

APPLYING THE THEORY OF LEARNED HELPLESSNESS  
TO THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF  
STREET PROSTITUTES IN TWO CITIES

by

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## ABSTRACT

This study assessed the usefulness of the learned helplessness theory to explain why people become street prostitutes. It was predicted that the data would show that street prostitutes had experienced an unusually high incidence of negative contingencies in childhood, especially sexual abuse, and that this childhood experience had led to a position of learned helplessness. To test this prediction, 35 street prostitutes in two cities and 15 controls in one of those cities were interviewed on 15 measures, including demographics, earliest use of drugs and alcohol, earliest sexual experience and prostitution, and related information. Results showed a high incidence of reported childhood sexual abuse by the street prostitutes. These 50 participants were also observed for the presence of five physical characteristics presumed to be associated with learned helplessness. Results showed distinct differences between street prostitutes and controls on the measures of learned helplessness. Results also supported the likelihood of the theory of learned helplessness to contribute to explaining why these women and men had become prostitutes. It was recommended that social resources be directed toward (a) improving the quality of childhood experiences to provide more positive contingencies and increase self-esteem and (b) establishing rehabilitation programs to assist prostitutes to break their cycle of learned helplessness and leave their dangerous and destructive life for a better way of living.

## CHAPTER 1

### BACKGROUND

Prostitution has traditionally been called “the first profession.” This dubious distinction is based on accounts of people (generally women) who received payment for providing sexual favors to the public. Even earlier than these historical accounts is evidence of women participating in sexual rituals as a part of religious observances, generally as a lifetime vocation if not as a profession. Whether or not prostitution is the first profession, it is certainly one of the oldest professions and continues to be a widespread practice in virtually all cultures and societies throughout the world.

Throughout history prostitution has been regarded in various ways by members of the general society. In some societies and eras, prostitutes have been accorded high social position (some called “courtesans,”) receiving tributes for their great beauty and sexual skill and living in great luxury and wealth. In other societies and eras, they have been treated with extreme contempt and scorn, punished for even a single act of prostitution by exile or even death.

In American society in the 21st century, prostitutes are generally viewed in a negative way. The former “courtesans” are discreetly separated from the brothel or street prostitute by subtle names such as “mistress,” “special lover,” or “call girl.” Clearly lowest on the social register of prostitutes are the street prostitutes—women and men who walk the streets, offering sexual services to public strangers for a schedule of prices. The street prostitute, who works outside selling sex for money, is generally considered to be “at the bottom of the food chain” in the sex trade market.

The life of the street prostitute is negative in virtually every aspect. Safety is a constant concern. Harsh weather presents a range of problems, from no customers to health risks. The pay is generally very low, requiring a large volume of activity to realize a subsistence income. (The average street prostitute in Daytona Beach, Florida, charges \$10-\$15 for oral sex, perhaps \$15-20 for vaginal or anal sex. The street prostitute must have sex with at least 30 people during each "shift" to make \$200-\$300. Over half of the street prostitutes admit to having a promoter, or "pimp." This promoters takes 50% to 75% of the prostitute's earnings. Thus, the average street prostitute who works 5-6 days per week is "underemployed," earning perhaps \$15,000 a year. This does not take into consideration the frequent business interruptions due to arrest, hospitalization for disease or injury, or being a victim of crimes such as robbery, battery, and rape.)

Prostitution in America presents problems in at least four major areas. First, the low social standing of prostitution in America is first based on religious grounds, holding that sexual service to strangers for pay violates the sanctity of marriage and traditional social relationships and cheapens the value of the sexual experience. The second reason for the low standing of prostitution in America is that it frequently presents serious medical problems for both prostitutes and customers, ranging from genital warts to the transmission of the AIDS virus. These medical problems can have a serious economic impact on the cities and states that are forced to deal with the problems of people who cannot afford to pay for health care (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1997). Third, the random nature of sexual activity in prostitution and the general segment of society that participates in street prostitution presents serious safety risks. Street prostitution is closely associated with crime and violence. Fourth, prostitution is generally held in

low esteem because of the personal toll it exacts on the prostitute in terms of self-esteem; to offer one's body for sale to strangers is a degrading experience. For all of these reasons, prostitution presents a serious problem to our society today.

This study focuses on the effects of prostitution on the self-esteem of the prostitute (specifically, the street prostitute) and a possible theoretical explanation for the circumstances that lead a person to become a prostitute. Street prostitutes in two cities (New York City and Daytona Beach, Florida) are interviewed and observed in two distinct time periods (1970-1980 and 2000-2001, respectively) to apply the theory of learned helplessness to their histories and current conditions in order to measure the explanatory value of the theory of learned helplessness to this situation.



## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter reviews major literature about prostitution in the United States and the personal and social factors that might lead to prostitution. First, general theories of human behavior are briefly reviewed, including biological, sociological, and psychological theories. Third, the theory of learned helplessness is reviewed for its potential value as a explanation of why certain people become street prostitutes.

#### Theories of Human Behavior

Theories of human behavior can generally be categorized as based on biology, sociology, and psychology. Sample theories from each area are reviewed in this section.

Some theories attempt to explain human behavior social as a biological phenomenon. For example, Lombrosco developed a biologically based theory to explain criminal behavior, distinguishing himself and other “civilized” people from “criminals” on the basis of genetics. He used the terms *atavistic* and *savage* to describe people who were classified as criminals (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993).

