



Female Teen Prostitution in San Diego County: Community Survey Results

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FEMALE TEEN PROSTITUTION IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY: COMMUNITY SURVEY RESULTS

INTRODUCTION

In the Spring of 2005, the Girls' Issues Group (GIG), a subcommittee of the San Diego County Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council (JJCC), in partnership with SANDAG, sponsored the distribution of a survey to professionals who work with female teens engaging in prostitution. The goal of the survey was to gain a better understanding of the scope of the problem, obtain additional information about this at-risk population, determine their priority of needs, and what services, if any, currently are available.

The impetus for the survey came from a collective concern by local service providers, law enforcement, and court personnel about the perceived increase in teen prostitution in San Diego County. This growing problem was identified at the three Community Conversations hosted by GIG members in 2004. Consensus was reached among participants regarding the need to quantify and concretely articulate the scope of the problem. Thus, a survey was designed to solicit input on this issue from key professionals throughout San Diego County¹.

SANDAG's Criminal Justice Research Division assisted in administering the survey and analyzing the findings. Between February and April 2005, a total of 87 surveys were completed either on-line or returned to SANDAG in paper form. Survey respondents represented a variety of perspectives, including law enforcement (43%), service providers (35%), probation and prosecution (12%), and school (10%) (not shown).

¹ It should be noted that, while other issues facing young girls in San Diego County, such as illegal trafficking, also are critical areas that deserve attention, GIG members agreed that the scope of this preliminary survey should be focused on local teen prostitution.

FAST FACTS

Adult Males Play a Key Role in Teen Prostitution

- 94** Percent think most female teen prostitute "johns" are adults over the age of 18.
- 81** Percent report that most pimps also are over the age of 18.
- 59** Percent report that many of these girls are coerced into prostitution by others.
- 49** Percent feel most of these girls are under the age of 15.

Girls Engage in Frequent and Risky Sexual Behavior

- 93** Percent feel that female teen prostitution is a serious problem in San Diego County.
- 86** Percent report that most of these girls engage in prostitution on at least a weekly basis.
- 81** Percent think these girls "sometimes," but not "always," engage in safe sex practices.

Gaps Exist in Services and Community Response

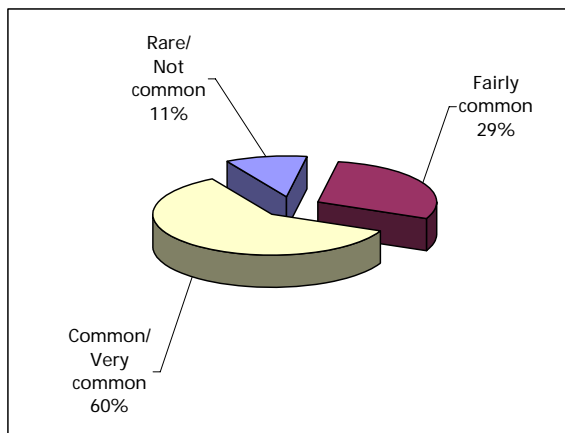
- 90** Percent feel there is a need for a regional task force to address this issue.
- 56** Percent report that the mental health needs of this population are not being met.
- 22** Percent feel local service providers are able to meet all of the needs of this population.

PREVALENCE OF FEMALE TEEN PROSTITUTION IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY

How Serious is the Problem of Female Teen Prostitution?

Almost all of the individuals surveyed reported feeling that the issue of female teen prostitution is a serious problem in San Diego County (93%) (not shown) and that it is "fairly common," "common," or "very common" in our communities (89%) (Figure 1). As one respondent noted, "This is a huge problem in our community. We are losing a generation of young girls to prostitution."

