

*It's Not Only for the Money: An Analysis of Adolescent versus Adult Entry into Street Prostitution**

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Numerous studies examine the causal factors of entrance into prostitution and find economic marginalization, substance addiction, and interpersonal networks are common reasons women enter the trade. However, we know less about the role that age of onset plays in shaping female pathways into prostitution. Here, we build from insights into previous research by analyzing not only entry pathways but also how age categories are linked to time spent in the trade and whether the length of time in prostitution exacts a greater “toll” on women. Drawing from the feminist and age of onset literatures, we analyze 40 in-depth interviews with female street prostitutes from five U.S. cities. Our results underscore the importance of age as an organizing feature of women’s pathways into prostitution and the potential associated consequences of working in this trade.

Given the stigma and labeling associated with working in street prostitution, one may wonder what compels individuals to enter the trade. Numerous scholars have attempted to address this question, and the culmination of this work uncovers a variety of explanations that include financial necessity, childhood abuse, runaway behavior, homelessness, interpersonal networks, drug addiction, psychological characteristics, and antisocial personality disorder (Brock 1998; Brody et al. 2005; Chapkis 2000; Whelehan 2001). While there is a substantial body of literature that examines the factors that are associated with prostitution entry, most have not considered age of onset (for exception, see Kramer and Berg 2003), which has been shown to impact the pathways women take into crime¹ (Simpson, Yahner, and Dugan 2008). In fact, there is ample theoretical and empirical evidence that indicates age shapes criminal initiation (Laub and Sampson 2003; Moffitt 1993; Sampson and Laub 1993).

The current research bridges the gap in the literature in two ways. First, drawing from feminist and age of onset literatures, we examine how age of onset shapes pathways into prostitution. Second, we consider how entrance pathways are associated with length of time spent in the sex trade and the

effect this has on women. Building on Barton's (2006) findings on strippers, we seek to further explicate the unique challenges that street prostitutes face in their line of work over time. We base our analysis on 40 interviews with female street prostitutes from five U.S. cities to assess motivations for entering prostitution as adolescents or adults, analyze how age of onset is linked to time spent in the trade, and whether the length of time in prostitution exacts a greater toll on women. Our results underscore the importance of including age as an organizing feature of women's pathways into prostitution and the potential associated consequences of working in this trade over time.

Women and Crime

Nearly three decades of feminist research have offered much insight into female offenders and the factors associated with female criminality (Reisig, Holtfreter, and Morash 2006). Indeed, researchers have documented how gender influences criminal pathways, motivations, and involvement with the criminal justice system (Daly 1992; Kruttschnitt 1996). Empirical evidence indicates that victimization, economic marginalization, and substance abuse disproportionately affect women and play unique roles in shaping women's initiation into crime (Daly 1992; Gaarder and Belknap 2002; Gilfis 1992; Simpson, Yahner, and Dugan 2008). In her examination of female offenders, Daly (1992, 1994) produced a widely used typology of multiple pathways women take into crime including street women, harmed and harming women, drug-connected women, battered women, and other women. Daly's pathways framework underscores the gendered nature of women's offending patterns.

Scholarly research on pathways into crime has also employed a life-course developmental approach, claiming that age of offending is important for establishing trajectories of criminal activity (Laub and Sampson 2003; Moffitt 1993). In spite of the plethora of research analyzing the initiation to offending among men and adolescents, fewer studies have paid specific attention to first-time adult offenders or considered the age of onset among female adult populations (for exceptions see Eggleston and Laub 2002; Simpson, Yahner, and Dugan 2008). This is surprising given that research shows adult-onset offending comprises approximately half of the overall adult offender population, and these rates are even greater among female adult offenders (Eggleston and Laub 2002).

Although studies suggest there are distinct routes and trajectories into crime, there is evidence that pathways to crime are age-graded, especially when we consider the blurred boundaries between women's victimization and offending. Many girls who have experienced childhood abuse find that the best available means of escape from violence is to rely on survival strategies—such as running away from home, drug use, and illegal street work—that thereby

constitute crimes according to the “justice” system (Gilfis 1992; Owen and Bloom 1995). Other scholars contend criminal activity among battered women is a by-product of their emotional attachment to criminally involved boy-friends or spouses (Mullins and Wright 2003; Richie 1996).

In one of the few studies analyzing age of onset into crime and pathways to jail, Simpson, Yahner, and Dugan (2008) found that individuals who engaged in crimes as children were more likely to have experienced sexual abuse and were more heavily involved in drug dealing, property crime, and offensive violence later on in life compared with adult-onset offenders. In contrast, women whose onset of criminal activity began as adults were more likely to have experienced violent victimization in adulthood compared with earlier onset offenders. While Simpson and colleagues’ study highlights the importance of taking into account the age of onset of criminal behavior for criminal trajectories, additional work is needed to further explore these connections.