Various experiments have been performed with animals to assist in explaining human behavior. For example, in one experiment (reported in Peterson et al., 1993), a mildly painful electric charge was conveyed through the floor of a steel chamber where a laboratory rat was housed. This stimulus was reproduced over 80 times. The behavior of the rat in the beginning was frantic, attempting to escape or avoid the shock. By the end of the experiment, the rat remained

motionless huddled in the corner. I conducted a similar experiment with a mouse for a science fair in Brooklyn, New York, when I was 13 years old. My experiment was a folk-type maze, with a charge on one side and food as a reward on the other. I trained the mouse to go on one side. Next, I applied the charge to both sides. The mouse then began to climb over the charge, but I prevented the mouse from doing that. The result was that the mouse began to be passive and stopped trying, even when I removed the electrical charge. Without knowing it at the time, I had produced learned helplessness. Briefly, the animal recognized that its efforts led to failure, hence the expectation of future failure was eminent, and the animal gave up. (For an application to humans, see the section on learned helplessness theory).

Other researchers have attempted to explain human behavior in terms of sociology. This group of theories holds society in general to be responsible for most of human behavior, particularly deviant behavior. Such explanations often place the chief blame on deteriorating neighborhoods, the inadequate social controls in those neighborhoods, and conflicting social values that are evident in such neighborhoods. The theories propose that social disorganization results from poverty, a breakdown of social controls, development of high-crime areas, and delinquent cultural norms (Cullen & Agnew, 1999).

More pertinent to the present study are the theories of human behavior that are based in psychology. A strong example of psychological theory in human behavior is that of the experiment with school children reported in the film *Eye of the Storm* (2003). The film reports a 1950 study done by Jane Elliott, a teacher in Riceville, Iowa (a town of just under 1,000 people, all of whom were White). The teacher conducted a human diversity experiment with her students, separating them by the only physical characteristic that were different: eye color (Brown and Blue

were the two categories). The part of her experiment that applies to this study (specifically, learned helplessness) was as follows: The teacher told the blue-eyed students that they were superior and smarter, and she gave them more privileges than the brown-eyed students. The blue-eyed students scored significantly higher on standardized tests. The teacher then produced the experiment in reverse, telling the students that she had been wrong, that the brown-eyed children were superior and smarter, and she gave them more privileges. On similar assessment tools, the brown-eyed children now scored higher than the blue-eyed children. (The students did not know the actual results of their tests, only what the teacher told them.) It can be concluded from these results that the contingencies provided by the teacher (her arbitrary statements of which group was superior) led to their behavior (comparative performance on tests). The children who were told that they were smarter performed better than the other group, in both cases, even though there was apparently no objective basis for the differences in scores. The students' images of themselves and their expectations about their performance apparently drove their performance on the tests. Applying these results in the opposite direction (the students who were told that they were not smarter scored lower on the tests in each case), the conclusion can be applied to the theory of learned helplessness, discussed later in this chapter.

### The Theory of Learned Helplessness

One of the psychological theories used to explain human behavior was considered to be potentially valuable to explain how people choose, or are led to lead, a life of prostitution. The theory of learned helplessness may explain the choice of prostitution or the circumstances that force a person into prostitution.

The theory of learned helplessness consists of three essential components: (a) contingency, (b) cognition, and (c) behavior (Peterson et al., 1993).

Contingency refers to the objective relationship between the person's actions and the outcome that the person experiences. The most important contingency is uncontrollability: a random relationship between the person's actions and outcomes. The opposite contingency, controllability, obviously occurs when the person's actions reliably produce desired outcomes. In simple terms, if one experiences success, one expects to continue to succeed; conversely, if one experiences failure, one expects to continue to fail.

Cognition refers to the way in which a person perceives, explains, and extrapolates the contingency. This process consists of several steps. First, the person must perceive the contingency; this subjective perception may or may not be objectively accurate. Second, the person explains what was perceived. Third, the person uses that perception and explanation to form an expectation about the future. The key to this cognition is that, if the person perceives failure that the person perceives to have been caused by himself/herself, then the person expects to fail again.

Behavior refers to observable consequences of (non)contingency and the person's cognition of it. With regard to behavior, a significant concern is that the person who perceives past failure, and thus expects future failure, is likely to surrender to the subjective perception—to give up, and see the situation as out of his/her control.

This surrender is the essence of learned helplessness. The person perceives failure and loss of control of the past situation, expects failure and lack of control of current and future situations, and thus considers himself/herself to be *helpless*.

Thus, the person has *learned helplessness*. Evidence of learned helplessness is seen in passivity, lethargy, and the general expectation that the future is out of one's control and doomed to failure. A detailed treatment of the theory of learned helplessness has been presented by Peterson et al. (1993).

The theory of learned helplessness has been a popular theory in psychology research, chiefly because it is relatively simple and clear-cut, and relatively easy to test with a wide range of research tools. It is grounded in basic psychology, learning theory, neuropsychology theory, and attribution theory. It has application to a wide range of human problems, including depression, disease, poor achievement in school and career, codependency, and abuse of women and children (Audi, 1999). The last area—abuse of children—is the focus of the next section, seeking to understand how the experience of abuse in childhood might be associated first with the acquisition of learned helplessness, which might be a factor in an eventual life of street prostitution.

### Sources of Learned Helplessness

What types of experiences could lead to learned helplessness? Specifically, are there certain childhood experiences that could lead to a learned helplessness outlook on life? If so, could those experiences contribute to the eventual decision to engage in prostitution, or to the circumstances that would lead or even force a person into street prostitution? This section explores childhood experiences that can produce a condition of learned helplessness.

