

## JUVENILE PROSTITUTION AND CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: A CONTROLLED STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

This study presents a Canadian replication of the work of Silbert and Pines (1982a) on entry to prostitution. Our results, like those of the American workers, point to a picture of multiple abuse and degradation of the 45 former prostitutes interviewed, both before and after entry to prostitution. The Canadian work of Badgley (1984), apparently showing juvenile prostitutes are no more likely to experience child sexual abuse than members of the general population, has been criticized on methodological grounds. The present study indicates 73% of prostitutes were sexually abused in childhood, compared to 29% of a control group obtained in a random population survey. Comparison with control subjects indicated severity of sexual abuse in childhood was a significant contributor to the currently poor mental health and diminished self-esteem of the former prostitutes.

### INTRODUCTION

This research was originally conceived to explore the idea that prostitution, in particular that practised by adult women, was both the enterprise of normal, decent individuals and was also capable, through legal reform, of becoming a normative institution. This presumption was based on an historical perspective (Otis, 1985) and on cross-cultural experiences and understanding: in non-Moslem parts of West Africa the prostitute is an esteemed member of the community, free and independent; and in India the subcaste of the *devadasis*, prostitutes whose calling is ordained by God and sustained by religious ritual, still survives (Bagley, 1979). In some European countries too, certain types of social structure foster the independent and non-stigmatized practice of prostitution: for example, in fieldwork on the adaptation of ethnic minorities in The Netherlands, we encountered prostitutes in Amsterdam who were free and independent

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entrepreneurs, tolerated within a complex plural society in which conservative and extremely liberal values co-exist (Bagley, 1973, 1983). Research by Kiedrowski and Van Dijk (1984) provides some supportive evidence suggesting officially liberal attitudes to prostitution in The Netherlands result in a profession which is to some extent self-governing and self-regulating, excluding both the entry of juveniles and the practice of pimps.

This rather optimistic perspective has been tempered by a growing number of research reports which suggest that prostitution is not, by and large, a voluntary activity but usually involves a juvenile (someone under 18) who has fled from an abusive or rejecting home, reluctantly turning to prostitution as a means of economic survival; has become a prostitute through the coercions of a boyfriend or pimp; or has entered as a secondary activity to support drug addiction (James & Meyerding, 1977; Silbert & Pines, 1981, 1982b; Badgley, 1984; Fraser, 1985).

Our concern in this respect has been paralleled by disillusionment with an associated hypothesis. We had argued (Bagley, 1969) that the observed harmful effects of sexual relationships between adults and juveniles might, in many cases, be a reflection of the intervention of external authorities rather than due to the relationship itself. The study we designed to test this hypothesis completely disconfirmed this idea. We found, contrary to expectation, that sexual abuse of children by adults had independent, long-term harmful effects to a greater or lesser degree, for *all* of the children involved (Bagley & MacDonald, 1984). Data from a community mental health survey which enquired about abusive events in childhood confirmed that sexual abuse in childhood has significant links to poor mental health as an adult (Bagley & Ramsay, 1986). In addition, evidence from clinical studies has produced clear evidence of the harmful sequels, for the children involved, of coerced sexual relationships with adults (Bagley, 1985a).

### RECENT NORTH AMERICAN RESEARCH ON JUVENILE PROSTITUTIONS

Uncharacteristically, there has been more research on juvenile prostitution emerging from Canada than from the United States in recent years (Bagley, 1985a). While the growing American literature on outcomes of child sexual abuse (Able-Peterson, 1981; Geisser, 1979; Herman, 1981; Linedecker, 1981) has frequently mentioned cases of sexually abused children entering prostitution, these have been largely based on clinical studies of a few cases. An alternative method, used by James and Meyerding (1978), Silbert and Pines (1981), and Badgley (1984), has been to interview a group of individuals known to have practiced prostitution, asking questions not only about current lifestyle, but also about factors antecedent to prostitution. This approach has both strengths and weaknesses. While such studies can yield valuable psychological and social data, it is clear that defining the population to be accessed presents major difficulties. In North America, prostitution is a deviant and often clandestine activity, and groups large enough for study purposes are often difficult to obtain. Trying to gain the time and confidence of women working on the street may put them in physical danger from pimps. Male researchers will be initially mistaken for clients, police, or potential pimps, and treated with great cynicism. Female researchers may be regarded as social workers or other prostitutes, and may well be in physical danger from pimps.

Current ethical procedures for most scholars usually require that the researcher seek parental permission before interviewing someone under 18: this makes research with juvenile prostitutes extremely difficult! In addition, child welfare laws in many provinces and states require professionals who learn of the sexual abuse of a juvenile to report this knowledge to an appropriate authority. Again, abiding by the letter of this regulation will make research with prostitutes extremely difficult, since it is clear from a variety of studies that the majority of practising prostitutes are aged under 18 (Fraser, 1985).

In our review of the literature (Bagley, 1985a), one piece of research stood out from all others, in terms of the quality of research methods, and the depth of material elicited. This is the work by Mimi Silbert and her colleagues at the Delancey Street Foundation in San Francisco (Silbert, 1982; Silbert & Pines, 1982a, 1982b, 1983).

Silbert's (1982) respondents were women approached by "a self-help residential facility nationally known for its successful treatment of prostitutes, criminals and drug addicts" (p. 6). All of the 200 women in this study (ranging in age from 10 to 46) had practised prostitution before seeking or being offered the refuge of the Delancey Street Foundation. An important aspect of this research was the use of a standardized questionnaire which included checks (asking the same questions, worded in slightly different ways, at different points in the three-hour interview) which indicated the general reliability of the information given.