Figure 1
MOST RESPONDENTS FEEL FEMALE TEEN PROSTITUTION IS A COMMON PROBLEM

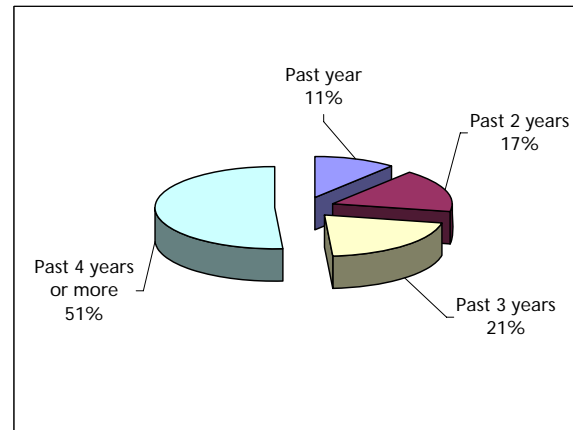


TOTAL = 87

SOURCE: SANDAG 2005 GIG Teen Prostitution Survey Results

When asked how long teen prostitution had been a serious problem, around one-half (49%) thought it had emerged in the past three years, with the other one-half (51%) feeling it had been an issue for longer than that (Figure 2).

Figure 2
MOST RESPONDENTS THINK THE PROBLEM HAS BEEN AROUND FOR AWHILE



TOTAL = 81

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG 2005 GIG Teen Prostitution Survey Results

What are Common Characteristics of Female Teen Prostitution Acts?

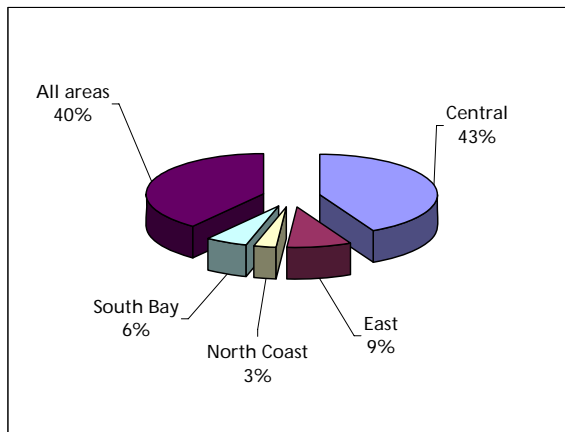
In order to examine the degree of risky behaviors in which these girls are engaging, the survey asked about common characteristics of female prostitution acts. Based upon their experience working with this population, respondents revealed that:

- most (86%) of the female teens engage in acts of prostitution at least on a weekly basis;
- oral sex is most frequently involved in these acts (reported by 99% as occurring "always" or "often"), followed by hand jobs (91%), vaginal intercourse (88%), and anal sex (16%); and
- these acts of prostitution most often take place in cars or other vehicles (86%) and at hotels/motels (81%). Other possible locations frequently mentioned included private residences (47%), alleys (34%), and parks (31%) (not shown).

Where in the County Does Female Teen Prostitution Occur?

The respondents offered various points of view regarding where in the county female teen prostitution is most likely to occur. As Figure 3 shows, 43 percent felt it was most common in the Central regions of the county, while another 40 percent thought it happened throughout the county equally and could not be isolated to one community. Other respondents specifically identified East County, South Bay, and North Coastal.

Figure 3
FEMALE TEEN PROSTITUTION IS A COUNTYWIDE ISSUE



TOTAL = 80

NOTE: Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding. Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG 2005 GIG Teen Prostitution Survey Results

How Often do the Girls Have Pimps?

Almost two-thirds (62%) of the respondents felt that it is “common” or “very common” for female teens engaging in prostitution to have a pimp. When asked how these girls meet the pimps, the two most common ways cited were that the girls are approached by the pimp (49%) or that they meet him through friends (44%). Eighty-one percent (81%) reported that most pimps are *over* the

age of 18 (with about two-thirds of these under the age of 24) (not shown).

How do the Girls Meet a Solicitor?

When asked to describe how a solicitor or “john” meets a girl for prostitution purposes, the most common response was by “walking the streets” (62%). Other ways included through a pimp (22%) and through other friends or family (18%) (not shown).

What are the Characteristics of “Johns” or Solicitors in these Situations?

The majority of respondents reported that the most common age range of “johns” (or solicitors) is 18 years and older (94%) and that most of these girls (95%) do not know the “john” prior to engaging in sexual acts with him (not shown).²

How Often are the Girls Engaging in Safe Sex Practices?

While only 2 percent of the respondents felt that female teen prostitutes “never” engage in safe sex practices, only 17 percent reported that they “always” do so. Rather, the majority (81%) said they use safe sex practices “some” of the time (not shown).