Alice Miller's book *The Untouched Key: Tracing Childhood Trauma in Creativity and Destructiveness* (1991) provides a clear description of the critical factors in the successful or unsuccessful experiences of childhood. Miller

established a groundwork for successful childhood experience: Children need to be raised in a safe environment in which they feel protected, not abused. In one of the most widely quoted statements of child rearing, Miller said, “All children are born to grow, to develop, to live, to love, and articulate their needs and feelings for their self-protection” (p. 22).

The converse of Miller’s statement is just as significant in the growth of a child. If a child is raised in a neglectful or abusive environment, the child is more likely to feel helplessness and despair and more likely as an adolescent or adult to commit destructive acts. Disassociation from the original cause, feelings of anger, helplessness, despair, longing, anxiety, and pain will find expression in these destructive acts against others (criminal behavior) or against themselves (drug addiction, alcoholism, prostitution, psychic disorders, suicide; Donovan, 1990; Dor-Shav & Mikulincer, 1990; Kiefer, 1990; Miller, 1991).

### Learned Helplessness and Prostitution

Although Miller (1991) did not specifically identify street prostitution as one of the possible outcomes of neglectful or abusive childhood experiences, the patterns that she describes support her subjects as candidates for street prostitution. Certain treatment of children by their caretakers are likely to lead to this behavior, including being left unsupervised, engaging in coercive or consensual sexual activity at a very early age, or drug and alcohol abuse at a very early age.

Of particular concern is child sexual abuse. The Prostitution Education Network (PEN, n.d.) reported that approximately 85% of the prostitutes in their study reported that they were victims of incest or other sexual abuse during

childhood. Experiments with depressed patients have shown that lack of motivation remained even after contingencies were removed (Overmier, 1996).

It could be inferred from these findings that, even when the negative contingencies of childhood neglect and abuse (particularly sexual abuse) were removed, the resulting learned helplessness would leave the prostitute with no motivation to change her life of drug use, alcoholism, and prostitution. Such an inference is supported by research reported by the PEN, stating that approximately 85% of the prostitutes in their study reported that they were survivors of early incest or sexual abuse. This high incidence led the researcher to focus on early sexual abuse as a possible causal factor in learned helplessness.

Prince (as cited in PEN, n.d.) identified a high incidence of negative self-esteem among prostitutes. It was speculated that the source of that negative self-esteem included childhood environments and early sexual activity. Behavioral scientists have generally agreed that low self-esteem and a general attitude of “giving up” can be detected in certain aspects of physical appearance, such as (a) style of dress and condition of clothes; (b) scars and physical evidence of past or current violence or disease; and (c) general personal hygiene, including posture, condition of hair, teeth, and skin, and so forth.

In summary, the literature reveals that negative childhood experiences, particularly neglect and/or sexual abuse and early sexual activity, can lead to low self-esteem and to learned helplessness. The theory of learned helplessness consists of three essential components: contingency, cognition, and behavior. The theory holds that conditions that lead a person to perceive negative results as uncontrollable develop a self-attitude of helplessness and predict that future experiences will also be uncontrollable and will result in failure. It seems

reasonable to apply this learned helplessness to the lives of street prostitutes to try to explain what led them to such a destructive life. If these people were, during their childhood, repeatedly exposed to negative contingencies, it is likely that they would have developed negative expectations about their futures—a cogent example of learned helplessness.



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

The review of literature (chapter 2) and the extensive professional experience of the researcher as a police officer dealing with street prostitutes for over 30 years led to the research question that guided this study: Does learned helplessness resulting from negative childhood experiences such as sexual abuse help to explain why some people become street prostitutes?

In order to answer this research question, the researcher conducted interviews with street prostitutes and observed them for specific characteristics that were associated with low self-esteem and learned helplessness.

#### Participants

The participants in this study were 35 street prostitutes in New York City ( $n = 20$ ) and Daytona Beach, Florida ( $n = 15$ ) and 15 members of a control group of nonprostitutes in Daytona Beach. All 50 participants contributed to this research voluntarily but did not record informed consent.

#### Procedures

Two sets of field interviews and observations were completed. First, during 1970-1980 in New York City, the researcher and other sworn police officers conducted field interviews with 20 street prostitutes while they were in custody, during field interrogations, or during casual contacts on the street. At the same time, the interviewers made systematic observations of the interviewees regarding physical features that were related to the study. Second, this same procedure was

used with 15 street prostitutes and 15 controls in Daytona Beach, Florida, in 2000-2001.

### Data Collection

The interviews and observations were recorded on forms developed by the researcher, and the results were tabulated and analyzed.

#### *Interviews of Prostitutes*

The following data were collected via the interviews (see summary data coding sheet in the appendix):

1. Control number
2. Age (obtained from the arrest report, field interrogation, or participant report),
3. Gender (determined genitally)
4. Race (categories: Black, White, Black Hispanic, White Hispanic, Asian, and other)
5. Person who raised the participant (mother, father, other relative, both)
6. Use of alcohol as a drug before age 12 (yes/no)
7. Use of controlled substance as a drug before age 12 (yes/no)
8. Age at first use of drugs (< 9, 9-11, 12-14, 15-17, 18-20, >20)
9. Age at first use of alcohol (< 9, 9-11, 12-14, 15-17, 18-20, >20)
10. Age at first sexual experience (dichotomized at age 12)
11. Age at first sexual experience for money (prostitution)
12. Whether participant had a promoter/manager/pimp
13. Parents' knowledge of and attitude toward participants participant's sexual activity prior to 16th birthday

14. Participant's exposure to sexual abuse as a child

15. Participant's status as a victim of sexual abuse as a child

A variety of legal dictionaries and state statutes (e.g., *Criminal Procedure Law for the State of New York, Annotated*, 2004; *Florida State Statutes*, 2004; *Penal Law of the State of New York, Annotated*, 2004) was used to identify consistent definitions of child abuse.

