

By Kate Herman

Close *to* HOME

Be they poor and homeless or comfortable and well-fed, earning \$6,000 a night is an intriguing prospect for teenage girls. But the cost of getting out can be much, much higher.

When you think of prostitutes in the United States, what comes to mind? Chances are, it's not the 13-year-old girl next door—and certainly not the one living in your own home. Yet according to several published reports, more and more middle-class, high-achieving girls are being wooed into prostitution more and more frequently, succumbing to a life of sex, drugs, and multiple partners in exchange for big money and easy living.

There's a new trend emerging: From *Newsweek* to *Oprah*, the news is filled with reports of suburban girls with good grades, two-parent families, and even active spiritual lives telling of their descent into prostitution.

"I didn't wake up one day and go to my school career day and say, 'No, I don't want to be a nurse. I think I'm going to be a prostitute,'" Jen, who was 16 when she turned her first trick, told talk-show host Oprah Winfrey. "You make some bad choices, and it's like getting on a roller coaster and it's out of control. And before you know it, you're kind of entrenched in that lifestyle."

This new trend among teens, many of whom are initially solicited by pimps at their local shopping malls, adds another layer to an already complex set of factors that lead to the prostitution of children in the United States. Homelessness and poverty often play key roles,

leaving girls with few options and a keen desire to make money—fast. But regardless of background, many girls are intrigued by the notion of making as much as \$6,000 a night, even if they have to hand it over to their pimp at close of business.

Jill Leighton knows all too well how easily a nice-looking, smooth-talking man can tempt girls with money, clothes, food, and more—only to trap them in a sexual prison with few escape routes. Leighton, now in her late thirties, was barely a teenager when one such man caught her eye in a Cincinnati mall.

"When Bruce approached me, I was 14 years old, homeless, sleeping in a cemetery, and 'dumpster diving' at Taco Bell for food," recalls Leighton, who—like Jen on *Oprah*—had argued with her mother and left home a short time before. "He offered me a job in what he termed an 'entertainment agency' ... and I needed a job."

Trusting Bruce came easier for Leighton because of his looks. "I'd been told as a child by my grandmother that bad men 'sweat for no reason, have thick mustaches, are balding, and drive blue vans,'" she says. "Bruce was none of those. He looked like my teenage crush, Fleetwood Mac singer Lindsey Buckingham."

Pictured: Former teen prostitute Jill Leighton

“The teen experience was against my will—I was a captive in a brutal prostitution ring run by a sadist. My adult experience was a decision I made.”

But instead of serenading her on stage, Bruce subjected Leighton to three years of sexual torture and prostitution, training her to be “the submissive” while the paying customers choked, bound, whipped, and handcuffed her during sex. She credits a miracle for never getting a sexually transmitted disease, but at least one of her encounters led to pregnancy. “[Bruce] was opposed to me using contraception, feeling it would diminish the clients’ experience,” she says. “Abortion was his method of contraception for me. He paid for it, although it came out of the money I made for him.”

Twenty years later, her experience is far from unique. The Alan Guttmacher Institute says a sexually active teenager who does not use contraceptives has a 90 percent chance of becoming pregnant within one year. Of the 905,000 teen pregnancies in the United States in 1996, 78 percent were unplanned, and roughly one-third ended in abortion.

Leighton’s education also fell victim to the sex trade. “Being a teen prostitute ended my educational process in the ninth grade,” she says, noting that she earned a GED years later. Homeless children in general are more prone to chronic school absences.

But the school story is the same for teen prostitutes across socioeconomic backgrounds: Jen, who shared her tale on *Oprah*, had left home after an argument with her mother over her declining school attendance. Her mother, Carol, said education was the single most important aspect of Jen’s life and there was no room for compromise. “I said to her, ‘Either you go to school or you can’t live at home,’” Carol remembered. “My intention was that she would say, ‘Okay, I’m going to go back to school,’ which is not what she did.”

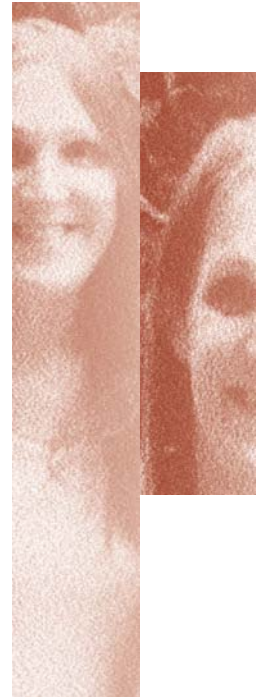
It took Jen more than three years to get out of the business. Now 20 years old, she lives at home and attends college. For Leighton, it wasn’t as easy. She escaped when Bruce was arrested in 1984, but her past continues to haunt her: The pornographic photos of her that Bruce took so many years ago are posted on the Internet, despite her efforts to have them removed. And a decade after her escape, following several “straight” jobs in retail management and waitressing, she lost her job and


became homeless again. In need of money, she turned to stripping before becoming a call girl in Boston. But unlike her first foray into prostitution, this time, she says, she was in control. “The teen experience was against my will—I was a captive in a brutal prostitution ring run by a sadist,” she says. “My adult experience was a decision I made.”

Now out of the business again, Leighton works full-time and also is executive director of Project PROSPER, an advocacy group for the fair treatment and safety of women and girls who are still working as prostitutes as well as those who want to leave the industry. Whether because of money, the adrenaline rush, or the feeling of expressing their own identity, some prostitutes simply aren’t ready to give up their job, while others are crying out for help.

“I’ve found both as a prostitute and stripper and as a service provider that prostitutes are often very smart, creative, and talented individuals who end up in prostitution for a variety of reasons,” Leighton says. “Most are there for need, some are coerced by situations or individuals in their lives, and some have other options but choose sex work for their own reasons.” □

Kate Herman is a senior editor at AAUW.






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