

# EXITING COMMERCIAL SEXUAL ACTIVITY

Miriam Saphira PhD DipEd Psych, DipClinPsych

Averil Herbert PhD, DipClinPsych, Tainui, Ngati Paretekawa, Ngati Maniapoto

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## **Abstract:**

This study explores the attempts of those involved in commercial sexual activities to leave the sex trade. People who began commercial sexual activities before the age of 18 years were asked about their first experiences of being paid for sex. They were asked if they had attempted to leave the sex trade and about the issues this entailed. The study examines the factors that led workers back into commercial sex; the alternatives; the support systems available; and the impact of early experiences of trying to leave.

## **Introduction:**

Much was said during debates around prostitution reform in New Zealand in 2003 about making it easier for people to exit the sex trade. Little was said about factors that may make it difficult to exit. Making a choice to enter the sex trade assumes a situation of informed choice. It assumes the existence of equally compelling alternatives being available to teenagers who are often disenfranchised (Unger, Simon, Newman, Montgomery, Kipke, & Albornoz, 1998). This notion of choice and consent overrides the realities of family breakdown, child abuse, life on the street, life with an addiction and personal damage experienced by young people who enter the sex trade (Davidson, 2001). However, young people often feel they must have made a free choice as the alternative is to realise that they have made a mistake and as a consequence lose their self respect. There is often a long path of violence, pressure, coercion, hedonism, hunger and desperation before a young person reaches the stage of embarking on commercial sexual activity. MacKinnon (1989) points out that when faced with no alternative, the strategy to acquire self respect and pride is to believe: *I chose it.*

The Australian Institute of Criminology suggested that there were a number of risk factors present at different stages of a child's development which may contribute to a child's vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation (Grant, Grabosky & David, 1999). The issues are complex. Family breakdown, prior victimisation, isolation of personal identity, homelessness, poverty, lack of education, drug use, the isolation and abuse of indigenous and ethnic communities, growing consumerism and unemployment are some of the issues cited (Grant, Grabosky & David, 1999).

The only information from the young person's perspective comes from studies of adult prostitutes who began at a young age. In a study of 10 sex workers, who engaged in commercial sexual activities between the ages of 11-23 years old, seven became involved to support their drug use and three for the money (Marriott, 2001). In a New Zealand qualitative study, the reasons parlour workers gave for entering into commercial sexual activity were money, freedom and easy lifestyle. Street workers' responses were related to money to support spending, more excitement, the "pleasures of the moment" and increased earnings (Plumridge, 2001).

In a study of Thai students, 85% cited poverty when questioned about the reasons for children entering prostitution. Other reasons were the desire to be rich, lack of education, family problems including abuse, behavioural problems, materialism, drugs and family obligation (Baker, 2000).

Dodsworth summarises what have been called the “*push/pull*” factors (Hayes & Trafford, 1997). The negative “push” factors included physical and sexual abuse, poverty, neglect, family breakdown, bad experience of foster care, inadequate after-care services, homelessness (often as a consequence of running away), school exclusion, unemployment, lack of financial support, as well as the consequent low levels of self esteem and feelings of powerlessness. The positive “pull” factors included excitement, freedom, independence, access to money, support from others involved in prostitution, a way of seeking affection and a sense of power and control which was in contrast to previous abuse experiences. It is suggested that young people involved in commercial sexual activities are living lives where all available lifestyle choices are less than positive (Dodsworth, 2000).

For males the situation appears to be replicated. Some 75% of young males in a Minneapolis study (Freiburg, 1985) were gay and had been severely discriminated against at home. In other similar studies, youths reported that they became involved in commercial sexual activities to survive and escape the physical, sexual and emotional abuse suffered at home and at school. They used sex to meet non-sexual needs (Savin-Williams, 1994; Pederson & Hegna, 2002).