### *Observations of Prostitutes*

The following data were collected and recorded on the observation form:

1. Control number
2. Number of missing teeth
3. Scarring (including burns) and details
4. Lack of personal hygiene (yes/no)
5. Torn or ripped clothes (yes/no)
6. Dirty clothes (yes/no)
7. Miscellaneous information that might be related to the condition of the

participant

Other more subject factors of appearance were observed but not used in this study. Some of these factors included odor, bad breath, lethargy, and general disorientation. These factors were not used because of the difficulty of measuring them, and the inconsistency of recording between the two phases of data collection.

### *Interview and Observation of Control Group*

Fifteen people encountered randomly in the Daytona Beach neighborhoods in which the street prostitutes were interviewed and observed were recruited to be

interviewed and observed. The eligibility criteria were (a) residents of the studied area or (b) visitors of residents of the residents of the studied area. This control group was established in an effort to provide norms for the general community on the interview and observation measures.

### Instruments

The researcher developed a survey form for the New York phase of the study, which was slightly revised for the Daytona Beach phase. The researcher also developed an observation sheet, which was used in both phases. The appendix contains these three forms.

### Data Analysis

Data collected via the above described instruments was placed in tables and figures for analysis to identify common elements and trends. Simple calculations of frequencies, percentages, and means were sufficient for analyzing these data. Evidence of at least three of the five observation factors placed a given participant in the category of displaying learned helplessness.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to assess the usefulness of the learned helplessness theory to explain why people become street prostitutes. It was predicted that the data would show that these people had experienced an unusually high incidence of negative contingencies, especially childhood sexual abuse, as children. To test this prediction, 35 street prostitutes in two cities and 15 controls in one of those cities were interviewed and observed on measures presumed to be associated with learned helplessness. The results of data collection and analysis are reported in this chapter.

Table 1 summarizes the results of the interviews with 20 street prostitutes in New York City in 1970-1980 and 15 street prostitutes in Daytona Beach in 2000-2001. These prostitutes ranged in age from 16 to 38 years. All but 2 were female. It is noteworthy that about two thirds of these street prostitutes had been raised by their mother only. Over three fourths of the prostitutes had used alcohol and controlled substances as drugs before age 12, some as young as 9 years, and over two thirds had used alcohol by age 14. Most had their first sexual experience between 12 and 17 years old, and 6 reported a first sexual experience by age 11 years or younger. Prostitution usually began in mid-adolescence, and as early as age 12 years. There may have been some confusion among participants regarding sexual abuse as a child; only 40% reported being exposed to sexual abuse as a child, but 63% reported being victims of child sexual abuse.

Table 1

*Results of the Interviews With Street Prostitutes*

Variable and category	New York City	Daytona Beach	Combined
Age (range 16-38 years)			
16-20	9	6	15
20-24	6	3	9
25-29	3	2	5
30 +	2	4	6
Gender			
Female	18	15	33
Male	2	0	35
Race (1 NY missing)			
Black	6	3	9
White	4	9	13
Black Hispanic	4	1	5
White Hispanic	2	1	3
Asian	2	0	2
Other	1	1	2
Raised by (1 DB missing)			
Mother	9	11	20
Father	1	2	3
Other	4	0	4
Both	5	2	7
Use of alcohol as a drug before age 12 (2 NY missing)			
Yes	16	11	27
No	2	4	6
Use of controlled substance as a drug before age 12 (1 NY missing)			
Yes	15	13	28
No	4	2	6

Table 1 (continued)

Variable and category	New York City	Daytona Beach	Combined
<b>Age at first use of drugs</b>			
< 9	1	0	1
9-11	4	1	5
12-14	5	6	11
15-17	6	2	8
18-20	0	2	2
> 20	2	1	3
Missing	2	3	5
<b>Age at first use of alcohol</b>			
< 9	5	2	7
9-11	5	1	6
12-14	5	5	10
15-17	3	3	6
18-20	0	0	0
> 20	0	0	0
Missing	2	4	6
<b>Age at first sexual experience</b>			
< 9	1	0	1
9-11	3	2	5
12-14	8	9	17
15-17	7	3	10
18-20	0	1	1
Missing	1	0	1
<b>Age at first sexual experience for money (prostitution)</b>			
12-14	5	1	6
15-17	9	14	23
18-20	5	5	10
> 20	1	0	1
<b>Has manager/promoter/pimp</b>			
Yes	9	3	12
No	9	12	21
Missing	2	0	2
<b>Parents' knowledge of child's sexual activity before age 16</b>			
Yes	- <sup>a</sup>	7	7
No	- <sup>a</sup>	8	8

Table 1 (continued)

Variable and category	New York City	Daytona Beach	Combined
Participant exposed to sexual abuse as a child			
Yes	7	7	14
No	13	8	21
Missing	4	0	4
Participant victim of sexual abuse as a child			
Yes	12	10	22
No	8	5	13

<sup>a</sup>These data were not collected in New York.