Silbert's survey found 60% of the 200 female prostitutes were victims of juvenile sexual exploitation: most subjects started prostitution after running away from home because of sexual, physical, or emotional abuse. Once in the streets, they were victimized by pimps; they were beaten, raped, robbed, and abused. In addition to victimization in prostitution, they were victimized in situations that had nothing to do with their street work. Three-quarters of the subjects were raped, in most cases by total strangers, in rapes often involving brutal force. Despite the fact that virtually all the victims described physical injuries and extremely negative emotional impact, very few reported their victimization to authorities or sought help (Silbert, 1981). Seventy-eight percent of the women became prostitutes while they were still juveniles. Two-thirds of those who were sexually abused were abused by father figures. Seventy percent of the women who were sexually abused as children said this assault had a definite influence on their entry to prostitution.

In Canada, a federal committee on Sexual Offences Against Children and Youth (Badgley, 1984) carried out a number of surveys, including a prevalence study of the amount of child sexual abuse (through a survey of a nationally representative sample of adults who recalled events of sexual abuse in their childhood); and a survey of 229 male and female juvenile prostitutes in Canada's major cities. The Badgley Report concluded, *inter alia*, that:

Young prostitutes . . . were at no more risk when they were growing up than other Canadian children and youths of having been victims of sexual offences . . . it cannot be concluded that having been sexually abused as a child was, by itself, a significant factor that accounted for their subsequent entry into juvenile prostitution (p. 978).

The basis for this conclusion is the apparent finding that the juvenile prostitutes



reported no more sexual abuse in childhood than did the adults in the national prevalence survey. We have criticized Badgley's conclusions in this respect (Bagley, 1986b) on the following grounds:

- (1) The two samples were not comparable—one was a national random sample of adults; the other was a "snowball" sample of prostitutes aged 20 or less. The interviewers for the prostitute sample were a variety of temporary workers, including students and at least one ex-police officer! The interviewers for the national sample were adults regularly used by a national poll organization. We are not told what questions were asked in the survey of prostitutes, nor in what setting; nor are we told the response rate. The wording and presentation may have been different from that in the national sample.
- (2) The two groups were not comparable in age—the average age of the prostitutes was 17.8 years when interviewed. Respondents in the national sample were on average in their late thirties when interviewed. Groups with different ages and contrasted sexual histories might well describe childhood events differently.
- (3) A crucially important error in Badgley's comparison appears to be the differential period at risk for sexual abuse within the family. Once they had entered prostitution, within-family abuse would be extremely unlikely, since the young prostitutes were (as Badgley shows) unlikely to be living at home. The average age at entry to prostitution was 16 for both boys and girls in Badgley's survey; 48% had engaged in prostitution for the first time when they were 15 or younger; 14% of males and 19% of females began prostituting at age 13 or younger. Furthermore, many of these young people were recruited into prostitution only after they had run from home, often more than once. By the age of 14, 76% had run from home at least once; 52% had run away "several times" or "continually." Children who are not in the home cannot, of course, be sexually assaulted within the home, and are also likely to be removed from the adult relatives and acquaintances who, from other evidence in the Badgley Report often impose themselves on children.

Putting these various pieces of evidence together, it appears that at least two-thirds of children who became prostitutes were hardly present at all in their homes after the age of 12. If they experienced the same amount of sexual abuse as children in the general population, as the Badgley Committee asserts, then this sexual abuse seems likely to have taken place *before* their twelfth year. In contrast, the majority of children in the general population experience assault *after* their twelfth year. Other evidence in the report indicates the assaults experienced by the general population group were—both before and after age 12—of a less serious nature.

It is paradoxical that the Badgley Committee argues young prostitutes have experienced no more sexual abuse than the general population sample, and then argues that being a prostitute at age 12 through 16 constitutes "the most severe forms of the abuse of children" (p. 1061). Looked at in this way, the severest forms of sexual abuse of young prostitutes take place *after* they enter prostitu-

tion. The case study evidence suggests entry to prostitution is not, by and large, a voluntary decision but reflects a pattern of pre-teen and young teenage children trying to escape emotionally, physically, or sexually abusive homes by running to the streets where they are sucked into lifestyles involving drugs and disorganized sexuality, and enter prostitution due to the coercion of poverty, homelessness, and social relationships with street figures, including pimps. On the street and at the margins of prostitution it is likely that virtually all young people who finally enter prostitution, suffer serious sexual abuse.

Our reading of the evidence presented in the Report on Sexual Offences Against Children is that the overall prevalence of "ordinary" sexual abuse of young people prior to their entry to the street life is probably at least twice that in the general population, because of their much shorter period of risk. Street life involves exposure to special kinds of sexual abuse, and prostitution itself is sexually abusing for the young teenager.

