

# How children become prostitutes

By Richard Phillips

**S**AN FRANCISCO — It is a drizzling, chilly, and nearly lifeless night on Powell Street. Lonely executives are out of reach, squandering expense accounts in hotel bars, and she is yet too artless to find a way in.

Certainly, she is too young to join them legally.

This hooker is about 13, perhaps 14, too young to obtain a driver's license in most states, but, more important, not old enough to drink with the paying customers. She must troll for business in the drizzle and chill.

Killing time inspecting travel posters in a store display window, she stands like a giraffe slipping on wet cobblestones. High-heeled boots collapse against each other at the ankles, joining tight burgundy cords that emphasize kid's legs plainly too skinny to be termed slim. They bulge only at the pockets, where hands burrow for warmth. The fake "fun fur" around her torso hardly seems warm enough. But they're all the rage for girls in the 8th and 9th grades.

A man in a sailing jacket nears, and the giraffe on slippery cobblestones abruptly vanishes. Idle eyes leave the travel poster, and where a moment ago pouty boredom was apparent, a glance of seductive trust emerges. This kid knows her business.

He is trolling, too.

The two predators pass each other in slow assessment, one with shiny black wingtips and a chin turning soft with affluence, the other with cosmetic blush and a "Charlie's Angels" sophistication that sets Freudians into an Electra frenzy.

**SOME PSYCHIATRISTS** and Freudian psychologists maintain that all girls secretly desire sexual intercourse, whether they are teens or pre-pubescent. The more orthodox among them argue that if a young lass submits, then she probably enticed the fellow, who figured it was *his* idea. A lot of incestuous fathers think along the same lines. Both theories are regarded today as having a grain of truth — but a grain that has been warped by patriarchal history and taboo to mean more than it does.

This hunt is strictly business. Eager client, a clean-shaven fellow in his early 40s, looks sheepish only for the moment it takes him to survey Powell Street for possible witnesses. Then he turns around smoothly and overtakes the kid hooker.

"Those kids are killing the older prostitutes," observes a young woman formerly in the trade.

"Old," she adds helpfully, is a prostitute over 20.

Child prostitution as a reportable topic only recently has been discovered as a national scare. The news and entertainment media milk it for all it's worth, which is quite a lot. But amidst the titillation and contrived horror a disturbing trend seems all too apparent:

Girls, mere children, many of them yet to experience their first menstrual cycle, are submitting to a growing appetite for ever younger bodies. Judging from swelling arrest records of juveniles, it is a national problem.

**THE ONE WITH** skinny legs seen leaving Powell Street with a cash customer might be turning tricks for \$30 — or for as little as \$5 if tomorrow's meals are uncertain. Probably she is a runaway. Except for an ungrateful boyfriend addicted to heroin or perhaps a pimp who has a lock on her emotions, she is isolated. Moreover, if a recent survey of child prostitutes in San Francisco is valid, she may well have fled a nuclear family with strong religious values and economic security.

She also despises herself. And she hates prostitution.

San Francisco is a haven for the young. Many of them arrive here as runaways, fleeing suburbs of Chicago as well as Des Moines or Cleveland, seeking acceptance and freedom in a city steeped in Jaguars and a warm air of promise. It is a melting pot of lifestyles, a tourist town, gilded by big bucks and the young rich, romanticized as a fine place to get your head together, a place where one can find human beings who care.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that this golden City by the Bay has a seamy side.

Girls arrive broke and naive, easy prey for pimps and pushers. The shrewdest have skills at bus depots — motherly women with warm eyes and disarming words who greet each scared young arrival with unsolicited

caring. They offer a cup of soup and a night's security but say nothing about the pimp in the bedroom.

**OTHER RUNAWAYS** get here by hitching rides across the Great Plains, only to discover that truck drivers often have a price for their good will. Usually the price is sexual. "They stop in the middle of the desert and say, 'OK, kid. Give it up or toodle-oo,'" said Delores Flores, a college student whose winsome smile belies a prostitute's past.

Street unnerves neighboring gentry. Those who suspect the worst about them often aren't far from the mark.