Motivations for Entry into Prostitution

Through their extensive research, scholars have identified a variety of factors that are associated with entry into prostitution. One argument in this line of research stresses the link between abuse and prostitution. Indeed, a number of studies on female prostitution have revealed the patterns of victimization at the hands of men (Earls and David 1990; Miller 1993). However, what remains unclear is the causal path linking child abuse with later prostitution. Two models have been proposed as possible explanations. First, the susceptibility model contends that the combination of psychological characteristics (i.e., alienation and feelings of worthlessness) and tragic events (i.e., sexual assault) makes women more vulnerable to entering prostitution. While some scholars argue that childhood victimization is directly related to subsequent prostitution entry (James and Meyerding 1977; Kramer and Berg 2003), others assert that the causal link is indirectly mediated by runaway behavior (Seng 1989; Simons and Witbeck 1991). Nevertheless, according to the susceptibility model, when certain personality attributes are coupled with personal crisis, females become more susceptible to entering the life of prostitution.

The second model used to explain women’s motivation for entering prostitution is the exposure model, which refers to interpersonal contacts with and inducement from others who are involved in the subculture of prostitution (Davis 1971). This model is closely tied to the cultural deviance theoretical perspective, which attributes crime to a set of values that exist in disadvantaged neighborhoods. In particular, Sutherland (1939) proposed a theory of differential association, which argues that people learn to commit crime because of regular contact with antisocial values, attitudes, and criminal

behaviors. These definitions that are favorable to crime are learned when one's personal networks are primarily filled with individuals who uphold and perpetuate them. For instance, in their Chicago-based study, Raphael and Shapiro (2002) found that 32.5 percent of street prostitutes had a household member work in prostitution where they grew up and 71 percent of their sample reported that they were encouraged by another individual to work as a prostitute to earn money. In short, it appears that the cultural deviance framework may partially explain why some women from disadvantaged backgrounds enter prostitution.

Economic necessity is often connected to entry into prostitution. Women who occupy lower socioeconomic status (SES) have fewer educational and employment opportunities, making it challenging to avoid poverty (Ehrenreich 2001). As a result, some turn to particular survival strategies, such as working in the underground economy to supplement limited welfare (Edin and Lein 1997). Evidence indicates that when women lack viable alternatives, they are more likely to perceive prostitution as a feasible option for income (Brock 1998; Delacoste and Alexander 1998). In fact, many street prostitutes are run-aways who have few resources and engage in a myriad of criminal activities to survive (Weitzer 2009).

Moreover, scholars contend that drug addiction can also pull women into the sex trade. In fact, studies find that substance abuse is often prevalent among street-working prostitutes and note that it can be a primary reason they resort to selling their bodies (Epele 2001; Porter and Bonilla 2009). For certain drug-addicted women, prostitution may serve as the only viable means to finance their habit, especially among those who lack education and job skills (Gossop et al. 1994). Other research suggests that while some women may use drugs recreationally prior to engaging in prostitution, the habit intensifies the longer they work in the trade, as drugs may be used as a coping mechanism (Cusick and Hickman 2005; Davis 2000).

We have just reviewed many studies that analyze female involvement in prostitution and the various motivations that account for their entry into sex work. Yet these works offer little explanation as to why some factors appear to have greater impact on certain women compared with others. Building off previous studies that suggest age may be a defining factor that shapes reasons for engaging in prostitution (Kramer and Berg 2003), we use age of entry as an organizing tool that influences pathways into street prostitution. Following Simpson, Yahner, and Dugan (2008), we distinguish women who enter prostitution in adolescents (18 and under) from those who start in adulthood (19 and over) and create a typology to determine whether such a framework explains why and how prostitution results from multiple interdependent factors.

Previous studies conclude street prostitutes are likely to experience the highest rates of violence, abuse, arrests, and stigma of all sex workers (Miller and Schwartz 1995; Sanders 2007; Weitzer 2009), which may increase the longer a woman works as a prostitute. Thus, beyond exploring the connection between age and pathways, we examine the implications of particular pathways as they are linked to time in the trade and whether the tenure in prostitution exacts a greater “toll” on women.

Methodology and Data Collection

To assess the interaction between gender, age, and prostitution entry, we rely on 40 interviews drawn from two research projects, each conducted by one of the authors. The first project was based on a comprehensive in-depth examination of street prostitutes affiliated with four nonprofit organizations that specifically aid women in prostitution by providing services, resources, and a range of other amenities to them. These sites were located in different U.S. cities: Los Angeles, Chicago, Minneapolis, and Hartford. While there is much structural variation among these organizations, most claim their goal is to help women in prostitution leave the trade. The author was able to act as an intern and researcher at each of these settings for approximately 3 months per site, where she conducted semistructured interviews with 36 clients. This researcher attempted to interview all prostitutes present at each site; however, overall, fewer than 10 either refused to participate or were unable to because of scheduling conflicts. Of these 36 prostitutes, three were excluded from this current study because they did not provide substantial information about their entrance into prostitution. During these interviews, the women discussed their biographies, including how and why they first entered prostitution, and their experiences in the trade.

Data from the second study come from a broader investigation examining the re-entry experiences of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women in St. Louis, some of whom also worked as street prostitutes. As the original study was comparative in nature, the sample included women who returned to custody 2–3 years following their release from prison and a matched sample of females who were not reincarcerated during this period. During these interviews, 11 women discussed working in prostitution, and of these individuals, seven were therefore included in the current study.² Women were recruited to participate in the project based on the following criteria: (1) they were released on parole between June 2004 and December 2005 and (2) they were released with at least 2–3 years to serve on their parole sentence.³ To ensure the comparative nature of the sample, approximately equal numbers of women were included in the study if (1) they have no documented new crimes, law violation, or technical violation resulting in reincarceration and

(2) they were reincarcerated as a result of a new crime, law violation, or technical violation.