INFORMATION ON GIRLS ENGAGING IN PROSTITUTION

How Old are these Girls?

When asked to describe the most common age range of the female teens who engage in prostitution, about one-half (49%) of the respondents said between 13 and 15 and the other one-half (46%) said 16 and 17 (5% said 18 and older) (not shown).

² In comparison, almost one-quarter (23%) reported that the “john” usually was someone the pimp knew.

Why do Girls Get Involved in Prostitution?

As Table 1 shows, around one-half or more of the respondents agreed that two of the three most common reasons teen girls get involved in prostitution are related to money: for personal spending cash (67%) or to buy drugs/alcohol (47%). Of significant concern, 59 percent thought that it was common for these girls to be coerced by someone into engaging in these acts.

**Table 1
OBTAINING MONEY MAIN REASON
FOR INVOLVEMENT IN PROSTITUTION**

Personal spending money	67%
Coerced	59%
Buy drugs/alcohol	47%
Peer pressure	33%
Family history	13%
Money for basic necessities	8%
TOTAL	78

NOTE: Percentages based upon multiple responses. Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG 2005 GIG Teen Prostitution Survey Results

What are the Specific Needs or Issues of these Girls?

Respondents who identified themselves as service providers answered a question regarding the specific needs or issues of female teens engaging in prostitution. As Table 2 shows, almost nine out of every ten providers (89%) noted that a history of sexual abuse is a major issue for this population, as are other types of trauma (78%), and substance abuse (77%). "Other" issues included family issues and issues related to self-esteem.

**Table 2
ABUSE AND TRAUMA MOST FREQUENTLY
MENTIONED NEEDS AND ISSUES**

History of sexual abuse	89%
Trauma	78%
Substance abuse	77%
Academic assistance	56%
Basic needs	52%
Mental health	44%
Health-related issues	26%
Pregnancy/parenting issues	22%
Other	15%
TOTAL	27

NOTE: Percentages based upon multiple responses.

SOURCE: SANDAG 2005 GIG Teen Prostitution Survey Results

SERVICES AVAILABLE IN OUR COMMUNITIES

Twenty-seven (27) of the 87 respondents described themselves as either social service agency staff members or administrators. As such, they were asked to provide additional information about the services their agency provides and what steps they take to meet the needs of these girls (as well as the specific needs of this population, as described previously).

What Populations do these Agencies Serve?

The service providers who responded to the survey represented areas around the county and provided services to multiple areas. Specifically, 56 percent said they serve residents of South Bay, 52 percent the North Coastal region, 48 percent the Central region, 37 percent the East region, and 33 percent the North Inland region. Almost all (97%) of the respondents said that their agency's primary target population includes youth. Only around one in four (26%) of the service

providers reported that their agency currently tracks female teen prostitution as an issue on their intake form (not shown).

Under What Circumstances do the Agencies Meet these Girls?

Service providers were asked to select the three most common reasons they initially see female teens who disclose engaging in prostitution. As Table 3 shows, around four out of five (81%) said they most often see girls who are referred for a law violation, two-thirds (65%) for family issues, and 58 percent for substance abuse issues. "Other" reasons included school issues, sexual assault, runaway behavior, and domestic violence.

**Table 3
MOST GIRLS ARE SEEN BECAUSE OF
THEIR CONTACT WITH JUSTICE SYSTEM**

Referred by juvenile justice system	81%
Family issues	65%
Substance abuse	58%
"Other" needs	23%
Mental health	15%
Basic needs	12%
Pregnancy/Parenting	8%
TOTAL	26

NOTE: Percentages based upon multiple responses. Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG 2005 GIG Teen Prostitution Survey Results

How Well do these Agencies Feel They Meet the Needs of these Girls?

Only around one in five (22%) of the service provider respondents felt that their agency is currently able to address all of the issues these girls have. As such, the majority (80%) reported that they refer these girls to outside services and other programs (including Survivors of the Street, Children of the Night,

Bilateral Safety Corridor Coalition, and others) (not shown). As one provider added at the end of the survey about teen prostitution, "...It is more serious than what most adults have knowledge or awareness of. There needs to be some serious consideration and preparation on how to best deal with the scope of this problem."

What are the Gaps in Services for these Girls?