"Almost all of them, whatever else they might have been into — dope, alcohol, theft — they also were prostitutes," Silbert said.

The youngest are escapees from home. Underage and unskilled, they've discovered their options narrowed to a life outside the mainstream.

"They're too young to be sales clerks or even McDonald's cashiers, and they're too young to obtain welfare," Silbert said. They are, however, desperate to avoid the life back home.

Prostitution becomes a way to survive.

**FOR A YOUNG RUNAWAY**, the arrival of a pimp may signal the first real rescuer in their miserable lives. "Most are sweet-talked into prostitution," Flores says.

Television fantasies play up the coercion in child prostitution: Children and young teens kidnapped from bus depots and shot up with heroin until their will to resist is sapped. The reality today is that a little sugar goes much farther than a stick. The pimp often is not a dude in a disco suit and velvet hat, but an honest-to-goodness *friend*. Perhaps the first in their entire lives, the Delancey study suggests.

It is a predator's world. Just as J. Worthington Foulfellow had no trouble hoodwinking Pinocchio with false promises, pimps know where to pull the strings among girls hungry for a kind word. They are ripe for delusion.

"One 15-year-old girl I interviewed insisted that her 'boyfriend' was out working while she turned tricks. He told her: 'We have to eat. You have no skills, but it would be nice if you go help out by (prostitution). If you love me you'll do it,'" Flores recounts.

The girl never referred to her 'boyfriend' as a pimp.

"Remember that these are kids," said Flores. "They are lonely and scared and hungry. They honestly come out here thinking that something spectacular is going to happen to them that is better than the world they left."

**PROSTITUTION BEGINS** as a thing she does "once or twice." When drugs finally come along, the introduction often is made with kind words.

"Most of them expect to get out of prostitution soon. She says, 'My pimp is holding the money for me' or 'Soon I'll be able to buy all the things I want for myself,' because she thinks the pimp is actually helping her."

Flores had difficulty remaining silent throughout the interviews.

"There were a lot of times when I wanted to lean across the table and yell, 'There's another way! You're coming with me!'"

Sixty per cent of the prostitutes Silbert studied were 16 or younger. The rest were just as young when they started. They reveal intense self-disgust. But none is inclined to break away, at least not now. Virtually all are runaways, many from Midwestern towns, products of religious households in most instances — almost half were raised Catholic, another third strict Protestant. Many of the others had at least nominal Christian upbringing.

The Delancey survey damages other comfortable stereotypes as well. Among them is a racial notion that prostitution is a black trade. Most of the girls interviewed in San Francisco were white, but they reported far fewer arrests than their black counterparts, who comprised about one-quarter of the Delancey study. Such findings suggest more Caucasian prostitution than arrest records might indicate.

**FLORES, EVER MINDFUL** of her own past, isn't really surprised by Delancey's discoveries. Disturbed, yes, but not surprised.

"What bothered me is finding that 'interviewee No. 27' was an 11-year-old kid," says Flores. No. 29 was even younger, and No. 35 had an older sister in 9th grade. And so on, right up through No. 200.

Each was a volunteer, enticed by a promise of \$20 offered in fliers circulated by the foundation. The fliers stated that former prostitutes would conduct the interviews. Each volunteer was tough, displaying a street savvy calculated to unnerve strangers. The toughness doesn't help much when alone in a car or a isolated room with a "crazy," but they seemed unconcerned. At first.

Flores interviewed child prostitutes alone, often in cheap hotel rooms above San Francisco's famous Tenderloin District near Hyde and Eddy streets. "They're all ratholes. Cheap, cockroach infested ratholes. Two bucks a night."

Occasionally, a pimp telephoned, demanding to know what was going on with *his* girl. A young prostitute usually trusts her pimp, believing he actually is saving her earnings for the day when she gets out of prostitution. Flores herself avoided pimps. "I had one, once, for one day, and he gave me a black eye."

Those she interviewed often got black eyes, too. And broken arms and legs from crazy customers. And promises.

"Most of them left the interviews certain that their pimps would protect them," Flores said.