In some ways then, the findings of the Badgley Report (1984) parallel those of Silbert's (1982) study: the young prostitutes in both studies experienced considerable abuse, both before and after entering prostitution. But in Badgley's study that abuse was emotional and physical, with sexual abuse being no more prevalent (at about 15%) than that reported in the general population. Clearly, further research is needed to throw more light on discrepant findings on prior sexual abuse in the lives of young prostitutes, in the contrasted studies of Badgley and Silbert. We had hoped that the special studies commissioned for the Fraser Committee on Pornography and Prostitution in Canada could throw some useful light on this discrepancy in findings. Unfortunately, these studies, on Ontario (Fleischman, 1984), Atlantic Canada (Crook, 1984), Quebec (Gemme, Murphy, Bourque, Nemeh, & Payment, 1984), the Prairies (Lautt, 1984), and Vancouver (Lowman, 1984) did not use a uniform methodology or set of questions. Gemme et al. (1984) report that of the 82 Quebec prostitutes they studied, "most" came from unhappy family backgrounds and poor environments. No estimate was made of the amount of child sexual abuse experienced by the prostitutes. Crook (1984) studied a sample of 47 prostitutes in the Maritimes, reporting that only 13 had experienced prior sexual abuse. The differential prevalence by sex in this mixed male and female sample was not given, nor were the research methods or questions asked clearly specified. Lautt (1984) studied 36 female prostitutes in Prairie cities, but made no estimate of prior sexual abuse. Lowman (1984) reported that of 48 prostitutes interviewed, one half confirmed sexual abuse had occurred in their childhood prior to entry to prostitution. Of the 23 subjects confirming prior child sexual abuse, 13 thought the abuse had "a significant impact on their subsequent involvement in prostitution," while a further 10 of these 23 abused women could give no direct opinion on this topic. It is, of course, often difficult for even the most sophisticated subjects to recall with analytic accuracy what factors influenced even relatively simple decisions which took place some years before. Reviewing the Fraser Committee studies in light of Silbert's (1982) methodologically sophisticated work, the best we can conclude is that entry to prostitution is influenced by isolation from customary peers and normative networks, and an isolation fostered by abusive events in the home, including sexual abuse. Silbert and Pines (1982a) indicate:

... the street prostitute is a victim of an abusive home who starts prostituting because of survival needs, rather than as a willing participant (p. 488).

The picture which Silbert and her colleagues paint is one of a despairing, isolated drift into prostitution. In many ways Badgley's (1984) research confirms such a picture, except he appears to underestimate the amount of prior sexual abuse in the matrix of family abuse which undermines the self-confidence and adequate functioning of young women who enter prostitution.

Young women especially seem to enter prostitution because their survival options become extremely constrained. This may be so to a lesser degree for young men who enter prostitution (Benjamin, 1985), but it seems safe to conclude from recent American and European studies (Sereny, 1985; Weisberg, 1985) that the majority of teenage prostitutes can hardly be said to exercise free choice in choosing this particular "profession."

## THE PRESENT STUDY

### Methods of Research

As Silbert (1982) has observed, a truly representative sample of prostitutes is impossible to obtain. All studies will be biased to a certain degree, and the "high class" prostitutes, the elite of the profession (Gemme et al., 1984) are rarely described. It is likely that studies of prostitutes are biased toward the most easily available groups, particularly street prostitutes. But these women may also be the most psychologically and socially marginal groups among the profession.

The present study differs from previous research in the population accessed. Although we used the same questionnaire as Silbert (1982) with similar methods of administration and coding, our subjects were somewhat older than Silbert's (Table 1). We studied 45 women aged 18 or more, all of whom had previously been prostitutes but who were no longer practising prostitution. All of the women were interviewed by women associated with various helping agencies in Calgary and Edmonton with whom the former prostitutes were in contact. We contacted the complete "universe" of subjects available in the cooperating agencies. Fifty-two subjects were available; four had left town or could not be traced; three declined to be interviewed; and 45 cooperated fully in the interview procedure.

All of the subjects had given up prostitution at least three months earlier—the average time since leaving prostitution was 9.5 months (range: three to 27 months). All subjects were interviewed by social work or counselling professionals with whom they had previous contact. All interviews were conducted in a relaxed, private setting. We are reasonably confident that subjects gave as accurate a review of their lives as they were able.

A unique feature of this research has been the availability of comparison subjects who had never engaged in prostitution. These control or comparison subjects were drawn from a community mental health study of 679 individuals randomly selected from the adult population of Calgary (Ramsay & Bagley, 1985). These individuals completed a number of standardized measures of mental health and psychological adjustment, and answered questions about childhood and current circumstances antecedent to particular types of psychological adjustment (Bagley & Ramsey, 1985). These mental health measures were added to the Silbert Questionnaire and provide a useful check on the validity of the self-concept measure used in Silbert's study. In addition, female subjects were interviewed and completed the mental health measures a second time a year later. At



TABLE 1

Comparison of Aspects of Silbert's San Francisco Sample (N = 200)  
with the Alberta Sample (N = 45)

Variable	San Francisco	Alberta	Significance of Difference
Under 21 at time of interview	70%	44%	$p < .01$
Father or mother absent for 5+ years by 12th birthday	40%	42%	N.S.
Grew up in urban area	77%	73%	N.S.
Grew up in inner city	54%	44%	N.S.
White	69%	82%	$p < .05$
Black	18%	4%	$p < .05$
Native Indian	1%	13%	$p < .05$
Drinking problems in father and/or mother	58%	53%	N.S.
Regular violence between adults in the home	40%	38%	N.S.
Child physically abused	45%	62%	$p < .05$
Child sexually abused	61%	73%	$p < .05$
Average age of leaving home permanently	14.0 years	15.4 years	$p < .01$
Started prostitution while aged less than 16	62%	51%	N.S.
Negative feelings about self starting prostitution	94%	95%	N.S.
Raped (other than by a client) while a prostitute	70%	62%	N.S.

that time, they also completed a previously developed questionnaire about sexual abuse in childhood (Sorrenti-Little, Bagley, & Robertson, 1984). The controls were randomly selected on the basis of age alone, to produce two groups whose mean ages were not significantly different.

A second set of control or comparison subjects was drawn for 33 of the 45 former prostitutes who reported sexual abuse in childhood. The comparison group consisted of all the women aged under 40 in the community mental health survey who reported sexual abuse in childhood. These 36 women were significantly older than the ex-prostitute group (27.4 years versus 22.4 years), but did provide a valuable comparison group with regard to the nature of child sexual abuse and its possible influence on entry to prostitution.