In this study, we focus specifically on age of entry into street prostitution and do not analyze when they first engaged in other criminal behaviors (unrelated to prostitution). Drawing on Barton's (2006) study, which concluded that strippers experience a greater "toll" the longer they work in the trade, we also examine whether female street prostitutes feel this toll and whether it increases the longer they remain on the streets. We were able to gauge this toll because in the first research project (which encompasses 83% of the sample for this study) the researcher asked participants questions that specifically addressed the difficulties and negative effects of working in street prostitution. These questions included: What are the negatives of working in prostitution? What were some of the difficulties of being a prostitute? Did your family and friends know you were working in prostitution? How did they react? Did working as a prostitute affect how you felt about yourself? How did you cope with these difficulties?

Because of the differences between strippers and street prostitutes, we developed an alternative definition of the "toll" that emerged from our qualitative data. Based upon these accounts, the toll is defined as the accumulation of violent encounters, elevated levels of exhaustion associated with the job, heightened stigma and broken relationships with family members, increased drug addiction as a way to cope with the difficulties of the job, and severe punishments from the criminal justice system.

In the current study, we employed qualitative research methods because it provides insight into the perspectives and lived experiences of the research participants. In both projects, the interviews followed a semistructured protocol designed to elicit rich accounts relating to prostitution, with interviewers using follow-up probes to obtain a fuller depiction of the context and circumstances surrounding entrance into prostitution and the outcomes of working in the trade. The interview questions that were useful for this study related to crime, entry into prostitution, age of entry, length of time in the trade, and experiences associated with the work. Interviews were voluntary, and research participants were promised strict confidentiality; therefore, pseudonyms were used. The interviews lasted between one and two hours, were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and were subsequently coded.

In the analysis, we took care to ensure that the concepts developed and illustrations provided typified the most common patterns of women's accounts. Inter-reliability was achieved by having both authors independently code the data sets for themes related to how females constructed their understandings of their entrance into prostitution. We then conferred to identify the most common thematic patterns. We ensured internal validity using inductive analytic

techniques, including the search for and explication of deviant cases (Charmaz 2006). Although we are cautious of the generalizability of our findings, the study's findings underscore the importance of age as an organizing feature of women's pathways into prostitution and the potential associated consequences of working in this trade.

Findings

The demographics of the women in our sample were racially and ethnically diverse with 67 percent African American, 23 percent Caucasian, and 10 percent Hispanic.⁴ They ranged from 20 to 60 years of age, with a mean age of 36.5 years. In addition, 50 percent of women entered prostitution when they were 18 years or younger, and 50 percent entered prostitution when they were 19 years or older. We analyzed pathways according to age group and discovered they varied by age of entry. At the time of the interviews, the women included in these samples had ceased working in prostitution. Based on our interviews, we discerned their age of entry into prostitution, the age they left it, and calculated how long they were in the trade (see Table 1).⁵ The women are separated according to their age of entrance categories—adolescents or adults.

Age and Pathways into Prostitution

Previous research finds numerous pathways into prostitution, yet the relationship between age and entry remains unclear. Thus, we aim to illuminate this topic here by analyzing prostitutes' accounts of how and when they entered the sex trade. To do so, we identified patterns and compared them across two age categories: adolescents (18 and under) and adults (19 and up).

We find pathways into prostitution differ according to age of entry, as illustrated by our typology (see Table 2). Among those who entered prostitution during adolescence, we identified two categories or pathways: *Prostitution to Reclaim Control of One's Sexuality* and *Prostitution as Normal*. In comparison, women who entered as adults comprised the two other categories: *Prostitution to Sustain Drug Addiction* and *Prostitution for Survival*. There were three individuals who comprised a fifth category of *Others* because their age category did not coincide with corresponding pathways or they exhibited a combination of two or more pathways.⁶ While there is some overlap, we contend that overall each typology encompasses a distinct set of motivations and pathways into prostitution that varies according to age.

Motivations for Entering Prostitution as Adolescents

Fleeing Abuse and Reclaiming Control. A majority of the women (60%) who entered prostitution as adolescents discussed their entry as an attempt to regain control of their lives and their sexuality. A common experience among

Table 1
Age of Entry, Exit, and Time in Prostitution (in Years) *N* = 40

	Age of entrance	Age of exit	Time in
Adolescent entry			
AMY	13	28	15
EVETTE	16	35	19
CEECEE	15	40	25
JANISE	14	42	28
LATONYA	13	51	38
SARA	16	20	4
NINA	16	32	16
TINA	16	41	25
MONIQUE	10	49	39
KALI	16	26	10
CARRIE	18	35	17
JENNA	14	41	27
TISHA	11	20	9
DEBBIE	14	34	20
ALISSA	15	44	29
LISA	16	32	16
JANELLE	18	37	19
JACKIE	10	38	28
LATISHA	18	60	42
CLESHAY	15	41	26
	Average time in trade		22.6
Adult entry			
NOELLE	22	38	16
WENDY	31	43	12
VANESSA	24	25	1
ELENA	31	32	1
SABRINA	21	31	10
MARIA	40	46	6
BELINDA	30	40	10
SHONDRA	28	40	12
ROSARIA	29	32	3
RACHEL	21	26	5
TIFFANY	27	28	1