Table 2 summarizes the results of the observations of 35 street prostitutes interviewed (Table 1) and the control group ( $n = 15$ ) in Daytona Beach. Observations were made by the interviewers at the time of the interview. The observers noted five physical appearance items that were presumed to be associated with learned helplessness. Three fourths of the prostitutes had visible missing teeth, about 70% had visible scars, 40% showed evidence of poor personal hygiene, half had torn clothing and about three fourths had dirty clothing.

The five factors were counted for each of the prostitutes and controls. It was arbitrarily determined that displaying at least three of the five factors would constitute implied evidence of learned helplessness. Based on this measure, 12 of the 20 New York prostitutes (60%) and 11 of the 15 Daytona Beach prostitutes (73%) were categorized as having learned helplessness. Thus, 23 of the 35 street prostitutes (67%) but only 3 of the 15 controls (20%) were so categorized. This dramatic difference supports the association of these factors with prostitution.



Table 2

*Results of Observations of Prostitutes Regarding Presumed Signs of Learned Helplessness*

Variable and category	New York City	Daytona Beach	Control	Combined
Missing teeth (visible)				
Yes	14	11	3	28
No	6	4	12	22
Visible scars				
Yes	11	13	8	32
No	8	2	7	17
Missing	1	0	0	1
Poor personal hygiene				
Yes	12	2	3	17
No	6	12	12	30
Missing	2	1	0	3
Torn clothing				
Yes	5	12	2	19
No	13	3	13	29
Missing	2	0	0	2
Dirty clothing				
Yes	13	12	7	32
No	6	3	8	17
Missing	1	0	0	1
Learned helplessness factors				
0	0	0	3	3
1	1	2	4	7
2	7	2	5	14
3	8	6	3	17
4	4	5	0	9
5	0	0	0	0
Number with learned helplessness rating <sup>a</sup>	12	11	3	26
Percentage with learned helplessness rating <sup>a</sup>	60	73	20	52

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to assess the usefulness of the learned helplessness theory to explain why people become street prostitutes. It was predicted that the data would show that these people had experienced an unusually high incidence of negative contingencies, especially childhood sexual abuse, as children. To test this prediction, 35 street prostitutes in two cities and 15 controls in one of those cities were interviewed and observed on measures presumed to be associated with learned helplessness.

#### Summary of Results

The 35 street prostitutes interviewed in New York City and Daytona Beach were predominately female and young. Most had been raised in single-parent homes and had used alcohol and controlled substances before their teens. Most had their first sexual experience in latency or early adolescence and were prostitutes as early as 12 years old. Over half reported being victims of child sexual abuse. Observations by the interviewer revealed a fairly clear profile of the participants as measured by the five physical characteristics presumed to be associated with learned helplessness. Most of the prostitutes had visible missing teeth and scars, worn torn and dirty clothing, and showed evidence of poor personal hygiene.

There were clear differences between the street prostitutes and the control group on the measure of learned helplessness. Based on the measure of at least three of the five factors, 60% of the New York prostitutes (60%) and 73% of the Daytona Beach prostitutes but only 20% of the controls were categorized as having

learned helplessness. This dramatic difference supports the association of these factors with prostitution.

### Discussion

It was the intent of this study to determine whether learned helplessness was associated with a life of street prostitution, possibly as a causal factor. While cause and effect were not measured in this study, the results lend strong support to the concept of association of learned helplessness with becoming and remaining a street prostitute. The fact that the prostitutes displayed 3 times (New York) and 3.5 times (Daytona Beach) the evidence of the presumed factors of learned helplessness than the controls shows that at least some of the factors are associated with prostitution, if not directly with learned helplessness. Particularly interesting is the high incidence of early child abuse among these prostitutes. Other studies (e.g., Johnson, 1995; PEN, n.d.) have reported incidence of the most serious types of child sexual abuse as high as 85%, which is consistent with the 60% and 73% reported in this study.

This extremely high incidence of a history of childhood sexual abuse among these street prostitutes underlines the importance of positive childrearing, in contrast to the type of childhood experience that provides negative contingencies that can lead to learned helplessness. The child must live in a home in which he/she can experience success and develop self-esteem; otherwise, there is a strong likelihood that the child will learn to see failure as a common result of all endeavors, and will expect to fail in adult life (see Donovan, 1990; Kiefer, 1990; Miller, 1991).

## Implications and Recommendations

The implications of this study are both informational and practical in nature. There are two major implications: (a) reducing the conditions that are likely to lead to a life of prostitution, and (b) developing assistance for prostitutes to turn away from a life of prostitution.

First, if it is true that prostitutes (particularly street prostitutes) are more likely than other people to live their lives by the principles of learned helplessness, and if it is true that this learned helplessness was developed as a result of childhood sexual abuse, then a reduction in child abuse could lead to a reduction in the number of persons becoming street prostitutes. This, in turn, could reduce the spread of disease, crime, and violence associated with prostitution and reduce the significant costs of prostitution to city and state governments. Thus, it is recommended that resources be used to increase the number and quality of parenting programs that will assist parents to provide a home atmosphere of positive opportunities for the child to develop self-esteem, to experience success, and thus to expect success in adult life.

Second, prostitution is not necessarily a life sentence. Prostitutes can be helped to leave the destructive life on the street and move toward a positive and productive life. Armed with the information gained from this and similar studies about factors that contribute to a life of prostitution, social service agencies and law enforcement agencies could develop specialized rehabilitation programs. These programs could help the prostitute to understand what led to a life of street prostitution and what could change that life into a happy, healthy, safe, and productive life.