## Results

The ex-prostitute group (referred to hereafter as EX) were somewhat but not significantly younger than the community comparison or control group (hereafter referred to as CON). The EX group contained somewhat more women from minority ethnic backgrounds (Table 2). This is characteristic of street prostitutes

TABLE 2

Comparison of 45 Ex-prostitutes and 45 Community Controls

Variable	Former Prostitutes	Control Subjects	Statistical Significance of Difference
Age: 18-21	44.4%	40.0%	Not significant
22-25	28.8%	22.2%	
26-29	20.0%	22.3%	
30-36	6.7%	15.5%	
Ethnicity: White	82.2%	95.5%	Not significant
Indian or Metis	13.3%	2.2%	
Black	4.4%	2.2%	
Highest School Grade: 6-7	11.1%	0%	$p < .01$
8-9	28.9%	15.5%	
10-11	42.2%	17.8%	
12-13	17.8%	66.7%	
Expelled or Suspended From School More Than Once	55%	Not asked	—
Ever Pregnant	55%	48.9%	N.S.
Termination of Pregnancy	53%	13.3%	$p < .01$
Pregnant Prior to Age 17	31%	2.2%	$p < .01$
Grew up in: Inner city	44.4%	22.2%	$p < .05$
Suburb of city	28.9%	37.8%	
Small town	8.9%	28.9%	
Rural area or reserve	17.8%	11.1%	
Siblings: 0	11.1%	8.9%	$p < .05$
1-2	40.0%	68.9%	
3-4	35.5%	20.0%	
5+	13.3%	2.2%	
Raised by (majority of childhood, up to age 12):			
Mother and father	42.4%	80.1%	$p < .01$
Mother alone	31.1%	17.7%	
Sibling	4.4%	0%	
Other relative	6.7%	2.2%	
Foster home	15.5%	0%	
Drinking Problem in an Adult in Household when Child:			
Father/stepfather	48.8%	11.1%	$p < .01$
Mother	13.3%	0%	
Other relative	17.7%	0%	
Physical Abuse (excessive beating at least once a month)	62.2%	6.7%	$p < .01$
Physical Neglect (often hungry or left unattended for 8 hours or more)	22.2%	0%	$p < .01$



Emotional Abuse (excessive criticism and/or failure to meet emotional needs)	66.7%	8.9%	$p < .01$
Sexual Abuse by an Adult (18+) up to 16th Year	73.3%	28.9%	$p < .01$
Two or More Types of Abuse (emotional, physical or sexual)	100%	35.5%	$p < .01$
Fights Between Adults (including drunken brawls) at Least Weekly Before 16th Year	66.7%	4.4%	$p < .01$
Age Left Home Permanently:			
13-14	13.3%	0%	
15-16	66.6%	2.2%	$p < .01$
17-18	15.5%	11.1%	
19+	4.4%	86.7%	
Main Reason Left Home:			
Conflict between adults	15.5%	2.2%	
Sexual abuse	48.9%	0%	
Physical abuse	17.8%	0%	$p < .01$
Emotional abuse	13.4%	2.2%	
To attend college	0%	11.1%	
To marry	0%	40.1%	
To work elsewhere	4.4%	44.4%	
Sexual Abuse in Childhood:			
None	26.7%	71.1%	
One assailant	40%	22.2%	
Two assailants (on different occasions)	22.2%	6.7%	$p < .01$
Three assailants	6.7%	0%	
Four assailants	2.2%	0%	
Five assailants	2.2%	0%	
Suicide Attempt or Act of Deliberate Self-Harm by Age 21	26.7%	8.9%	$p < .05$
Self-Esteem (Coopersmith Adult Scale)			
Devastated or very low self-esteem (clinical criteria—score of 30 or more)	71.1%	6.7%	$p < .01$
Semantic Differential Self-Concept Measure			
Very low self-esteem (below two standard deviations from mean for community sample)	51.1%	6.7%	$p < .01$
Middlesex Hospital Questionnaire			
Psychoneurosis (total scale) — Score in range of clinical group	80%	17.8%	$p < .01$

Depression Sub-Scale	80%	15.5%	$p < .01$
Somatic Anxiety Sub-Scale	71.1%	20%	$p < .01$
Phobic Anxiety Sub-Scale	62.2%	17.8%	$p < .01$

in Prairie cities (Lautt, 1984). The EX group had completed significantly few school grades, and had frequently been in trouble in school. Although rates of pregnancy were the same, the EX group were much more likely to have had a termination of pregnancy and to have become pregnant before age 17. The EX group were much more likely to have grown up in inner-city areas; on average they came from larger families, and were much less likely to have grown up in a conventional, two-parent household. Drinking problems among family members, physical abuse and neglect, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse were significantly more frequent in the EX group than in the community controls. Nearly three-quarters of the EX group had been sexually abused, compared with 28% of the CON group. All of the EX group had experienced either sexual or physical abuse, or both, compared with 35% of the CON group.

Three-quarters of the EX group left homes riven by strife, drunkenness, and abuse by the time they were 16: none of the controls left home at this age. Sexual abuse was the most frequent reason given by the EX group for leaving home. A third of the EX group had been sexually abused by two or more individuals in childhood, compared with seven percent of controls.

The mental health of the EX group was dramatically poorer than that of the controls. They were three times as likely to have made a suicide attempt, and more than four times as likely to have poor mental health (on the Middlesex Hospital Questionnaire — Bagley, 1980), and devastated self-esteem (as measured by Coopersmith, 1981). The Coopersmith Scale and the Middlesex Questionnaire subscales correlate with the semantic differential measure used by Silbert (1982) on average 0.56, lending some validity to Silbert's work on the importance of restoration of self-esteem in the psychological rehabilitation of former prostitutes.