Most assistance offered to young people involved in commercial sexual activities is motivated by the concepts of rescue and reform. These are experienced as punitive and restrictive by the young people they aim to protect (Lee & O'Brien, 1995). The 1996 World Congress Against the Commercial Exploitation of Children (reiterated at the Second Congress at Yokohama) recognised that such exploitation has to be fought on a number of different fronts simultaneously (Dodsworth, 2000). The approach recommended must be holistic, based on children's rights and supportive of their participation. Such principles would encourage and support alternative survival strategies, provide exiting opportunities and encourage and strengthen resilience. Both legislation and support services need to recognise the conditions of exploitation and understand what the exploiter is offering these young people. This is not, however, an “either/or” option for service providers. There would be a need to support cultural differences when positive, but to confront traditional practices that maintain the abuse (Warburton, 2001).

If young people are to leave the life style, support groups and programmes that address both substance abuse and the physical and psychological issues of childhood need to be established (Baker, 2000). Australian outreach models have provided hostel accommodation, safe houses for girls, boys and queer youth, and drop-in centres for young people for over twenty years. This does not appear to have lessened the exploitation of children (Grant, Grabosky & David., 1999). A study of ten young sex workers in Victoria revealed that all but one had accessed 13 different social agencies for assistance with food, accommodation, rights, the law and alternative employment (Marriot, 2001). One such agency was the *Sacred Heart Mission*. This service endeavours to straddle the formal and informal worlds and to bridge cultural divides (Mitchell, 2000). There were problems for the young people in gaining access to support during the night as no service was available 24 hours a day. None of the participants wished to remain in sex work and some hoped to quit within three months. Eight out of the 10 young people who were interviewed were dealing with substance abuse. They said they found sex work necessary to provide them with immediate money (Mitchell, 2000).

An approach must be discovered whereby the positive “pull” factors (excitement; sense of freedom and independence; access to easy money; means of seeking affection learnt from previous abuse experiences) can be countered (Hayes & Trafford, 1997). Many of the problems facing those leaving the sex trade are identical to those experienced by people who have suffered trauma or who are recovering from addictions or tragedy. The symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) need to be recognised and taken into account in any courses that are set up to enable young people to leave commercial sexual activities.

Cusick sees exiting commercial sexual activity as a process rather than a definitive event (Mansson and Hedin, 1999). Fuchs Ebaugh (1988) describes role exit as a process consisting of four consecutive phases:

1. *first doubts* arise when the individual begins to question that which has earlier been taken for granted and when a conscious feeling of disappointment and dissatisfaction comes to the fore;
2. *seeking alternatives* is a phase characterised by vague and fuzzy alternatives which gradually become clearer and take the form of more conscious consideration and planning;
3. *the turning point* often occurs dramatically and in connection with an external event, but it can also come gradually, after long and mature consideration;
4. *creating the exit role* which occurs when the person who has broken away frees him/herself from what remains of the old role and starts creating a new identity.

This study asked those who had attempted to leave commercial sexual activity about the process, about factors that enabled them to leave the situation and about factors that prompted them to return.

## Method

Questionnaires were distributed and/or interviews were held in the Auckland, Northland and Waikato regions. Forty seven forms were completed. The questionnaire was developed in consultation with medical and psychological researchers, the Auckland Ethics Committee and Maori Community Workers in South Auckland. Completed questionnaires were returned from brothels, private workers, New Zealand Prostitutes Collective drop in centres, former workers from a snowballed sample and from street workers. Some respondents were assisted with the reading of the questions. Ethical approval was obtained from the Health Funding Authority Auckland.

The 47 respondents ranged in age from 15 to 47 years with an average age of 24 years. There were 37 females, 3 males and 7 transgenders. There were 20 European (43%), 19 Maori (40%), 5 Pacific Peoples (11%), and 3 European immigrants.

## Results

Most were living away from family when they started having sex for money. Most (96%) had had early sexual experiences and half had disclosed childhood sexual abuse. The average age they began prostitution was 14.5 years old. The range was from under 10 years old to 17 years.

Twenty nine (62%) had tried to stop engaging in sex for money but less than half were successful.

