

HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOR AMONG YOUNG STREET MALES: A CHALLENGE TO SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

**Cudore Llewellyn Snell, DSW, LICSW
School of Social Work, Howard University
Washington, D.C.**

Life on the streets for young males continues to be a major problem in the United States. Some, whether they are runaways or not, are on the streets in search of alternative lifestyles and many become part of the drug culture, religious sects, or make a life for themselves involving delinquency or prostitution. Extant research focuses largely on the psychological dimensions of their problems and scant attention is paid to their strengths or help-seeking behavior.

Little is known about the help-seeking behavior of youth and young adults who live on the streets. Much less is known about the help-seeking behavior of young male prostitutes and the role of social support networks in their lives.

Statement of the Problem

The major purpose of this research was to explore help-seeking behaviors of young street males in one urban setting who engage in prostitution. As part of this inquiry their social support networks were identified and described. Help-seeking was defined as: those actions aimed at problem-solving through requesting advice and/or material and emotional assistance from formal and informal resources. Formal resources consisted of structured agencies, programs and professionals, while informal sources included friends, family and peers (Gary, Leashore, Howard & Buckner-Dowell, 1983). In addition, this research was undertaken to get an understanding of the help-seeking process around the issue of AIDS. Thus in light of the AIDS crisis, the levels of knowledge, attitudes and practices regarding the safer sexual practices of young street males were assessed.

Research Questions

The study specifically sought to address the following research questions regarding young street males who engage in prostitution:

- o Who seeks help?
- o What kind of help is sought?
- o What type of help is received and what are the conditions of this receipt?
- o What social support systems exist for this population and what role do these systems play in help-seeking behavior?
- o What are the levels of knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding safer sexual practices among young street males?

Significance of the Problem

Historically, social work has acted as the conscience and change agent of the nation to effect progress on behalf of victimized populations wherever they may be. However, one group of young persons, generally, has been ignored by society and the social work profession. This group is comprised of young prostitutes in general and young male prostitutes in particular. Individual social workers labor to help them, but the profession has not yet made a formal commitment to deal with this issue (Campagna, 1985; Hermann, 1987).

Youthful prostitution, whether male or female, is a national problem of increasing importance, yet its full magnitude is not yet known. By estimation, there are 100,000 to 300,000 youthful prostitutes in the United States today (Campagna, 1985). According to Herman & Jupp (1985), these youth have been stolen, purchased from parents and others, found as street youth, and adopted legally and illegally for the purpose of sexual exploitation. They are used for pornography and prostitution; are abused, tortured, murdered, and often are involved in drugs and eventually adult prostitution (Hermann & Jupp, 1985). Many of the exploited youth later experience problems such as sexual dysfunction, an inability to trust, relationship instability, poor

concentration, insomnia, depression, suicide and suicide attempts, self-mutilation, substance abuse, enuresis, encopresis, academic under-achievement, hysterical reactions, homicidal rage, genital disfigurement, genital bleeding, various infections and sexually transmitted diseases, and the like (Hermann & Jupp, 1985). Not all suffer from the effects mentioned here. All may experience guilt, confusion, shame and anger as a result of exploitation (Hermann & Jupp, 1985).

The young males who are subjects of this research need help desperately and the social work profession may be able to provide it (Hermann & Jupp, 1985). Yet as pointed out earlier, acknowledgement of this problem by social science research and social work practitioners has been minimal (Hermann & Jupp, 1985). Research on prostitution focuses largely on female prostitutes, with little attention to male prostitutes. Despite increased attention to young females in this area, the young male has received less attention (Weisberg, 1985). The studies that have been conducted specifically on young prostitutes have concentrated on females and have been primarily anecdotal in nature (Able-Peterson, 1981; Linedecker, 1981; Sereny, 1985). These studies have not addressed the role of social support networks directly; the extent to which this topic has been addressed is limited to inference. Explicit investigations of social support networks and help-seeking behaviors among youthful street males who engage in prostitution remain an unexplored area for empirically based research. If social work practice is to reach out to this population, information about help-seeking behavior and social supports is essential. The importance of social supports has, for a long time, been recognized in social work practice (Collins & Pancoast, 1976).

The current AIDS crisis underscores the urgency of need for this knowledge in terms of prevention through education. Help-seeking and the role of social support networks around the issue of AIDS and AIDS education in particular, is probably one of the most pressing research priorities currently. It is important to assess the level of knowledge, attitudes and practices regarding safer sexual practices among young male prostitutes as it relates to help-seeking behavior.

It must be noted that no empirical studies were located which directly examined the role of social networks in the help-seeking process with regard to young male prostitutes.

There continues to be a dearth in the social science literature with regards to male prostitutes in general, and young male prostitutes in particular. Most of the research studies found on young male prostitutes were conducted ten or twenty years ago and focused largely on their problems, and selected psychosocial characteristics, and categorized them into various roles in an effort to capture the diversity of this population. Clearly absent, was any reference to their strengths, their survival mechanisms and ability to seek and to receive both formal and informal assistance. This aspect is of particular relevance to social work practice. The conceptual framework which structured this research built upon selected concepts from social support network analysis and differential association theory.