Table 3 compares the abuse experienced by the 33 ex-prostitutes reporting sexual abuse in childhood (up to age 16), with that of the 36 women aged less than 39 in the community sample who also reported sexual abuse in childhood. It is immediately obvious that the EX group were much more likely than the controls to have experienced sexual abuse by more than one abuser. The EX group was abused by the same range of individuals (although more frequently by a biological father). The EX group experienced abuse which began at a significantly earlier age, was more frequent, and lasted for longer periods.

The differences in types of assault are dramatic. The EX group were subjected to a greater range of assaults, and to more serious assaults. Three-quarters of the EX group who were victims of child sexual abuse had to submit to completed intercourse, compared with 11% of controls. Fifteen percent of the sexually assaulted EX group had been required to be involved in sado-masochistic practices (including practices involving beating, mutilation, or burning of the subject), and an overlapping 15% had been required to pose for pornographic materials. None of the sexually-abused controls had been treated in this manner.

The sexually abused group of ex-prostitutes reported a much more negative

TABLE 3

Comparison of Former Prostitutes (N = 33) and Community Controls (N = 36)  
Sexually Abused up to Age 16

Variable	Former Prostitutes	Control Subjects	Statistical Significance of Difference
<b>Number of Abusers:</b>			
One only	54.5%	77.8%	$p < .01$
Two (on different occasions)	30.3%	19.4%	
Three abusers	9.1%	2.8%	
Four abusers	3.0%	0%	
Five abusers	3.0%	0%	
Total number of separate abusers	56	45	
<b>Assailant in Sexual Abuse in Childhood:</b>			
Biological father	21.4%	4.4%	$p < .01$
Stepfather, cohabitee, or mother's boyfriend	26.8%	31.1%	
Brother, uncle, or other relative	25%	31.1%	
Acquaintance or family friend	10.7%	22.3%	
Foster parent or teacher	7.2%	0%	
Stranger	8.9%	11.1%	
Number of assailants, on which percentages based	56	45	
<b>Age at Commencement of First Abuse:</b>			
less than 6	18.2%	6.7%	$p < .05$
6-7	18.2%	11.1%	
8-9	36.4%	28.9%	
10-11	15.1%	35.5%	
12-13	9.1%	13.3%	
14-16	3%	4.4%	
Number of assaults on which percentages based	33	36	
<b>Frequency of Sexual Abuse in Childhood (in longest lasting abuse):</b>			
once only	9.1%	33.3%	$p < .01$
2-4 times	15.1%	38.9%	
5-9 times	15.1%	13.9%	
10-19 times	18.2%	8.3%	
20+ times	42.5%	5.5%	
Number of assaults on which percentages based	33	36	
<b>Longest Duration of Sexual Abuse by One Abuser:</b>			
Single abuse on one day	9.1%	33.3%	
Over one month	21.2%	30.5%	



Over six months	18.2%	16.7%	<i>p</i> < .01
Over one year	6.1%	16.7%	
One to four years	15.1%	0%	
Five or more years	30.3%	2.8%	
Number of assaults on which percentages based	33	36	
<b>Nature of Child Sexual Abuse:</b>			
Fellated assailant	66.7%	25%	<i>p</i> < .01
Cunnilingus on victim	87.9%	25%	
Penetration of vagina by penis	75.7%	11.1%	
Penetration of anus by penis	30.3%	5.5%	
Penetration of vagina or anus by object	24.2%	8.3%	
Masturbated assailant	100%	55.5%	
Masturbated by assailant	100%	58.3%	
Kissing/fondling of unclothed breasts	60.6%	41.7%	
Involvement in fetishism or sado-masochism	15.1%	0%	
Posing for pornographic pictures or movies	15.1%	0%	
Total number of victims on which percentages based	33	36	
<b>Subjective Reaction: Effect on Self-image of Sexual Abuse in Childhood:</b>			
Very negative feelings about self	84.8%	55.5%	<i>p</i> < .01
Somewhat negative	6.1%	27.8%	
Numb; no reaction	6.1%	13.9%	
Felt positive	3.0%	2.8%	
<b>What Did You Do, if Anything, to Stop the Sexual Abuse?</b>			
Nothing/didn't know what to do	57.5%	52.8%	<i>p</i> < .05
Ran from home	21.2%	0%	
Revealed to family member, friend, or relative	36.4%	50%	
Revealed to police or professional	3.0%	5.5%	
Tried to commit suicide	9.1%	0%	

reaction to the abuse than did the controls. Cross-classifications indicate depressed self-image was strongly related to a combined index of the severity of the abuse; the nature, frequency, and duration of the abuse; and the number of separate abusers.

Some of the factors which may influence entry to prostitution emerge in the profiles of the group of ex-prostitutes (Table 4). For more than half, child sexual abuse resulted in negative feelings about sex: yet despite or because of this, for more than half, the experience of sexual abuse was judged to be a significant factor in becoming a prostitute. The sexually abused children became sexually active