(Continued)

Table 1
(Continued)

	Age of entrance	Age of exit	Time in
JASMINE	25	33	8
ANGELA	22	32	10
ELAINE	25	42	17
KRISTIN	23	38	15
CHANELLE	35	45	10
LORETTA	25	37	12
MARY	24	29	5
MELANIE	29	30	1
BETTY	34	47	13
	Average time in trade		8.4

Table 2
Typology of Entrance into Prostitution

Type of entrance	Characteristics	Sample
<i>18 and under</i>		
Fleeing abuse and reclaiming control	Childhood physical/sexual abuse, runaway behavior, perception of prostitution as empowering, some use of pimps	<i>N</i> = 12
Normal	Economic motivation, learned from family and friends, viewed prostitution as exciting and glamorous	<i>N</i> = 8
<i>19 and up</i>		
Sustain drug addiction	Family history of drug use, drug addicted, association with other prostitutes, morally conflicted about prostitution	<i>N</i> = 11
Survival	Means of survival, nearly homeless, holds some allure, not motivated by drugs but drug use escalates over time	<i>N</i> = 6
Other	Do not fit into other categories	<i>N</i> = 3

the women who had an early onset of prostitution (18 years or younger) was enduring childhood victimization, including sexual molestation, rape, incest, and physical assault. As a result, many girls chose to run away and flee their families. Kali, for example, discussed having entered prostitution at 16 years of age because of molestations: "I left home at an early age because there was some molestation in my family. I did it for money and to rebel from my parents." Similarly, Tisha linked her reason for engaging in prostitution at the age of 11 to early sexual abuse:

[My grandmother] was also engaged in a lot of activities such as selling drugs, doing drugs, renting out the rooms of her house and stuff like that. So staying was basically out of the question because she had so many men in the house and I had been sexually molested and raped a lot of times, so I didn't want to stay there anymore and put up with that.

Other women attributed their initial involvement in prostitution to sexual abuse but did not attempt to runaway. Instead, they began to perceive their sexuality as a way to garner power over men and reap monetary rewards. For instance, Jackie who engaged in prostitution at an early age was sexually victimized repeatedly during childhood. Her first memory of sexual abuse was by two family friends she was staying with from the age of 9 to 14 years of age and then by her great-uncle from the age of 15 on. She explained that her mother "gave" her away to family friends who molested her, which ultimately resulted in her entry in prostitution:

The people that my mama gave me to, one [of] their sons molested me real bad. I would go through the house and he would catch me in the kitchen and do stuff to me. But anyway, I got into prostitution. Grandpa, his daddy, he would always give me little money to feel and touch on me and stuff like that, so that's how I got off into that [prostitution]. I learned then that if I wanted something, I had to give up something.

Additionally, some recalled that engaging in prostitution gave them a sense of empowerment, allowed them to exact revenge, or provided a sense of control over their bodies. Janelle engaged in prostitution as a teenager: "[b]ecause from my childhood, I had been molested. And then as time went on, I was still getting molested, so I got tired. And I said well, if a man going to take it from me, why not sell myself?" And CeeCee rationalized her entry into prostitution in the following manner: "At the time it gave me a sense of control because I had been molested as a child. So it was like at some point it felt like I was getting a revenge for the predators in my life at that time." Consistent with prior research, we found that child abuse and runaway behavior became a pathway into prostitution for certain individuals (Hwang and Bedford 2003; Kramer and Berg 2003; Tyler, Hoyt, and Whitbeck 2000; West and Williams 2000).

Other scholars posit the mechanism between sexual abuse and prostitution often lies within a third-party actor (Williamson and Cluse-Tolar 2002). While not common among the women in our study, a few established relationships with men who then played a main role in their entry into the trade. For Janise, a teenage runaway, a male figure was key to her entrance:

I used to run away from home a lot because my father used to beat us. So I ran away from home and I met this guy and he told me—I explained to him how my father beat on us, he said ‘well I’m [not] gonna beat you. Call me daddy.’ He used to buy me anything I wanted, whatever, no matter how much it was.

Janise later discovered that these gifts came with a price. She explained that “later on in the relationship he said ‘now you gotta go do this in order to keep me buying you that’ which was prostitution. So I did it.” In this case, Janise was enticed as an adolescent to engage in prostitution because she believed these acts pleased her pimp, sustained the acquisition of material goods, and gave her a sense of control over her life.

Similarly, Alissa stated she engaged in prostitution at approximately 14 years of age because her boyfriend introduced her to the idea and encouraged her to do so. After she agreed, he became her pimp and profited off her labor:

He said, ‘[w]ell if you like me, would you like to make some money?’ So I’m like, ‘well yeah, okay.’ So he took me over to different men’s houses, he said, ‘[y]ou do whatever they want you to do....They’ll give you money and when you get the money you bring it back and give it to me.’ And that’s what I did, not knowing that I was prostituting because again I was young and didn’t know.

Most of these adolescent girls claimed performing sex work gave them a sense of control over their sexuality (and their lives). Ironically, certain girls (e.g., Janise and Alissa) not only engaged in prostitution because of encouragement from a male figure in their life, who served as their pimp, but also relinquished much of their autonomy and earnings to him within a short time. While some may enter the trade to obtain control, the coercive nature of street prostitution under a pimp’s rule is often far from empowering and often abusive. (Williamson and Baker 2009). In entering street prostitution, many girls worked in environments where the risk of violence was heightened, the very circumstances that initially caused them to flee their abusive homes.