## Conclusion

As a former member of Daytona Beach Police Department , retired New York City Detective and presently the Director Of Professional Standards at Flagler County Sheriff's Office , I appreciate the number of hours expended by law enforcement to "control" street prostitution. Most of these hours are applied to "control"; very little of the resources of the criminal justice system are applied to the rehabilitation effort of these street prostitutes/victims of child abuse. It would be an interesting sociological enterprise to attempt to treat these street prostitutes as victims and to offer productive alternatives to their present destructive lives.

It seems clear that the damage done in childhood by repeated negative contingencies, especially childhood sexual abuse, can set patterns for failure throughout life. The result is a lifelong victim role, passive and nonresponsive, carried along the most destructive paths of life in a state of learned helplessness. The application of the theory of learned helplessness to street prostitution is a promising area for research. Other researchers are encouraged to take the baton and move forward to find more answers to the whys of street prostitution and to the ways to end it.

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## REFERENCES

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APPENDICES

**APPENDIX A**  
**INSTRUMENTS**

Legend: Prostitution Survey  
Data Coding Sheet

- Field 1 Control number
- Field 2 Age obtained from arrest report, voluntary, or Field Interrogation Card or 250 Stop & Frisk (same as FIC)
- Field 3 Sex (Male or Female) Genitals determine sex
- Field 4 Race (1 = Black, 2 = White, 3 = Black Hispanic, 4 = White Hispanic, 5 = Asian, 6 = Other)
- Field 5 Raised by (1 = Mom, 2 = Dad, 3 = Other (grandmother, uncles, aunts), 4 = both)
- Field 6 Subject uses alcohol as a drug
- Field 7 Subject uses control substance as a drug
- Field 8 Age subject started use of drugs (1 = < 9, 2 = 9-11, 3 = 12-14, 4 = 15-17, 5 = 18-20, 6 = > 20)
- Field 9 Age subject started use of alcohol (1 = < 9, 2 = 9-11, 3 = 12-14, 4 = 15-17, 5 = 18-20, 6 = > 20)
- Field 10 Age at subject's first sexual experience
- Field 11 Age at subject's first sexual experience for money (prostitution)
- Field 12 Subject has a promoter/manager (pimp)
- Field 13 Parents' knowledge of fields 6, 7, 10, 11 before subject was 16 years old and allowed subject to continue behavior
- Field 14 Subject states that she(he) was exposed to child abuse (including abuse, abandonment, neglect, or sexual abuse)
- Field 15 Subject reports being a victim of child sexual abuse

By John Michael Gaspar

Streetwalker/Prostitute Survey Form

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Nickname \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_ Sex \_\_\_\_\_ Race \_\_\_\_\_

Height \_\_\_\_\_ Weight \_\_\_\_\_ Misc. \_\_\_\_\_

Raised by:  
\_\_\_\_\_ Mom \_\_\_\_\_ Dad \_\_\_\_\_ Both \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Substance Abuse:

\_\_\_\_\_ Alcohol \_\_\_\_\_ Drugs \_\_\_\_\_ (type)

\_\_\_\_\_ Age started drinking \_\_\_\_\_ Age started drugs

\_\_\_\_\_ Age of first sexual experience \_\_\_\_\_ Age of first paid sex

\_\_\_\_\_ Pimp

\_\_\_\_\_ Parent knew of substance abuse/sex activity prior to age 16

Do you feel that you were abused, abandoned, neglected, left without supervision under age of 10 years old regularly more than \_\_\_\_\_ hours consecutively?

\_\_\_\_\_ yes \_\_\_\_\_ no

Notes \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

By John Michael Gaspar

Prostitute / Control Observation Sheet

Arrest Number \_\_\_\_\_

Missing teeth \_\_\_\_\_ yes \_\_\_\_\_ no How many? \_\_\_\_\_

Scarring (including burns) \_\_\_\_\_ yes \_\_\_\_\_ no

Details: \_\_\_\_\_

Lack of personal hygiene \_\_\_\_\_ yes \_\_\_\_\_ no

Torn clothes \_\_\_\_\_ yes \_\_\_\_\_ no

Dirty clothes \_\_\_\_\_ yes \_\_\_\_\_ no

Misc. information

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By John Michael Gaspar

**APPENDIX B**  
**GRAPHS / VISUAL DATA**

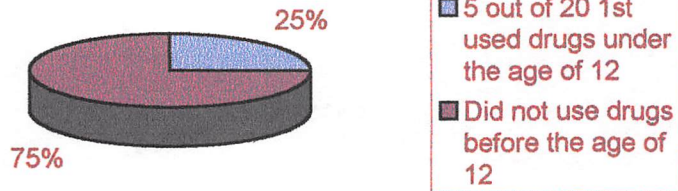
GRAPHS DEPICTING FINDINGS FROM NEW YORK CITY

Prostitution Survey 1970's thru 80's (NYC)

Use of Drugs

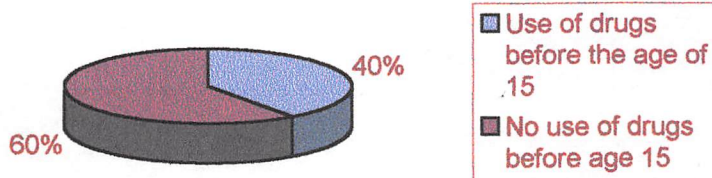
5 out of 20      25%  
Did not use      75%