**THE STORY OF Delores Flores** and the child prostitutes she interviewed is not new.

For as long as prostitution has been a profession, children have been participants, forced to turn tricks for adults. Only in recent centuries has it become indelicate.

According to Florence Rush, author of the newly published "The Best Kept Secret," (Prentice-Hall, \$11.95), sexual liberties with children date at least as far back as the Talmud. Raping a child in biblical days was considered mere thievery; restitution was made by paying the father 50 pieces of silver and marrying the girl. self-inflicted injuries remained unknown until the Delancey Street study.

In medieval times young girls virtually were part of a relish dish. Sexual trespass upon them wasn't considered unsavory among polite society until the 13th

Century when civil law was separated from church law under the statutes of Westminster. Even then, ravishing a girl under 12 wasn't a serious offense for another three centuries. When it did come, in 1571, it was through the back door: England was trying to assert dominion over troublesome provinces, and when the crown accused a Scotsman of raping a 7-year-old girl, its jurisdiction over Scotsmen was duly established. (The defendant escaped on a technicality, however, having been charged with a felony when rape then was only a misdemeanor.)

**WHEREVER THERE WAS church** inquisition the blame was entirely with the child. Not for sex, but for consorting with Satan. Girls as young as 6 were cauterized by hot irons preparatory to burning at the stake for granting sexual favors to Satan. Just "who" Satan really was unfortunately never manifested itself to the satisfaction of church inquisitors, notes Rush; enlightenment came much later when historians exposed the guilty as monks, priests, and male educators. Medievalist Henry Charles Lea, author of the "History of Sacerdotal Celibacy," observed that as late as the 18th Century the prioress of the convent of St. Catherian di Pisola roundly chastised monks and confessors for turning convents into dens of prostitution.

Men seldom were punished for cavorting sexually with kids, however, unless it was for the more serious crime of witchcraft.

Over the ages, in fact, "expert opinion" for sexual misconduct has been supplied by males. Generally they have blamed females.

In 1933, Sigmund Freud wrote:

"Almost all my women patients told me that they had been seduced by their fathers. I was driven to recognize in the end that these reports were untrue and so came to understand that their hysterical symptoms are derived from fantasies and not from real occurrences."

Today, Freud has a loyal following. So does incest.

Flores was a prostitute almost all of her teen-age life. It financed a bitter adolescence that nonetheless was preferable to living with parents. Ultimately, her experiences proved an asset because Flores was recruited as a researcher in a study of child prostitution financed by the National Institute of Mental Health and implemented through the Delancey Street Foundation of San Francisco — itself a curious collection of onetime thieves and drop-outs bent on reconstituting themselves and helping others.

Flores was introduced to sexual intercourse at age 8 by a gentle but incestuous father in the Bronx. He told her that little girls who love their fathers do this.

Compliant but confused, Flores perceived that what was happening also was unmentionable. Her mother feigned ignorance.

"She was very religious. Always lighting prayer candles to some saint in a closet where she kept the statues," Flores recalled. "She lived most of her life in a closet."

**MOTHER EMERGED** frequently to remind her pretty firstborn daughter that sex is unclean and that prettiness is bad. Nuns at school ignored the topic. Dad, meanwhile, continued his weekly trespass. It went on for three years.

"I never knew it was bad," Flores said. "I thought all the girls were doing it. I mean, like it was just something we all did and no one ever talked about."

One day Flores and several classmates lingered in a women's room, sharing thoughts of things enjoyed. One of them liked a new stereo. "I said I liked the way my dad made love to me."

It was a remark uttered in innocence. The next day Flores found herself ostracized. No one volunteered why, but even a confused 6th grader cannot mistake revulsion. When she fled home months later, it was with a conviction that badness was her lot in life.

Years of self-hatred and self-destruction ensued.

At 14 she was turning tricks for as little as \$5, buying candy bars and apples just to live, sleeping on park benches or in apartment stairwells, hoarding carbohydrates to avoid hitting on another strange man with a phony smile and the standard come-on: "How about it? It's only a 5 or a 10."

She hated herself. Drugs wasted her mind. A botched abortion left her sterile and almost dead. But her body had become a means to survive. And to inflict self-punishment.