Working in Prostitution Is Normal. An additional category of entrance into prostitution as adolescents consisted of the “normalization” of prostitution. Among early-onset females, 40 percent fell under this category and described prostitution as a normal activity in the neighborhoods where they

grew up in. As a result, these individuals viewed prostitution as a viable option for income. Lisa described her motivation for entering prostitution at 16 years of age in the following manner: "I use to hear [my sister] say stuff like ...'don't get up with a wet ass and no money in your pocket.' So instantly that planted that seed for me. When you lay down with a man you ain't gon' get up with an empty pocket and a wet ass." Evette also was exposed to prostitution through family members, as her father was a pimp and routinely kept company with many prostitutes. She explained how this was a normal facet of her childhood and adolescence:

I wanted to be with my dad and of course these things were going on in my dad's household because I told you my dad was a dope dealer and pimp, so that's when I became attracted to the lifestyle. The glamour part of it, you know, I saw the dressing up and the makeup and really that was the attraction for me....You know my dad kept a lot of street people around and that's how I met this guy that eventually introduced me to prostitution. I was doing it regularly by sixteen.

Both Lisa and Evette viewed prostitution as "normal" because they were surrounded by prostitution from a young age. It was through this socialization that they learned values, beliefs, and behaviors that corresponded with this lifestyle.

Another common theme, alluded to by Evette, was the perception that working in prostitution was glamorous. As these adolescent girls observed women working in the sex trade, they regarded the work and the accoutrements as sophisticated. Thus, they believed prostitution was a way to achieve status. Tina surmised: "[A]fter my father died we were so poor and in that area that's all you see are prostitutes and pimps....The girls are wearing nice clothes and making money, that's what I wanted too, so that's how it started for me." Likewise, Monique entered prostitution at 10 years of age, "Because of the money, the excitement, my environment ... When I grew up in the late 60s, the movies and people were glamorizing pimps and hustlers and stuff ... All I seen was the money, the furs, the jewelry and the talk ... so I started and I got a rush out of that quick money, that fast living." The lure of early entry into prostitution can be partly explained by interpersonal contact with others involved in the prostitution and the perception that it is a viable course of action to acquire money, clothes, and material resources.

Even though certain women in this sample claimed that as adolescents they learned to view prostitution as "normal" behavior to engage in, it is noteworthy that they did not also "learn" to use addictive drugs at this point in their lives. Indeed, many studies suggest that women enter prostitution for the purpose of earning money to sustain their drug habit (Potterat et al. 1998); yet we found that most women who entered prostitution as teenagers did not share

these motivations, as few contended with severe drug addictions. Rather, they avowed to having used drugs recreationally as adolescents and limited their use to marijuana or alcohol.

In sum, early-onset prostitutes' entrance into the trade was complex, yet they exhibited particular pathways that spanned across these five samples. Those in the first category consistently focused on childhood abuse when explaining their motivation for entering prostitution. In response to these experiences, many of the girls became runaways and engaged in prostitution to earn money in an attempt to reclaim control over their sexuality. The rest of our adolescent-onset sample fell in the second category of learning about prostitution at an early age from others involved in the sex trade and adopting the perception that sex work is normal. In these accounts, they routinely described sex acts as alluring and exciting. Our data suggest that female adolescent entry into prostitution revolves around two particular pathways, associated with specific events and motivations. We now explore the pathways into prostitution as adults.

Motivations for Entering Prostitution as Adults

Sustaining the Drug Habit. In contrast to early-onset prostitutes who depicted their entry as a way to gain control over their sexuality or who viewed the sex trade as a viable course of action in their community, the women who entered as adults provided alternative explanations. Indeed, 65 percent of women who first engaged in prostitution as adults attributed their entrance to drug addiction. Most of these women came from a family or environment where drug use was prevalent and consequently became drug addicted. Chanelle, for example, explained why she engaged in prostitution:

Because of my drug addiction. I found out that that would enable me to get money for drugs ... quicker than waiting on county checks or a boyfriend to bring it to me. I could go out there and be assertive and get it myself.... And I was propositioned once or twice but then it occurred to me one day—hey, I could sell my body and get some money. I tried it and it worked.

When posed with the same question, Melanie responded, “I have an addiction to money and drugs.” And Vanessa explained, “Once I started [drugs] and got hooked is when I first entered prostitution to support my growing habit.” For many women, prostitution served as a practical and accessible way to support their substance addiction.

One striking difference between the women who entered the sex trade during adulthood (rather than adolescence) was that the former held strong moral condemnations of prostitution. They stressed that the drugs affected their

willingness to enter the trade by making them lose sight of their morals and values. Belinda recalled, “I used to see other girls out there and ...I’m like ‘how could they do that?’ Then I had a strong need for a drug ... it [prostitution] wasn’t something that I liked to do actually, you know, but the need for the drug was so great that it took priority.” And Noelle explained how she initially struggled with moral beliefs about engaging in prostitution at the age of 22:

It was for the money to support my substance abuse. When I first started prostituting it had a very big impact on me. I would only work when it was dark out. I didn’t want my children or family members to see me. God forbid if someone should see me... I was so ashamed. As the progression of my disease picked up sooner or later it was early hours of the morning, then it was afternoon, then it was 24 hours a day. Then it became seven days a week. The progression of my disease took hold. And nothing matters. You use to live and live to use.