**Field 8: Use of drugs under 12**



Use of drugs      40%  
No use of drugs      60%

**Field 8: Use of drugs before age 15**





Use of Drugs

8 out of 20 40%  
Did not use 20%

Field 6: Use of drugs under 15

15 out of 20 75%  
used drugs under  
the age of 15  
Did not use drugs  
before the age of  
15



25%

Use of drugs  
15 out of 20 75%

Field 6: Use of drugs before age 15

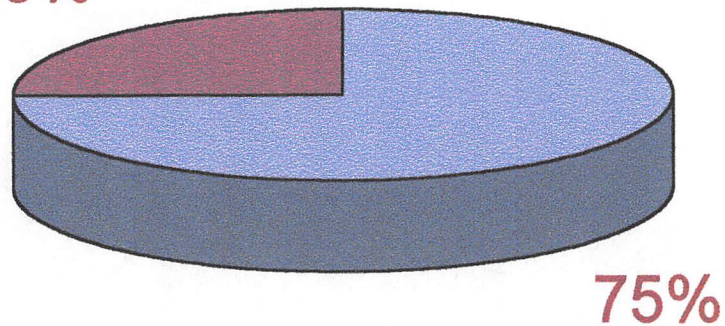
15 out of 20 75%  
used drugs  
before the age of  
15  
Did not use drugs  
before age 15



25%

## Field 9: Use of alcohol under the age of 15

25%

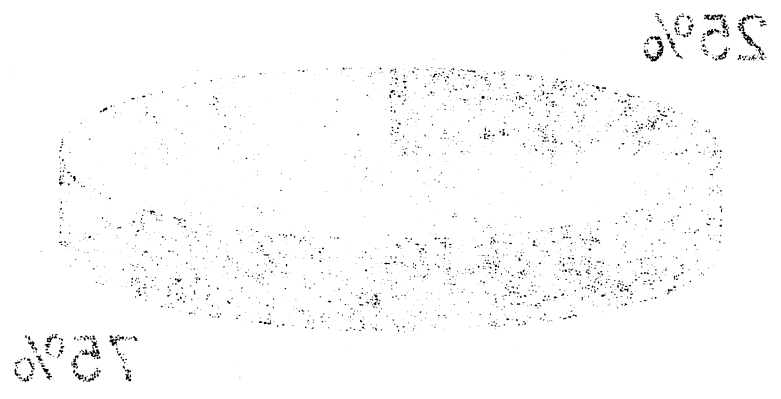


75%

- Use of alcohol before the age of 15
- Did not use alcohol before the age 15

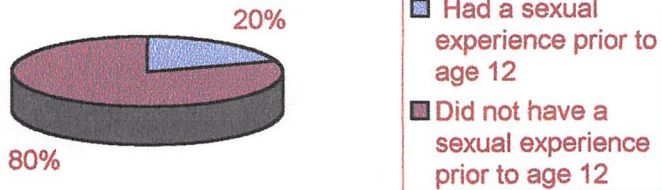
Field 3: Use of alcohol under the age of 18

Use of alcohol before the age of 18  
Did not use alcohol before the age of 18



1st sexual experience for money  
Had a sex: 20%  
Did not hav: 80%

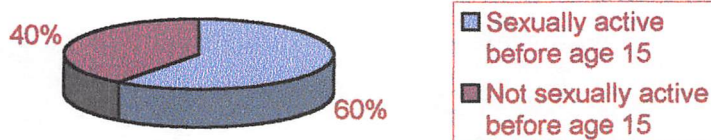
**Field 10: 1st sexual experience age 12**



12 out of 20 1st sexual experience  
1970-1980 Prostitution Survey NYC Data Sheet 1 Field 10

Sexually ac: 60%  
Not sexuall: 40%

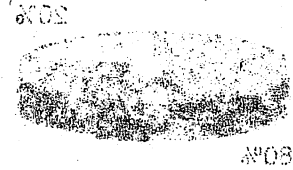
**Field 10: 1st sexual experience**



Had a sex 20%  
Did not have 80%

Field 10: 1st sexual experience age 15

Had a sexual  
experience prior to  
age 15  
 Did not have a  
sexual experience  
prior to age 15



15 out of 10 1st sexual experience  
1970-1980 Prostitution Survey NYC Data Sheet 1 Field 10