"Everyone thinks child prostitutes live in silk and velvet. It's not like that at all. It's sickening," she said.

**FLORES NOW IS 23**, in college, three years out of the world's oldest profession for women, and thirsting to contribute to humankind.

The wretched experiences behind her, however, were precisely what criminologist Mimi Silbert was looking for — a modern Mary Magdalene to help examine prostitution among America's young.

Hookers, even at a tender age, learn quickly how to deflect questions through manipulation. They can say anything and leave a Ph.D. feeling like a Socratic foil. Silbert had two doctorates, one in criminology and one in psychology. She knew her comparatively "straight" background would be no asset in getting behind the tough, emotional facade prostitutes acquire.

But Flores was wise to the game. At 12 she had seduced her psychiatrist at Bellevue Hospital in New York City to obtain release from its psychiatric ward. "I played seductive. It was easy." It was the first in a series of manipulative conquests over psychiatrists, freeing Flores from confinement and getting her into drug treatment shelters where life was easier. She would be a good interviewer, thought Silbert — "empathic and street wise."

The young woman readily agreed to help. So did four other ex-prostitutes who had come for help to the Delancey Street Foundation, where Silbert is copresident. Meanwhile, the National Institute of Mental Health, provoked by reports of rapes and beatings of child prostitutes, had approved Silbert's application for \$100,000 in taxpayers' money to finance the study.

**THEY WORKED THROUGH** most of last year. When it was over, 200 women and girls, some as young as 10, had opened their lives and emotions to sisters formerly in the trade.

Most came for the \$20 bounty. When they departed hours later, it was in tears and anger.

"It was the first time most of them had told the real story," Silbert said.

What they told is a challenge to stereotypes that persist in all the best homes.

Prostitution, they revealed, especially among kids, is not a matter of "bad seed" or "broken home." Children raised in comfort are just as vulnerable as those castaways born on the other side of the tracks — the kids we call street whores.

Moreover, if young Mary *does* become a Mary Magdalene, prostitution may well be a symptom of flight — and neither religion, dad and mom together, or good schooling will stop her. Among the child prostitutes who volunteered for the Delancey Street study, a background of *good family* was almost endemic.

"Their families seemed to have everything that made for successful nuclear families," Silbert said. "They were often 'together.' They were mostly white, and educated.

"And the younger they are, the more likely it is they come from wealthy backgrounds, what you would call upper-middle-class families," Silbert said.

**THEY ALSO WERE** incestuous. And that was the problem.

As the interviews wore on, it became

apparent that an incestuous father or father figure, when accompanied by a child's perception that no one will listen to her confused fears — or worse, will accuse her of lying — lays the foundation for prostitution. A lifestyle of *learned helplessness* ensues.

One girl related, "I was only 11 when it happened. I felt sick and disgusted. . . . I wanted to die; I was lower than a dog. I thought everyone could tell what he did to me by looking at me . . . my own father."

Some of the girls were as young as 3 when they were first introduced to sex by dad. Usually it was oral sex. If it wasn't dad, it was some other father figure, a step father, or an uncle, or brother, or clergyman. But dad usually was first on the list. Sixty-one per cent of the girls in the Delancey study were sexually exploited as children. Most were too frightened to say anything about it until the Delancey Street Foundation interviews; for two-thirds of them, the offenders were their natural fathers or stepfathers.

These are children who consent to a pimp's arm-twisting. They already feel used and tainted — and helpless.

"A 12-year-old shouldn't even know the meaning of the word, and yet they have that certain sense of despair," Silbert said. But there it was, even among 10-year-olds, a psychological state of immobility traceable to physical and sexual abuse as children.

**EACH YEAR THEY** came to the Delancey Street Foundation for help. And each year they seemed younger.

The foundation tries to help them out. It is a residential shelter and emotional retooling school for addicts, prostitutes, and ex-cons in the heart of San Francisco's exclusive Pacific Heights neighborhood, relying on its residents to help each other. Flores arrived, like many, in despair. She had come to San Francisco as a wanderer, without purpose. One night at a party she closed her eyes and stepped off the balcony of a high-rise building. Someone grabbed her wrist just before the plunge.

