

FEMALE TEEN PROSTITUTION IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY: A CAUSE FOR CONCERN

Over the past four years, professionals who provide services to youth throughout San Diego County have reported seeing an increase in female teens engaging in prostitution. In April 2005, 87 individuals, representing law enforcement, schools, courts, and social services throughout the San Diego area, responded to a survey distributed by SANDAG under the leadership of the Girls' Issues Group (GIG). GIG is a subcommittee of the San Diego County Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council. The survey results provide preliminary information about the scope of the issue of female teen prostitution in San Diego.

Overall, respondents felt that the issue of young females engaging in prostitution is a serious problem and approximately half of the professionals believe that the girls are between the ages of 13 and 15 years old. Of considerable concern is the belief voiced by over half of the respondents that it is common for these girls to be coerced into engaging in prostitution. Moreover, respondents felt that many of these girls have a multitude of serious problems, most notably a history of sexual abuse, past trauma, and substance abuse. Serving as a possible call to action for those involved, is the reported gap in available services for these girls, primarily mental health-related services. In fact, almost all respondents (90%) feel there is a need for a regional task force to address this urgent issue.

Table 1

WHAT PROFESSIONALS KNOW ABOUT FEMALE TEEN PROSTITUTION

Girls Engage in Frequent and Risky Sexual Behavior

- 86%** Report that most of these girls engage in prostitution on at least a weekly basis.
- 81%** Think these girls "sometimes", but not "always", engage in safe sex practices.

Adult Males Play a Key Role in Teen Prostitution

- 94%** Say most "johns" are adult males over the age of 18.
- 81%** Say 81 percent of "pimps" are males 18 and over.

Specific Needs of these Girls and the Gaps in Services

- 81%** Say these girls are most often referred to their agency by the juvenile justice system.
- 58%** Report these girls are referred for substance abuse issues.
- 56%** Mention mental health and trauma services are the largest service gaps for these girls.
- 22%** Feel local service providers are able to meet all of the needs of this population.

Source: GIG Survey on Female Teen Prostitution, April 2005

The results of the survey underscore the need for further research into this issue, as well as the necessity for professional staff training, enhanced documentation by agencies regarding the prevalence of female teen prostitution, and the development of appropriate programs and services to adequately serve these young women and their families. To view the entire CJ Bulletin on this topic, visit our Web site at www.sandag.org/cj.