Although some had been exposed to prostitution in childhood, the women in this category felt conflicted about prostitution, with most having strong moral opposition to it. However, as their addictions progressed, they violated their previously held beliefs about prostitution, as it became a viable means to earn quick cash for drugs. These findings support previous research that asserts drug addiction can lead women into prostitution and keep them “stuck” in the trade (Cusick and Hickman 2005).

Survival Sex. Among adult-onset prostitutes, 35 percent described their entry into prostitution as a means of survival, in that it served as a necessary way to earn money to eat and pay rent for housing. For example, Elena explained, “I lived in the streets and there was no other way to maintain myself for food, clothes—it was really hard for me.” As a result, Elena sold drugs but resorted to prostitution “when the sales weren’t coming through.” And Shondra explained why she first started turning tricks:

I was still married to my second husband. We were separated. He left me in Atlanta stranded. He packed up our things, my kids, and left—during a time when I was in a mental hospital. I had a real bad breakdown. And when I got out I told him that I couldn’t live with him for a minute, that I needed time to adjust. So I moved in with a girlfriend of mine and during the time I was at her house he packed up everything and moved back North and left me in Atlanta stranded. It kind of messed me up. I guess he felt that my relatives were here I would be okay but it kind of messed me up. I ended up prostituting my way back to the Midwest because I had no money, nothing to my name.

In contrast to those who cited the previous pathway, the women in this category turned to prostitution to survive. Findings corroborate previous research which argues structural conditions can lead impoverished individuals into prostitution (Miller 1986; Weitzer 2009), as they often view it as a

survival mechanism and one of the best available opportunities for making money (Rosen and Venkatesh 2008). This pathway, in particular, is similar to Daly's (1992, 1994) "street woman" classification.

While acknowledging structural factors that make prostitution a practical option for lower-class women, some described their work as glamorous or alluring, even though they entered the work primarily for income. After a period where she "tested" prostitution out by walking the streets with a fellow prostitute, Kristin explained: "It was kind of exciting...And I kind of got a thrill out of the guys whistling at me with my mini-skirt on." And though Loretta engaged in prostitution because she was unemployed, when asked whether there were other secondary reasons she admitted, "I was in my late twenties and I had just had my second child ... and honestly, I also thought it was exciting."

While there is some overlap between categories, these findings reveal that age of onset is important to consider because it is linked to particular pathways that lead adolescents and women into prostitution. However, these conclusions also generate further inquiries, such as: Why are pathways into prostitution important? And are they associated with other outcomes? We address these concerns in the following section.

Pathways, Time in the Trade, and the Toll

Beyond showing that age appears to be linked to particular pathways into prostitution, the age of entry also holds other implications for street prostitutes. We believe it is especially noteworthy that those who began working in prostitution as adolescents remained in the trade for longer periods of time compared with individuals who first entered as adults. Specifically, the former group spent approximately 22 years in prostitution compared with the latter group who averaged 8 years on the streets (see Table 1). This stark difference suggests those who entered earlier are more likely to work in prostitution for a longer duration of time, which in turn can increase the toll the work takes on these individuals. The toll experienced among street prostitutes consisted of an accumulation of violent encounters, elevated levels of exhaustion, heightened stigma that resulted in broken relationships with family members, intensified drug addictions as a way to cope with the difficulties of the work, and arrests and incarceration. Previous work based on a large data set of street prostitutes concludes that drug use and violence, in particular, can also lead to premature mortality among them (Potterat et al. 2004). Likewise, it is evident throughout these accounts that fear of death is a prominent factor that contributes to the toll women experience owing to their work.

The first indicator of the toll is the number and intensity of violent encounters prostitutes experienced on the streets. Like much of the research

on prostitution, we found women who remained in the trade for longer periods of time had been exposed to higher levels of abuse and appeared to feel the effects of victimization to a greater degree. Carrie, for example, who began work as a prostitute at the age of 18, remained in the trade for 17 years and recalled countless violent encounters: "I've been raped, woken up rolled up in a tarp, left for dead, had my lung collapse in a street fight, and more. It's amazing I'm still alive." Likewise, Jenna, who was 14 years old when she first started and worked as a prostitute for 27 years, emphasized the violence and abuse she endured: "I was raped many times and left for dead, having people cut my face up and my eye was permanently damaged. I was almost killed by my last john and I ran for my life." Although prostitutes can experience violence at the hands of johns, pimps, or others at any point in their career, abuse appears especially salient among those who had been on the streets a substantial time and had been subjected to numerous attempts on their lives.

In addition, the level of overall exhaustion is another indicator of the toll experienced by street prostitutes, which was frequently reported by those who remained in prostitution for a considerable number of years. For instance, 28-year-old Amy worked as a prostitute for 15 years and claimed she stopped working on the streets because, "I was tired of prostituting and wanted to try and change my life so I could do something else ... because I'm getting way too old for it. By the end, I was so tired I just sat on the sidewalk from sheer exhaustion until the cops found me." Likewise, LaTonya, a 52-year-old woman who worked in prostitution since age 13, stated, "I realized that I wanted to stop this lifestyle because I'm way too old for this shit... I'm a mother of 11 kids and 15 grandkids ... at this point in life I shouldn't be doing that." When probed to describe specifically the ways in which she felt tired, LaTonya referenced multiple forms of exhaustion: "I was so tired and ill that I went to the hospital, I barely made it. Around that time I got too depressed, that's another issue I struggled with was depression or whatever." Similar to Barton's (2006) assessment, those who emphasized these feelings underscore the difficulties of the work itself, which manifested itself in terms of both mental and physical exhaustion.