**Table I Age of First Involvement and Attempts to Stop Commercial Sexual Activity**

<i>Age at Commencement of Commercial Sexual Activity</i>	<i>Attempted to Stop</i>	<i>Did Not Attempt</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Under 14 years when first involved</b>	1	5	6
<b>14 – 15 years when first involved</b>	15	6	21
<b>16 – 17 years when first involved</b>	13	7	20
<b>Total</b>	29	18	47

Twelve (26%) had stopped commercial sexual activity at the time of filling in the questionnaire. Four had obtained other work; two were forced to stop by being sent to prison for other offences; two stopped when they came off drugs and had less need for quick money.

A variety of reasons caused those who had tried to stop commercial sexual activities to return to it. They reported that they were unable to adjust their lifestyle, they ran out of money and they had difficulty planning ahead. This latter difficulty could have been expected given the high rate of PTSD anticipated in this population due to the childhood abuse and subsequent violence many experienced while involved in the sex trade. One of the symptoms of PTSD is difficulty in forward thinking. Those who began at a very early age were less likely to attempt to stop commercial sexual activity.

**Table II Reason for Stopping Commercial Sexual Activity and Age of Commencement**

<i>Reason for Stopping Commercial Sexual Activity</i>	<i>Under 13 years</i>	<i>13 –15 years</i>	<i>16 –17 years</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Got a partner not a pimp</b>			1	1
<b>Did not like doing it</b>			1	1
<b>Got involved in other work and things</b>	1	2	1	4
<b>Came off drugs and stopped using</b>		1	1	2
<b>Went to prison</b>	1	1		2
<b>Recognised the effects it was having on me</b>	1			1
<b>Became a Christian</b>	1			1
<b>Did not stop</b>	2	17	16	35
<b>Total</b>	6	21	20	47

The most significant reasons for returning to the sex trade were to do with the difficulty of saving any money and the inability to think ahead. Much of the planning ahead was limited to a few hours or days at a time. One street worker earned several hundred dollars in two hours but spent it gambling. After she had lost it, she attempted to borrow money to stop the electricity at home being cut off. If someone had had a successful night, it was not uncommon to shout drinks rather than save it towards her plan for leaving the sex trade.

**Table III Age of Commencement and why they returned**

<i>Reason for returning</i>	<i>Under 14 years</i>	<i>14-15</i>	<i>16-17</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Ran out of money</b>		14	8	22
<b>Partner made me</b>		1	1	2
<b>Abusive relationships</b>			2	2
<b>Moved towns</b>			1	1
<b>Police threatened me</b>	1			1
<b>It's a life style</b>			1	1
<b>Did not try to stop</b>	5	6	7	18
<b>Total</b>	6	21	20	47

Although the idea of leaving home early may suggest early maturity and independence, the respondents' life style did not necessarily sustain independence. The initial idea of having sex for money was frequently (83%) proposed by other people, two thirds of whom also set the price. As young people they appear to have been influenced by others and to have had less control over their lives.

**Table IV Influence of others and ability to stop**

<i>Reason for returning</i>	<i>Myself</i>	<i>Peers</i>	<i>Older People</i>	<i>Newspaper Ad</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Ran out of money</b>	5	8	7	2	22
<b>Partner made me</b>	1		1		2
<b>Abusive relationships</b>			2		2
<b>Moved towns</b>			1		1
<b>Police threatened me</b>			1		1
<b>It's a life style</b>			1		1
<b>Did not try to stop</b>	5	6	6		18
<b>Total</b>	11	14	19	2	46

Those who had been raped or had suicidal thoughts since their involvement in commercial sexual activity were no more likely to try to leave than those who did not report such an event.

The respondents reported several negative aspects of the sex trade and sometimes these changed the nature of their involvement. After a street friend was murdered, one teenager stopped working on the street and began working in a parlour even though she was only 16 years old. Sometimes they were forced to stop for a time either because they had been arrested or because they were in hospital recovering from an attack or from an overdose of drugs or prescription medicine. Some attempted to stop at these times but many of these attempts were short lived.