TABLE 4

Questions Relevant to Prostitution,  
Asked Only of 45 Former Prostitutes

Variable	Number	Percent
<b>Effect on Feelings About Sex, Following Experience of Child Sexual Abuse:</b>		
No abuse—not relevant	12/45	26.7%
Very negative	10/45	22.2%
Somewhat negative	16/45	35.5%
No reaction	7/45	15.5%
Positive reaction	0/45	0%
<b>Felt that Sexual Abuse as a Child was a Significant Factor in Becoming a Prostitute:</b>		
No abuse—not relevant	12/45	26.7%
Definitely not	5/45	11.1%
Perhaps/not sure	7/45	15.5%
Probably, yes	3/45	6.7%
Definitely, yes	18/45	40%
<b>Age at First Sexual Intercourse (other than in child sexual abuse, or in prostitution):</b>		
10-11	4/45	8.9%
12-13	16/45	35.5%
14-15	21/45	46.7%
16-17	4/45	8.9%
<b>Number of Boyfriends with whom Subject had Voluntary Sexual Intercourse Prior to Prostitution:</b>		
0-1	5/45	11.1%
2 - 3	10/45	22.2%
4 - 5	6/45	13.3%
6 - 9	4/45	8.9%
10 - 14	4/45	8.9%
15 - 19	3/45	6.7%
20 +	13/45	28.9%
<b>Considered "Easy" or "Promiscuous" When at School</b>		
	9/45	20%
<b>Raped (in addition to any event of child sexual abuse):</b>		
Before entering prostitution	14/45	31.1%
After entering prostitution	28/45	62.2%
Reported rape to police	6/40	15%
Raped more than once and/or experienced sexual abuse before entering prostitution	40/45	88.9%
<b>Type of Prostitution Ever Practised:</b>		
Street only	30/45	66.7%
Street and bar	8/45	17.8%
Street and bar and massage parlour	5/45	11.1%

Escort agency and other	2/45	4.4%
Call girl	0/45	0%
<b>Age Started Prostitution:</b>		
12-13	6/45	13.3%
14-15	23/45	51.1%
16-17	16/45	35.5%
18+	0/45	0%
<b>Age First Regularly Working as a Prostitute:</b>		
12-13	4/45	8.9%
14-15	22/45	48.9%
16-17	12/45	26.7%
18+	7/45	15.5%
<b>Main Reason for Starting Prostitution:</b>		
Needed money to survive	15/45	33.3%
Needed money for drug habit	18/45	40%
Coerced or persuaded by pimp or boyfriend	6/45	13.3%
Drifted into prostitution because of example/influence of friends	6/45	13.3%
<b>Did You Consider You Had any Alternative to Entering Prostitution?</b>		
Yes	6/45	13.3%
No (forced, or did it to survive)	36/45	80%
Unsure	3/45	6.7%
<b>Feelings Following First Prostitution Experience:</b>		
Depressed	32/45	71.1%
Inadequate/worthless	34/45	75.5%
Confused	25/45	55.5%
Scared	25/45	55.5%
(more than one type of feeling usually reported)		
<b>Number of Problems Faced Prior to Entry to Prostitution:</b>		
None	1/45	2.2%
1	3/45	6.7%
2-3	17/45	37.8%
4-5	12/45	26.7%
6+	12/45	26.7%
("Problems" included drug habit; money and shelter needs; psychological confusion and dependency on a dominant person; runaway situation following emotional, physical, or sexual abuse at home)		
<b>Severely Beaten (causing scarring, contusions, fracture, and/or considerable blood loss) at Least Once by Trick, Own Pimp, Other Pimp, Police, or Other Person:</b>		
No	3/45	6.7%
Yes	42/45	93.3%



**Time Spent in Prostitution**

Less than a year	4/45	8.9%
12-23 months	6/45	13.3%
24-35 months	16/45	35.5%
36-59 months	12/45	26.7%
Five years or more	7/45	15.5%

**Reason for Leaving Prostitution:**

To escape physical beatings, own volition	5/45	11.1%
Had enough, wanted out, left of own volition	28/45	62.2%
Became "born again" Christian through street evangelist	1/45	2.2%
Helped to leave by women's group or sexual assault centre	5/45	11.1%
Boyfriend helped to leave	3/45	6.7%
Social services, probation, or other agency helped	3/45	6.7%

**Financial Status Now:**

Poor, struggling, on social assistance or student loan, or in minimum wage job	28/45	62.2%
Working, reasonably well off	13/45	28.9%
Married, living at home in reasonable comfort	4/45	8.9%
Independently wealthy	0/45	0%

at an early age, and more than half had intercourse with four or more males before entering prostitution in their teen years. No less than 29% had intercourse with 20 or more boys or men before entering prostitution, and many of these girls earned the reputation of being "easy" or "sluts" while at school. Many of these girls were also raped as teenagers (before becoming prostitutes). Ninety percent of the ex-prostitutes had been sexually abused and/or raped before entering prostitution. The majority of subjects began prostitution before their sixteenth birthday, and the ages at which these girls began prostitution were similar to those which emerged in other studies (Benjamin, 1985).

The main reasons given for entering prostitution was the need for money—to survive, or for drugs. Relatively few of the women were persuaded to enter prostitution by boyfriends or pimps. Eighty percent of the women felt they did not have any alternative to entering prostitution given the weight of multiple problems they faced. For almost all, the entry to prostitution was a hateful experience, leaving them scared, inadequate, worthless, and confused. All left prostitution as soon as they could, either of their own volition or with the aid of another person. None had gained any economic advantage from being prostitutes; but many had experienced emotional and physical trauma, and had been beaten and raped.

