I was, because that's what we do. We eat, drink, and sleep, thinking of ways to trick young girls into doing what we want them to do.

Those who had no regrets explained themselves in these ways:

I don't feel I forced anyone or made anyone do anything they didn't want to do. In fact, I helped girls no one else would. I picked up throwaways and runaways and dressed them up and taught them how to survive. Prostitution has been going on forever and it will still go on just different ways. If society wants to stop it, then they need to stop men buying sex.

Lots of money, lots of women, good times, bad times, seen things no human should have done, lots of things I'm not proud of. Do I regret it? Not really. Maybe I will someday. It can be glamorous and the control gives you a rush. Why would men want to stop doing what every man envies you for?

I miss the adventure. I miss the rush and the glamour, and of course the money.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Without curbing demand, it will be difficult to eliminate pimping.

Getting into pimping seems to have been the result of the normalization of prostitution in the participants' households and neighborhoods, combined with the neediness produced by the participants' living with domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse, and drug and alcohol abuse in their households of origin. Pimping was seen as the avenue to personal power and money.

Similar to women and girls in prostitution, participants became trapped by the money and by drug and alcohol abuse, only exiting pimping when their advancing age and alcohol and drug abuse made it impossible to continue. Now they have little to show in terms of money or status for their efforts. Many of the participants make a living now from clothing sales, some of which involve “knock off” copies of purses and blue jeans, sales practices that may border on the fraudulent.

Making pimping more dangerous would prevent some from entering this “profession.”

Interestingly, several tried drug sales but found it too dangerous. Clearly, if law enforcement could make pimping dangerous, its appeal would be lessened. For many of the participants, uneducated young men who had to leave home early, pimping was the safer and more appealing route than participation in other illegal activities.

But arresting and charging pimps won’t have much of an effect without lessening demand.

However, were law enforcement to put more pressure on pimps like those in this study, the demand for paid sex would ensure that new pimps would come in to take their places; as in drug sales, lessening demand is the only way to cut off the supply of drug dealers. All participants commented on the ever growing demand for paid sex, which exploits vulnerable young men like these as well as the girls and women who are recruited to supply the sex. What are needed are better developed strategies to cut into demand by lessening the normalization of prostitution in American society.

Study Limitations

This convenience sample cannot be deemed to represent the entire world of pimps, and the small sample size limits the applicability of the research findings. (This project is seeking funds to enlarge the sample to a minimum of 20 or 25, including women working as pimps and madams.) Even with these limitations, we believe that information in this study can still be useful to those working on criminal justice strategies and general cultural strategies to reduce the amount of prostitution in our culture.