"God, am I glad I didn't kill myself," she said, exhaling sharply.

The parade of waywards into Delancey

# Easy prey without a prayer: The tragedy of child prostitution



Jodie Foster as the young hooker in "Taxi Driver": A way to survive.

ONE GROUP IN California has openly declared it a good thing. "Sex by 8, or else it's too late" is the motto of the Cuyon Society in Beverly Hills, which claims a membership of 5,000 and an insight into children — contending that early sex is desired by children, and that keeping it in the family insures emotional well-being. The group hired a lobbyist to legalize child pornography.

Silbert expresses disbelief that caring people truly could believe such things.

"Our studies show that any child subjected to sex clearly is traumatized. For 99 per cent of them, the reaction is instinctive," said Silbert, whose doctorates in criminology and psychology were granted by the University of California at Berkeley.

Typical among such victims is an 11-year-old child prostitute who grew up in a religious, middle-class family. Her father never molested her, but a teen-age brother did. And she never told.

"For months thereafter she scratched herself all over her arms and chest to make them bleed." Hospitalized ultimately for symptoms, the real reason for self-inflicted injuries remained unknown until the Delancey Street study.

Few experts doubt the statistical evidence that child prostitution today is growing.

ACCOMPANYING IT is an uneasy feeling that commercial television and child pornography are fueling its growth by glamorizing preadolescent sexuality.

One girl interviewed by Silbert's team soon after her debut as a hooker related tearfully that her incestuous father usually visited after warming up on magazines filled with child pornography. He called her "pretty baby."

Dozens of prepubescent or barely pubescent prostitutes reported that customers also refer to them as "pretty baby," said Silbert, speculating that seductive poses that enrich Brooke Shields apparently have a dangerous rippling effect upon those too powerless to avoid the waves.

Silbert's statistics on sexual assaults in the backgrounds of child prostitutes is even more interesting when matched with other recent research.

Jennifer James, assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Washington, has found an even higher incidence of childhood sex assault among the 600 prostitutes she interviewed — 75 per cent. (Silbert's figure was 61 per cent.)

"A negative sexual experience, including incest, had more to do with their entering prostitution than anything else," says colleague Debra Boyer, a research analyst. It begins with fondling, then some form of oral sex.

"ACTUAL INTERCOURSE usually doesn't occur until the child is about 9, in our experience," says Shirley Robinson, a Bolingbrook therapist whose suburban Chicago practice with the Child Abuse Treatment and Training Center consists exclusively of cases of incest. Currently, some 300 children and their families receive counseling there.

Not all girls who are assaulted as children become prostitutes, Robinson emphasizes. Nor do all boys assaulted as children become rapists. If anything, the majority of victims probably go on to lead otherwise conventional lives, at least in the eyes of neighbors and friends.

"In the eyes of neighbors and friends" is hardly reassuring. Nobody knows how many childhood victims of sexual assault there are, nor how many become prostitutes. Authorities estimate that 25 per cent of the adult female population had been sexually molested as children, and

some estimates are higher. Whatever the real figure, evidence is abundant that incest and sexual trespass will be remembered forever after by the victims.

If Silbert's study applies beyond San Francisco — and the diverse birthplaces of her 200 prostitutes strongly suggests it does — churches this morning in Chicago and suburbs are filled with best kept secrets, with girls churned up inside by confusion and fear. The cause of their fear may be sitting right beside them — their father or brother.

BOTH JAMES AND Silbert are convinced that teaching young children about sexual offenses is critical. Otherwise they learn to keep it "the best kept secret."

"Children need information to protect themselves," Boyer said. "They must learn how to tell people to stop. They also must learn that they have the right to tell someone about it, and that they should continue telling until someone helps them."

An echo comes from the girls and young teens interviewed by Delores Flores and her colleagues in the Delancey Street survey of San Francisco prostitutes.

It occurred during interviews when Flores finally inquired; "Is there anything you needed most and couldn't get?"

Their response, invariably preceded by sadness and tears, was unanimous.

"What I needed most," each told Flores, "was someone to listen to me. Someone who cared enough to listen to me."