The picture which emerges from this gloomy survey is similar to that which emerged in Silbert's (1982) study—a picture of abuse, exploitation, and learned helplessness. In many ways our results are similar to those of Silbert (Table 1). The differences which do emerge (including a greater prevalence of physical and sexual abuse in the Alberta study) might be attributed to the fact that our subjects

TABLE 5

Multiple Regression Analysis of Factors Predicting  
Entry to Prostitution in 90 Subjects

Variable	Original Correlation with Entry to Prosti- tution	Partial Correlation	Multiple Correlation	Proportion of Variance
Separation from a biological parent for 5+ years before age 12	.54	.54	.54	29%
Severity of sexual abuse before age 16	.50	.37	.65	42%
Severity of physical abuse before age 16	.42	.36	.74	55%
Ran from home before age 16	.40	.25	.80	64%
Severity of physical neglect before age 16	.36	.15	—	—
Severity of emotional abuse before age 16	.30	.07	—	—
Age of subject	-.30	-.15	—	—

Note: All correlations were significant before multiple regression. After multiple regression, the first four variables with correlation greater than 0.20 remained significant predictors of entry to prostitution. Multiple regression was carried out using SPSS version 8.0 (Nie, Hill, Jenkins, Steinbrenner, & Brent, 1975). The last three variables, being non-significant predictors, were not included in the regression evaluation.

left home later than the San Francisco subjects, and were thus at greater risk of abuse in the home.

In looking for a model to explain entry to prostitution, we combined the data from the 45 ex-prostitutes and the 45 community controls (Table 5). The multiple regression technique used selects the variable which explains the maximum amount of the variance of the other predictor variables with the dependent variable (in this case, entry to prostitution). No particular order of entry was specified, except the amount of variance explained by each independent variable. The variable selected by the statistical analysis was separation from a biological parent before age 12, a factor which acts as an indicator of many other problems in childhood, including physical and sexual abuse, and physical neglect. Sexual and physical abuse remain significant predictors of entry to prostitution, even when the effects of parental separation are controlled for. It should be noted that abuse experiences were coded according to their severity, not simply as present or absent. Thus, sexual abuse was coded by assigning a zero if no abuse of any kind was experienced, a weight of one if abuse of any kind was experienced, and an additional weight of one for *each* of the following events: assault amounting to intercourse or other kinds of bodily penetration, assault involving sado-masochist activity, assault by more than one assailant on separate occasions, assault on more than 20 different occasions, assault(s) continued for more than six months at the hands of any assailant. For the controls, the mean sexual abuse score was 0.40; for the ex-prostitutes it was 2.31. Physical abuse and neglect, and

TABLE 6

Multiple Regression Analysis of Factors Predicting  
Poor Mental Health in 90 Subjects

Variable	Original Correlation with Poor Mental Health	Partial Correlation	Multiple Correlation	Proportion of Variance Explained
Severity of sexual abuse before age 16	.61	.61	.61	37%
Practised prostitution	.54	.35	.71	50%
Separated from a biological parent for 5+ years before age 12	.49	.22	.75	56%
Severity of physical abuse before age 16	.40	.25	.76	58%
Severity of emotional abuse before age 16	.28	.09	--	--
Age of subject	-.25	.10	--	--

Note: All correlations were significant before multiple regression. After multiple regression, the first four variables with correlations greater than 0.20 remained significant predictors of poor mental health.

emotional abuse were measured by the EMBU, a "memories of childhood" measure known to be valid and reliable (Perris, Jacobson, Linstrom, Van Knorring, & Perris, 1980) and shown to be predictive of adult adjustment in a parallel study in Calgary (Bagley & Ramsay, 1986).

Another issue to be addressed in this paper is whether the experience of prostitution per se contributes to the markedly poorer mental health observed in the ex-prostitutes in comparison to the community controls (Table 2). We carried out a further multiple regression analysis to address this problem (Table 6), with total score on the Middlesex Hospital Questionnaire (MHQ) as the dependent variable (Bagley, 1980). The MHQ is a well-validated measure used in community mental health studies, and discriminates between various DSMIII categories.

The regression analysis (Table 6) shows severity of sexual abuse is the strongest predictor of poor mental health. While being a prostitute takes its toll on mental health independent of other factors, there were some ex-prostitutes in our sample with relatively good mental health. Without exception, these women suffered neither physical nor sexual abuse, but in the majority of cases ran from home to avoid emotional conflict and the alcoholism of a parent.

The regression analysis with poor mental health as the dependent variable was repeated for the 45 ex-prostitutes (Table 7). Again, the severity of sexual abuse in childhood explains the greatest amount of the variance in the measure of poor mental health. When the correlation of other potential predictors with child sexual abuse are controlled for, two variables remain significant predictors of poor mental health: time spent in prostitution, and separation from a parent for five or more years before age 12.



## DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate a high proportion of prostitutes experienced sexual abuse in childhood. In this respect our results resemble those of Silbert (1982) (whose questionnaire we used), rather than those of Badgley (1984). These results also tend to support our methodological critique of Badgley, although the problems of obtaining comparable samples of prostitutes should be borne in mind.

Our own sample was drawn from various helping agencies, and it might be that those ex-prostitutes who cooperate with agencies are those with the most traumatic histories. This is but speculation, and it must be said that our original expectation was that those women able to leave prostitution after a relatively short time on the streets would be the least traumatized. Contrary to this expectation, the interviews revealed an astonishing picture of family disorganization, multiple abuse, and running from home. Once on the streets these young women were abused again, and the experience of prostitution contributed yet further to the psychological bondage of these women.

Comparison with the community control group indicated that the mental health of these former prostitutes was dramatically poorer. In a parallel study of links between childhood circumstances and current adjustment in a large community sample (Bagley & Ramsay, 1986), we found three factors were significantly intercorrelated: sexual abuse, physical abuse, and permanent separation from a parent. Children in disrupted homes were at significantly greater risk of physical neglect and emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. But when the intercorrelations of these factors were controlled for in multiple regression analysis, three factors—sexual abuse, physical abuse, and separation from a parent—each had some independent and statistically significant power in predicting current mental health. The present study (Tables 6 and 7) has produced similar results.