Respondents were asked to identify service gaps they believed existed for this population. As Table 4 shows, mental health and trauma services were the most frequently cited gaps, mentioned by 56 percent of respondents each. Around one-third of respondents or more also noted that basic needs, substance abuse, academic assistance, pregnancy/ parenting issues, and health-related issues also were service gaps. As one respondent noted, "We are just beginning as a community to figure out what these girls need in terms of treatment intervention. With additional funding, we could create programs to effectively assist teens involved in prostitution."

**Table 4
MENTAL HEALTH AND TRAUMA
LARGEST SERVICE GAPS**

Mental health	56%
Trauma	56%
Basic needs	44%
Substance abuse	44%
Academic assistance	38%
Pregnancy/parenting issues	33%
Health-related issues	30%
Other areas	15%
TOTAL	27

NOTE: Percentages based upon multiple responses.

SOURCE: SANDAG 2005 GIG Teen Prostitution Survey Results

HOW DO AGENCIES FEEL SERVICES CAN BE ENHANCED?

While almost all (92%) of the survey respondents said that their agencies do document incidents of female teen prostitution (most often in case files, the Automated Regional Justice Information System or ARJIS, or other databases), an overwhelming majority (87%) also reported that their agency would be willing to improve how data are documented. When asked other questions pertaining to their ability to meet the needs of this population, 60 percent said that their agency has staff members with specific expertise about the issue of female teens engaging in prostitution and 38 percent reported that their agency provides training specific to this issue (not shown).

When service providers specifically were asked if they saw a way that their program could be enhanced to better meet the needs of these girls, 46 percent said yes; 38 percent said yes, but not completely; and 15 percent said no. When the 15 respondents who said that some changes could be made were asked what they were, the most common response (mentioned by 8) was enhanced staff training. This sentiment was repeated when the providers were asked if they knew of any best practice models for working with this population and only 16 percent responded affirmatively (not shown).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This survey was intended to be a first step in documenting the scope of the problem of teen prostitution in San Diego County, with the goal of leading to further discussions, research, and action in addressing this issue. The results support many of the presumptions held by individuals who attended the Community Conversations about the prevalence, the girls' needs, the reasons for prostituting, and the lack of available resources to assist these girls. The general

experience of professionals who work with at-risk girls is that the problem of teen prostitution is common; is not a new phenomenon; is occurring among girls who have multiple needs and who are practicing it frequently; involvement in the justice system is the primary presenting issue; pimps and "johns" are mostly adults; and there is a lack of resources available for them.

Given the results of this survey, the following recommendations are provided to the community.

- Respondents indicated the need for a regional task force on female teen prostitution. Given that collaborative entities do currently exist that are addressing the issue of prostitution in various forms, a first step should be to explore if a new task force is needed or if these existing ones can accommodate the specific needs surrounding teen prostitution. The task force should at minimum be comprised of law enforcement, service providers, the courts, school officials, and community members. Specific goals should include centralizing the discussion and activities regarding teen prostitution, assisting in securing funds to address the issue, and identifying best practices.
- The high prevalence of reported childhood trauma, including a history of sexual abuse and substance abuse issues, indicates a need for specialized programming that can address both these issues.
- Only 17 percent of respondents thought the girls practiced safe sex all of the time, suggesting a need for prevention, outreach, and education on sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, by professionals that work with the girls.

- The multiple issues facing these girls call for a comprehensive approach to treatment and intervention. A wrap-around intervention model, which provides a multi-faceted, community based, and whole family approach, should be considered.
- There is a significant gap in quantifying the prevalence and associated characteristics of teen prostitution. As such, the need exists to establish a standardized method of documenting prostitution across programs (especially at those agencies receiving law enforcement/probation referrals). This will provide a more accurate picture of the problem, which could enhance the capacity of providers and service entities in addressing the issues.
- With the majority of agencies reporting being unable to meet the needs of teen prostitutes, funding sources need to be identified to increase the capacity of agencies to address the needs of this population.
- Just over one-third (38%) reported that their agency provides training on this issue, suggesting a need for more education on how to recognize the problems, understanding the needs of the girls, and the dynamics of teen prostitution.
- The results provide a perspective of the issue from the eyes of professionals and would be greatly enhanced by surveying girls directly to better understand the associated risks, the coercive influences, their backgrounds, and their needs.