Sexually active 60%  
Not sexually active 40%

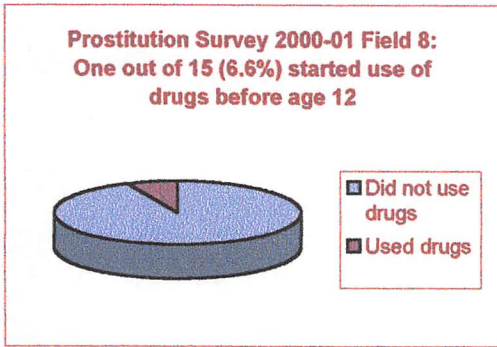
Field 10: 1st sexual experience

Sexually active  
before age 15  
 Not sexually active  
before age 15

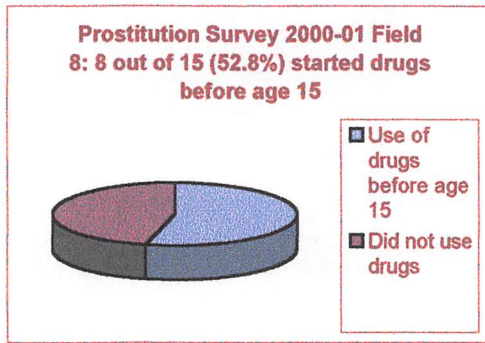


GRAPHS DEPICTING FINDINGS FROM DAYTONA BEACH

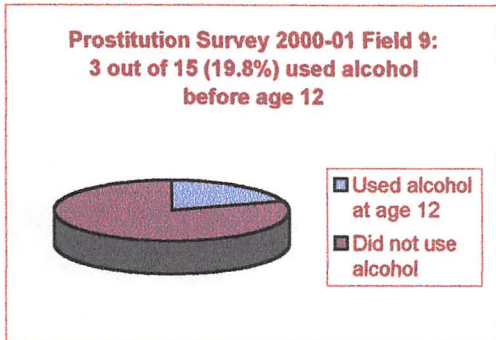
Did not use drugs 93.4  
Used drugs 660.00%



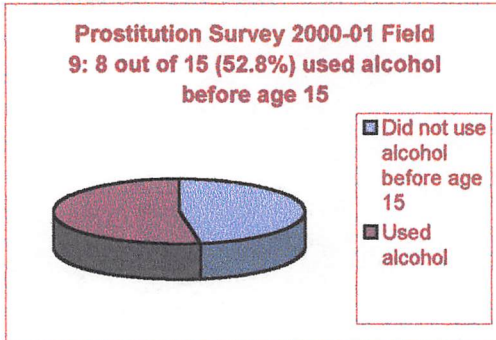
Use of drugs before age 15 53.80%  
Did not use drugs 46.20%



Used alcohol before age 12 19.80%  
Did not use alcohol 80.20%



Did not use alcohol before age 15 47.20%  
Used alcohol 52.80%



Date 8/1/91

Use of and Did not use drugs  
93.80% 48.20%

Did not use used drugs  
98.4 88.00%

Prostitution Survey 2000-01 Field 8-  
8 out of 18 (44.4%) stated drugs  
before age 12

Prostitution Survey 2000-01 Field 8-  
One out of 18 (5.6%) stated use of  
drugs before age 12

Used of  
drugs  
before age  
12  
Did not use  
drugs

Used drugs  
before age  
12  
Did not use  
drugs



Did not use Used alcohol  
47.20% 82.80%

Used alcohol Did not use alcohol  
19.80% 50.20%

Prostitution Survey 2000-01 Field  
8 out of 18 (44.4%) used alcohol  
before age 12

Prostitution Survey 2000-01 Field 8-  
3 out of 18 (16.7%) used alcohol  
before age 12

Did not use  
alcohol  
before age  
12  
Used  
alcohol

Used alcohol  
before age  
12  
Did not use  
alcohol





1st Sexual Experience

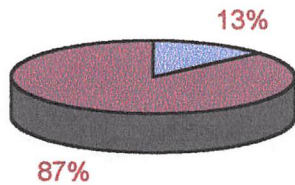
2 out of 15 13.20%

11 of 15 were 86%

Prostitution Survey 2000-2001

Field 10

**Field 10: 1st sexual experience under 12**



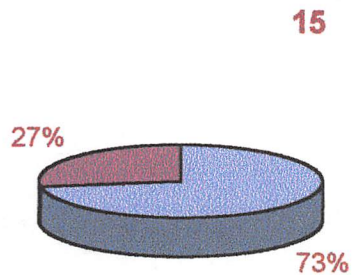
- 2 out of 15 were sexually active before the age of 12
- 11 of 15 were not sexually active before age 15

Field 10

Percentage 72.60%

Percentage 27.40%

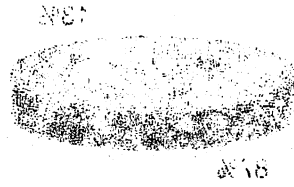
**Field 10: first sexual experience under 15**



- Percentage of prostitutes that were sexually active before age 15
- Percentage of prostitutes that were not sexually active before age 15

Field 10: first sexual experience under 18

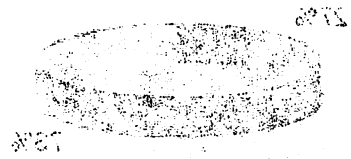
18  
Percentage of  
prostitutes that  
were sexually  
active before age  
18  
27.8%



Field 10  
Percentage 72.20%  
Percentage 27.80%

Field 10: first sexual experience under 18

18  
Percentage of  
prostitutes that  
were not sexually  
active before age  
18  
72.2%



Field 11 No Subjects were sexually active for money prior to age 12.

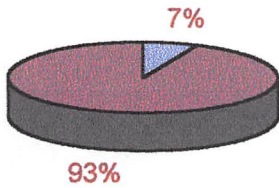
Prostitution Survey 2000-2001  
1st sexual experience for money  
Field 11

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

One subject was sexually active for money prior to age 12.  
Are sexuall 6.60%  
Not sexuall 93.40%

Prostitution Survey 2000-2001  
1st sexual experience for money  
Field 11

### Field 11: Sexually active before 15



- Are sexually active for money,
- Not sexually active for money,

Prostitution Survey 2000-2001  
1st sexual experience for money  
Field 11

Field 11: No subjects were sexually active for money prior to age 15

05  
04  
03  
02  
01

Prostitution Survey 2000-2001  
1st sexual experience for money  
Field 11

One subject was sexually active for money prior to age 15

Not sexual 93.40%  
Are sexual 6.60%

Field 11: Sexually active before 15

Are sexually active for money  
Not sexually active for money