**Table V The negative aspects of commercial sexual activity\***

<i>Negative Aspects</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Transgender</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Disgusting men</b>	15	2	3	20
<b>Rape and abuse</b>	6	1	3	9
<b>Having to do the sex &amp; not knowing what I had to do</b>	6		1	7
<b>Cold</b>	5			5
<b>Fear of Arrest</b>	3	1	1	5
<b>Stigma</b>	5			5
<b>Did not like the sex</b>	3		1	4
<b>Guilt</b>	3			3
<b>The effects</b>	2		1	3
<b>Not being paid</b>	1		1	2
<b>Waiting about</b>	2			2
<b>Client not knowing what I am</b>		1		1
<b>Late Hours</b>	1			1
<b>Pain</b>			1	1
<b>Getting dropped off at another place</b>	1			1
<b>Lifestyle</b>	1			1
<b>Jealousy among the girls</b>	1			1
<b>Total</b>	37	3	7	71*

\*Multiple responses were possible

Several said they were going to stop in a couple of months when they had paid off some bills or fines. No one talked of putting the “easy money” aside so they had some money saved for when they did stop. They did not have a routine so they did not work every day. When they had some money, they did not go to work until it ran out. It made little sense to some to go out on the streets when they had money “under the mattress”. Others never had any money to save because their boyfriends took it.

The negative aspects are countered to some extent by what the respondents described as the positive aspects of commercial sexual activity. Transgender respondents were more likely to find enjoyment in the interaction and often felt good when men perceived them to be women.

**Table VI The Positive Aspects of Commercial Sexual Activity**

<i>Positive Aspects of Sex for Payment</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Easy money</b>	37
<b>Lifestyle of money and drugs</b>	9
<b>Recognition, good conversation</b>	6
<b>Enjoyment</b>	4
<b>Access to Drugs</b>	3
<b>Buying new things</b>	2
<b>Freedom</b>	2
<b>Security</b>	1
<b>Good Work Conditions</b>	1
<b>Total</b>	65

The amount of support they received from friends did not seem to have much bearing on whether they would try to stop their involvement. Those who reported thoughts of suicide were no more likely than others to stop their involvement in commercial sexual activity.

Over half of the respondents advised young people not to get involved in commercial sexual activities. A third suggested young people needed to become educated as to the dangers.

### **Conclusion**

Many of people in this study had become involved in underage prostitution at the suggestion of older people. Some of these people stood to benefit financially from the transaction. For the young people themselves the money they could access from being paid for sex was far greater than the current youth wage rates. Many began while they were legally obliged to be attending school. Those interviewed spoke of the instant lifestyle. They would see something they would like to buy, would do a trick and buy it. There was little notion of putting money aside in case they could not work because of illness or because they tired of the lifestyle. Others were involved to support their regular drug use and some indicated that they supported some one else.

Plumridge (2001) commented on “the consumption of alcohol and drugs” and how “the hedonism of the moment” became “a meaningless treadmill”. Only 12 of the participants in the current study had managed to leave the sex trade. Nearly two thirds had tried to stop.

There must also be opportunity to begin some healing of the trauma that has been suffered. Group work and the comradeship it offers could be beneficial. The group may offer a new set of values that assists a person who may be undertaking a “getting back into the workforce” course.

It is unlikely that 9 – 5 courses with fortnightly payments will offer sufficient incentive to enable people to leave commercial sexual activity. Courses that begin later in the day, utilise the former hours of work and give rewards at shorter intervals may engage a person leaving commercial sexual activities. The hours worked in the sex trade are similar to many jobs such as the hospitality trade.

Mansson and Hedin, (1999) enquired into former prostitutes’ experiences of exiting and distinguished four challenges which the women had faced after leaving prostitution. These

were: working through and understanding the experiences of a life in prostitution; dealing with shame; living in a marginal situation; and dealing with intimate and close relationships. The respondents in this study were not engaged in interview long enough to ascertain whether these were also factors to consider when exiting.

## Implications

Exiting involvement in commercial sexual activity was not systematically planned but was related to a variety of fortuitous events. Some of the respondents who found alternative interests discovered that there was work and study that involved comradeship with other students; that partying was possible without the expectations, violence, abuse and general exploitation that had been imposed on them. Another unplanned event was finding a supportive relationship.

For others prison offered the opportunity to deal with an addiction, do some healing and become informed about more desirable alternatives.

Services that already exist may be able to accommodate those wishing to exit if more outreach programmes encouraging exit were available.

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