Moreover, another toll of prostitution was the stigmatization women felt upon being labeled by loved ones, which in turn adversely affected these relationships. A few women in this study spoke of their shame and the stigma they experienced while in prostitution and how that shaped their familial relationships. Shondra was a prostitute for 12 years and she explained how the shame she felt over her actions caused her to sever ties with her family members: "Once my family found out I was in county jail on prostitution charges... I didn't see them for years after that because I was embarrassed and ashamed of what they would think about me and my lifestyle." CeeCee,

who entered prostitution at 15 and worked in the trade for 25 years, recalled how her relationships with family members completely deteriorated when her brother saw her on the streets and took physical action: "In fact one of my brothers got so angry with me that he physically assaulted me." Thus, consistent with previous research, the stigma and shame women felt and the lack of support from family and friends became a burden for these individuals that took a toll over time (Chapkis 1997; Sanders 2007).

It is well documented that many prostitutes use drugs as a coping mechanism (Davis 2000; Porter and Bonilla 2009; Young, Boyd, and Hubbell 2000). Similarly, our interviewees claimed their addictions intensified the longer they remained in the trade to contend with the difficulties of the work (e.g., stigma, shame, violent encounters). Elaine, who worked as a prostitute for 17 years, admitted she occasionally used drugs prior to becoming a prostitute but the habit grew worse after her entrance. She stated, "When I started working the street [prostituting] it got even worse because I didn't have commitments to make. As I got more money I could just blow it on drugs." Monique, who entered prostitution at age 10 and spent a total of 39 years working on the streets, discussed how drugs became the way she coped with shame and stigma associated with her work: "Yes, it bothered me that my family found out what I was doing and what they thought about me, but I just went and got high so I wouldn't have to have to deal with it." The following account by Noelle, who had worked as a prostitute for 16 years, highlights how drugs and prostitution reinforced one another:

When I was arrested I was so sick and so sick and tired that they had to arraign me from the doorway. My drug of choice was heroin. I couldn't even walk to stand in front of the judge so they arraigned me from the doorway, that's how sick I was. That's how I got out of it finally.

As Noelle's earlier comments imply, she felt shame and stigma about working as a prostitute and drugs helped to assuage those feelings. As a result, she had a severe drug addiction at the time of her arrest. The women who had been in prostitution for significant lengths of time often had a serious drug habit that grew worse as they grappled with feelings of shame, worthlessness, and powerlessness.

The final indicator of a toll that woman experienced was extensive histories with the criminal justice system, which led to increasingly stiff punitive sentences. Tisha had a substantial history of arrests and jail time, accumulated during her 9 years of prostitution. She was "burned out" and felt the costs of being in prostitution were becoming too high as she faced another long stint in prison: "I was on parole and I got busted for prostitution again. I knew I was going back to prison for a long time. At that point, I knew something had

to change.” Janise, who worked in prostitution for 28 years, also expressed that going to prison was her biggest fear and caused her great anxiety. She espoused, “I had been to the penitentiary twice, one more arrest and I would have gone away for a long, long time. I became so scared of getting in a car with an undercover cop... that was a big fear for me. Because when you go to prison, you don’t really know if you’ll get out alive.” Anxiety about stiff punitive sentences became especially taxing for those who had significant prior involvement with the criminal justice system.

Many of the issues that caused a toll fueled each other (e.g., feelings of shame, escalated drug use, and strained familial relationships) and culminated in negative outcomes and feelings that prostitutes claimed they endured because of their participation in prostitution. Specifically, we found the women who entered prostitution as adolescents were more likely to remain in the trade longer, as well as experience and recount negative aspects associated with the job. For some of these individuals, the toll became too great to bear and ultimately served as the impetus to pull them out of the sex trade.

Discussion

Many studies examine factors that pull women into prostitution, including economic and structural conditions (Brock 1998; Chapkis 2000; Whelehan 2001), cultural norms (Raphael and Shapiro 2002; Sharpe 1998), and personal experiences, such as past abuse or drug addiction (Cusick and Hickman 2005; Hwang and Bedford 2003; Rosen and Venkatesh 2008; Simpson, Yahner, and Dugan 2008). However, these works do not provide a clear explanation as to why certain factors shape some women’s entrance into prostitution more than others. The current study extends previous research through a qualitative analysis of female entrance into street prostitution. Our study underscores that pathways into prostitution are age-graded; thus, the relevance of certain explanatory factors varies according to age category.

One pathway that accounts for adolescent entry into prostitution centers on childhood victimization, which includes physical abuse, sexual molestation, and incest. Consistent with other research, we find that many in our sample ran away from home to escape assaults (Gilfis 1992; Hwang and Bedford 2003; Owen and Bloom 1995) and subsequently engaged in prostitution to reclaim control over their sexuality. Ironically, those who were encouraged to work as prostitutes by male figures soon felt disempowered as their work was “managed” by others.