An English study (Bagley & MacDonald, 1984) of children removed from their homes and raised permanently in care because of physical abuse, sexual abuse, or family breakdown, found each of these background factors (sexual abuse, physical abuse, parental separation) predicted adjustment in adulthood. The general conclusion from these various studies, including the present one, is that psychological adjustment in women is influenced by the interaction of a number of factors reflecting family disruption. In prostitutes, the traumatic effects of child sexual abuse often seem to transcend and independently influence adult mental health, in comparison with the influence of the degradation and trauma of prostitution itself. It should be emphasized, however, that we are not certain about cause in this respect, which has not been established beyond doubt in this or indeed in any other study.

Silbert (1984) showed ex-prostitutes improved in self-esteem and self-confidence following counselling. Our own study (Table 7) shows a positive but non-significant correlation between time that has elapsed since leaving prostitution and improvement in mental health. This could be, as in Silbert's work, a reflection of counselling or it could simply reflect the amount of time lived in a more stable situation. We are investigating these possibilities, and will report on aspects of therapeutic intervention in a subsequent paper.

Does the experience of child sexual abuse influence entry to prostitution? This is a difficult question to answer, notwithstanding the fact that over 70% of

TABLE 7

Multiple Regression Analysis of Factors Predicting  
Poor Mental Health in 45 Ex-prostitutes

Variable	Original Correlation with Poor Mental Health	Partial Correlation	Multiple Correlation	Proportion of Variance Explained
Severity of sexual abuse before age 16	.40	.40	.40	16%
Months in prostitution	.33	.30	.44	19%
Separated from a parent for 5 + years before age 12	.30	.28	.50	25%
Age at entry into prostitution	.35	.19	--	--
Severity of physical abuse before age 16	.29	.11	--	--
Severity of physical neglect before age 16	.20	.04	--	--
Severity of emotional abuse before age 16	.15	.01	--	--
Time since leaving prostitution	-.14	-.14	--	--
Age	.08	.06	--	--

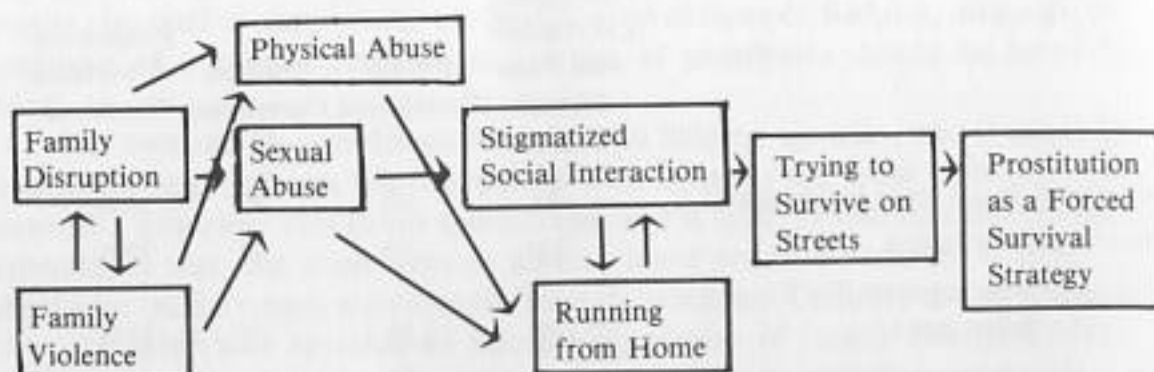
Note: Correlations of 0.27 were significant before multiple regression. After multiple regression the first three variables above remained statistically significant, and were included in the regression equation, which explained 25% of the variance in the index of poor mental health.

the ex-prostitutes in this study had been seriously sexually abused as children. Only 40% of the women felt child sexual abuse was "definitely" a factor in their entry to prostitution. Yet it appears sexual abuse may have caused social and psychological isolation and/or maladaptive sexual behavior in at least two-thirds of those interviewed. Stigmatized, running from home, isolated, drawn into drug subcultures, these teenagers drifted into prostitution. None really chose to be prostitutes. All hated doing it, and left as soon as they could. The present sample, biased as it may be, completely disconfirms our earlier notion that there is such a thing as "normal" prostitution, or rational social and economic choice about entry.

The model of entry to prostitution which has emerged from this study is something as follows (Figure 1). Family disruption and family violence undermine children's capacity to avoid prevalent sexual and physical assaults. Sexually abused children act out in various ways; physically abused children react by running. Children who have been both physically and sexually abused are doubly at risk. On the streets these traumatized children have little psychological strength to resist the predators who lead them into drug and prostitution subcultures. The girl who finally tries prostitution is one who is already degraded and demoralized, in a state of psychological bondage, with grossly diminished self-confidence. The experience of prostitution further degrades her.

FIGURE 1

## A Model of Entry to Prostitution



## RESUME

On reprend ici le travail de Silbert et Pines (1982) à propos de l'entrée dans la prostitution. Les résultats, semblables à ceux des chercheurs américains, mettent en évidence un portrait des abus multiples et de la dégradation de 45 anciens prostitués, interviewés avant et après leur entrée dans la prostitution. On critique les fondements méthodologiques des travaux faits au Canada par Bagley qui prétend que les jeunes prostitués n'ont pas plus que le reste de la population fait l'expérience d'abus sexuels comme enfants. L'étude indique que 73% des prostitués ont été victimes d'abus sexuels durant leur enfance en comparaison de 29% pour un groupe de contrôle issu d'un échantillon aléatoire de la population. En faisant la comparaison avec les sujets du groupe de contrôle, on découvre que la gravité de l'abus sexuel durant l'enfance est un facteur qui contribue de façon significative à la détérioration de la santé mentale et à la faiblesse de l'estime de soi des anciens prostitués.

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