

The recent political furore about sexual tourism has obscured the reality that the involvement of children under the age of sixteen in prostitution appears to be a firmly established feature of the British sex industry. However, because child prostitution is, necessarily, a clandestine activity, it has proved difficult to establish exactly how many children are involved. The information we do have is fragmentary, based largely on localised research, retrospective accounts by adults who are, or have been, in-

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involved in prostitution and the experiences of workers in the few voluntary sector projects which strive to respond to the problem. Its limitations notwithstanding, these accounts all point to the fact that child and teenage prostitution is associated with four, related, factors: family poverty, family stress, running away from home or care and homelessness.

Hugh Shriane (1995) in Luton revealed that 46% of the young people who ran away from home came from the poorest public housing estate with the highest youth crime and ‘in care’ rates and the lowest level of youth and adult employment in the borough.

### Abuse

However, a substantial minority of children running from home or care are also running from violent and sexual abuse. McCormack *et al* (1986) found that 73% of young women and 38% of young men running from home or care had been sexually abused. That such abuse can lead to involvement in prostitution is evidenced by Silbert and Pines (1981) who, in their study of 200 adult prostitutes found, that 60% of them had been sexually abused as juveniles. It is now widely accepted that child abuse, in the forms of sexual violation and violence is, for the most part, perpetrated by men and that it occurs throughout the social structure. However, recent scholarship suggests that rather than being randomly distributed, the violent abuse of children tends to be concentrated in the poorest neighbourhoods. This is attributable, in part at least, to the progressive drain upon parenting capacities which life in these impoverished neighbourhoods imposes but it is also clear that this violence is most prevalent amongst men who experience the greatest discrepancy between what they have become and what they believe, as men, they are supposed to be. If as many commentators argue, the violent sexual abuse of women and children is essentially about power rather than sex, it should not surprise us, that it is concentrated in neighbourhoods in which the powerlessness of its male residents is a defining feature.

### A growing problem

The Children’s Society has been at the forefront of work with children and young people under 16 who run away from home or from care since 1985 when it established the Central London Teenage Project, the first refuge for runaway minors. In the intervening years simi-

# Child prostitution in the UK

David Barrett and John Pitts assess progress in child protection.

### Child prostitution and family poverty

As a result of the government’s taxation and housing policies, the 1980s witnessed a substantial redistribution of wealth in favour of the already wealthy, and radical changes in the population profile of public housing. As the decade progressed relatively prosperous older families left housing estates in the inner city or on its periphery, to be replaced by poorer, younger families. As a result, whereas at the beginning of the 1980s the average council house tenant’s income was 73% of the national average, by the beginning of the 1990s it had fallen to 48%. By 1995, over 50% of council households had no breadwinner (Burrows 1997). The estates which experienced the greatest changes saw increasing concentrations of children, teenagers, young single adults and young single parent families. These are the kinds of neighbourhoods in which the children who eventually become involved in prostitution live.

### Running away

Not surprisingly, perhaps, these were also the neighbourhoods from which the bulk of the children in the care of the local authority were drawn and where the preponderance of young people who ran away, and stayed away, from home originated. An analysis of data collected by the Homelessness charity *Centrepoin* (1995) reveals that, overwhelmingly, young people who run away, or are thrown out of home come from the poorest neighbourhoods. Many of them have spent some time in care and many report that they leave home as a result of conflict with parents. A study undertaken by



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lar refuges have opened in other major UK cities. The experience of these refuges and research commissioned by the Children's Society in the late 1980s and early 1990s suggest that, like adult prostitution, child prostitution is growing amongst those children and young people experiencing the most acute social deprivation (Matthews 1986, Lea & O'Brien 1995).