The other pathway of adolescent entry into prostitution was based on socialization and learned perceptions about prostitution. Growing up in disadvantaged community contexts where prostitution was prevalent exposed females to this lifestyle at an early age. Because of close interpersonal networks with family, friends, and neighbors who participated in the sex work,

adolescents came to view these activities as acceptable and glamorous and prostitution as a viable option of work. Consistent with differential association theory, we find females who had regular contact with prostitutes or those who encouraged prostitution embraced the lifestyle at an early age.

Although some studies argue that childhood victimization and exposure to others involved in sex work account for women's entrance into the trade (Potterat et al. 1985; Simons and Witbeck 1991), our research reveals different motivations for women who entered prostitution as adults. The first pathway into prostitution among our adult-onset sample was primarily fueled by drug addiction. Interestingly, these individuals claimed they were morally opposed and reluctant to engage in prostitution, yet drug addiction led them to violate their beliefs to obtain money to support their habit.

The last pathway into prostitution among adult-onset prostitutes was economic instability. Extant research claims poverty can "pull" women into prostitution, especially when the trade serves as a survival mechanism and rational means for making money (Rosen and Venkatesh 2008; Weitzer 2009). This is consistent with the feminization of poverty theory, which states that many women resort to committing crimes because of their low SES (Daly 1992, 1994).

In uncovering these four pathways into prostitution based on age category, we are aware that none of these pathways are completely distinct from another. However, we assert that each embodies a prevalent pattern of entry into prostitution associated with a particular age group. Our study builds on Simpson, Yahner, and Dugan's (2008) work by identifying "risk factors" that pull women into prostitution that vary by age, many of which have been uncovered in previous research on this topic (Brock 1998; Chapkis 2000; Hwang and Bedford 2003; Potterat et al. 1998; Raphael and Shapiro 2002; Rosen and Venkatesh 2008). Yet our study presents nuanced explanations by analyzing how age of onset (adolescence versus adulthood) is associated with different pathways and risk factors. We assert that age is central to understanding this phenomenon because it not only appears to be connected to pathways into prostitution, but entrance types may also predict longer durations in the trade, which heightens the toll experienced by prostitutes.

Our age-graded typology provides an organizing framework that bridges both personal and structural features. Dalla (2000: 352) concludes that while "entry into prostitution results from the cumulation of multiple interdependent personal and contextual factors...[e]fforts at teasing apart those variables, and the relative significance of each, have left many questions unanswered and uncertainties remaining." By examining age and its connection to pathways into prostitution, this analysis begins to disentangle these concerns and goes beyond them by discussing implications of tenure in prostitution.

Our findings not only add to scholarly research but also can be used to inform public policy relevant to prostitution. From this perspective, our pathways underscore the need for additional support services for “at risk” women, as the prevalence of these may affect whether girls and women enter street prostitution. To be effective, prevention and intervention programs must address the unique needs of prostitutes. One way to do so is to focus on treating physical and sexual assault victims and to allocate proper guardians and housing for at-risk adolescent girls. Adult prostitutes are primarily in need of services that help them obtain legal employment, secure housing, and maintain their sobriety.

Despite our contributions, we must note a few limitations of this study. First, these data precluded us from addressing psychological factors, which may impact female entry into prostitution (Potterat et al. 1998). Second, each participant in our sample was interviewed once regarding their pathways into the trade; thus, we were unable to capture changes in attitudes or interpretations of personal experiences linked to entrance. Third, given our small sample size, our findings may not be generalizable to all street prostitutes. And, indeed, not all street prostitutes experience the degree of hardships evident among our sample. Nonetheless, future studies can continue to assess not only pathways into prostitution but tenure in the trade as it engenders a toll on these workers. In spite of these limitations, our study concludes that age of onset is a critical feature that should be considered in future attempts to understand and theorize entrance into prostitution.

ENDNOTES

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¹We recognize that there is scholarly debate about the classification of prostitutes as “criminals.” It is not our intention to promote this idea; however, owing to the legal and cultural mandates in the United States, being labeled and treated as criminals was especially salient for the women in this sample. Thus, we include this framework because it is derived from our data and sheds light on the perceptions of the individuals included in this study.

²Although 11 women admitted to having engaged in prostitution, four were excluded from the study because during the course of the interview, no information was gathered regarding the reasons they entered prostitution.

³Because the purpose of the original study was to explore how women managed their release from prison, this time frame was selected because it provided an ample follow-up period postrelease to identify women successful in not recidivating and a similarly situated reincarcerated comparison group.

⁴Race was not found to shape prostitution entry among respondents in the sample.

⁵Most women in this study claimed they worked consistently in prostitution for the length of time they specified. However, there were some individuals who left for short durations of time; temporary breaks were often attributed to other events, such as being incarcerated, pregnant, in a hospital, or in detox programs. We stress that these calculations represent the estimates of tenure in prostitution and are likely not exact measures but overall demonstrate broad patterns and averages. We connect time in the trade with the toll and rely on rich, qualitative data to support our assessment.

⁶Rosaria and Sabrina fit into the first typology; however, they entered prostitution as adults rather than as adolescents. Although Rachael entered prostitution as an adult and admits having experimented with drugs recreationally when she was younger, she did not engage in prostitution to sustain a drug habit or to survive while on the streets.

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