### A confused response

Professional responses to children involved in prostitution are contradictory and confused. The policing of prostitution in the UK is still shaped by the central imperative of the Street Offences Act (1959), to get prostitutes off the street. This endeavour has gained impetus recently as citizen groups have applied pressure on the police to 'clean up' their neighbourhood. This has often been a successful strategy from the point of view of the residents but, as Lea & O'Brien (1995) observe, this can often simply drive child prostitutes into another area and this may well:

*"... increase the risks they face as their regular 'safe' clients and the informal support and warning networks that operate on the street are lost. Another effect of this approach may be to push more young people into the sectors of the sex industry that take place away from the public gaze".*

The number of cautions and prosecutions of young men and women under 18 for offences related to prostitution declined between 1989 and 1993, suggesting the *de facto* creation of 'tolerance zones' in UK cities, in which the police, in effect, manage rather than prosecute prostitution. The problem with such tolerance is that within these zones, the duty of the police under the Children Act 1989, to protect children and young people effectively falls into abeyance.

Although it is hard to see how children involved in prostitution could not be 'at risk' or in danger of 'significant harm' in terms of the 1989 Act, many Area Child Protection Committees, which carry statutory responsibility for children subject to psychological, violent or sexual abuse have, in practice, tended to avoid the issue. Professional social workers who have tried to get to grips with the problem have, therefore, often felt uncertain

about the role they should play and the ways in which they should exercise their powers. In consequence, to date, no 'client' of a child prostitute, many of whom are willing to pay an additional premium for sex with children, has been prosecuted for an offence against a child under the provision of the 1989 Act.

### A new initiative

However, over the past year, at the instigation of the Children's Charities, the Association of Directors of Social Services, the Association of Chief Police Officers, the Department of Health, the Crown Prosecution Service and the Children's Charities, have been meeting to discuss how the law and the welfare services can work more effectively to offer protection to the children and to prosecute the adults who abuse them or profit from such abuse. They have discussed the need to de-criminalise child prostitution and overhaul the 1959 Sexual Offences Act. It is to be hoped that their deliberations will include the possibility of establishing a national network of residential foyers in which vulnerable, homeless young people can be accommodated and offered professional support and educational and vocational opportunities, into their early 20's if necessary. Mean-

while, the Department of Health is reviewing its 'Working Together' child protection guidelines, and it is to be hoped that the review will generate greater clarity about how local authorities, and the social workers they employ, should respond to child prostitution.

For its part, in an attempt to promote debate amongst policy makers and professionals who are, or ought to be concerned about child prostitution in the UK, in March 1995 the Children's Society published *Child Prostitution in Britain: Dilemmas and Practical Responses* (Barrett D, ed.). The book brings together contributors from a variety of professions and agencies who have a shared concern about child prostitution. As such, the book has a highly practical orientation. But the first chapter is different, it is written by 'Louise', a young woman who became involved in prostitution at the age of 14. Her message is simple but it cuts to the heart of the matter. She writes: *'If someone had been there for me, if someone had listened to me ... I may have been something else.'*

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## Homelessness

In 1994 almost 140,000 households were found temporary accommodation. Of these 59% were households with children and 12% had pregnant persons in the household. At the end of 1994 around 50,000 households were living in temporary accommodation. Government statistics show that of those households officially accepted as homeless, 33% became homeless because parents, relatives or friends were no longer able or were unwilling to accommodate them. 21% of homelessness was caused by the breakdown of relationship, 10% was due to a court order, mortgage default or rent arrears and 36% was due to the loss of private rented dwelling, the loss of secure tenancy or other reasons.

Life in temporary accommodation has a dramatic impact on the children's education. In a recent Shelter study it was found that:

- 85% of head teachers reported homelessness impacted on academic progress;
- parents faced hard choices about keeping children at existing schools, with high transport costs and difficulty of access, or moving them;
- parents had difficulty finding new school places and settling children in them, children were therefore more likely to spend time out of school or attend irregularly;
- educational progress was hindered by frequent changes of school and attendance difficulties;
- children found it hard to work at home in their difficult housing conditions;
- children found it difficult to participate fully in the life of school given their living conditions and experiences.

*Source: No place to learn; homelessness and education. Shelter 1995.*

NCH Action for Children Factfile 1996/7 - 0171 226 2033

NCH Action for Children is currently undertaking a campaign to end youth homelessness. Their House Our Youth 2000 pack is available by calling 0171 226 2033.