Experimental Design and Methods

A survey design with an informal semi-structured interview schedule was the chief method used to obtain exploratory-descriptive-analytic data and allowed association of the variables under study. The individual young male prostitute was the unit of analysis.

The target population consisted of a non-random, convenience sample of 70 young street males up to 35 years of age who engaged in prostitution and who sought out the services of two private non-profit social service agencies, in a large metropolitan area. Data were collected at or near where young male prostitutes congregated such as booths at fast-food eating places in colder weather and in nearby parks in good weather. Snowball sampling seemed pertinent in a study of this nature and was used to counter the potential difficulty of reaching non-captive subjects to decrease the levels of mistrust and hostility. This technique entailed asking each young male prostitute who agreed to be interviewed, to suggest additional prostitutes for interviewing. Interviewing was undertaken by the researcher and a trained

interviewer. Attempts were made to reduce systematic bias. This was done by training the interviewer in the probes and coaching that could be used; and the standardized selection procedures to be used.

Summary of Findings

Demographic Profile of the Youths Interviewed

The average age of respondents in this sample was 22 years with a range from 14 to 34. The sample was almost evenly distributed in terms of white (50%) and Black (44%). About half of the subjects were born in the South, and were Southern Baptists. More than half of the subjects had high school education. A large number were living in shelters on a short-term basis. A third of the young men were raised by their mothers, alone, another third by two parents, and a third by other relatives. Most of the respondents considered themselves as having occupations other than prostitution such as being non-technicians, for example, couriers, hospital workers, and clerks; students, and technicians, for example word processors, landscapers, air conditioning repairmen. More than 60 percent of the subjects worked either full-time, or part-time and this included employment in prostitution.

The income per week ranged from \$0 - \$800 and above, with an average income of \$300 per week (which included income earned from prostitution). The mean age of the first sexual encounter for money or favors was 15 years and 32 years as the oldest age of the first prostitution encounter. The number of years engaged in prostitution, ranged from one to 18.

Overview of Respondents' Social Support Networks: Worries, Fun Times and Looking for Help

Worries

The majority reported that they were worried about: 1) AIDS and physical danger, 2) future, and 3) personal relationships. Interestingly, most of the reported worries about future events dealt not

with immediate personal concerns, but with the welfare of others, particularly concern about family.

Feelings When Worried

Respondents reported feeling lonely, depressed, lethargic, not like having sex or felt like crying. The majority never felt that they were at the point of a nervous breakdown, yet some of the experiences indicate lives filled with hardships.

Fun Times

Almost all had fun times mostly with close friends and engaged in activities typically adolescent in nature: getting high, playing sports, hanging out at malls, partying and sex.

Looking For Help: Families and Friends

The majority reported high levels of emotional support from family if they needed it. The majority reported having received high levels of material support from their families. This was not true in terms of receiving material support from their friends.

Looking for Help: Formal Services

The majority reported that they would get help from a hospital emergency room, a medical clinic, minister or lawyer. The minority indicated that they would get help from a social service or welfare agency, mental health center, police, alcoholics anonymous/narcotics anonymous or a private therapist.

Shelters

Although 24 percent were living in shelters, 56 percent reported that they would not use them because of the following reasons: lack of privacy, concern about cleanliness and security, feelings of humiliation and restrictions on prostitution activities.

Finding Other Forms of Help

Respondents reported they found forms of help through friends and family, advertisements, professionals and themselves.

Returning for Help

The majority would return for help to the person they had gone to in the past if they needed to. They would also refer friends and family to the same source.

Satisfaction With Help

Most of the respondents expressed satisfaction with help they received from social workers, counselors, doctors, lawyers, or ministers.

Life Satisfaction

The majority reported being satisfied with life in general.

Risk Behavior and AIDS Awareness

A striking set of findings indicate that while a majority reported worrying about AIDS and had someone they could confide in about AIDS, only a minority reported feeling at-risk regarding AIDS. This gap between general worrying and feeling personally vulnerable was reflected as well in reported sexual behaviors, many of which are extremely risky in terms of HIV infection.

The majority of the respondents reported that they had vaginal intercourse and only a minority reported having used a condom. The majority reported that they had anal intercourse and little less than half said that they had at times used a condom during anal intercourse. The majority of the respondents reported that they engaged in oral-genital activity and only the minority said they used a condom.

Significant Differences

Blacks and Whites

The differences between white and Black youthful male prostitutes across the study's question areas are highlighted. The sample for this study was almost evenly distributed by race. The reader is reminded that the sample was non-random. Thus, it is not representative of all prostitutes in general, and youthful male prostitutes in particular. Chi-square was computed to explore possible racial differences on measures of help-seeking behavior, safer sexual practices and attitudes regarding AIDS.

Significant differences were found between race and help-seeking behavioral characteristics as well as with risk behavior and AIDS awareness.

More white males felt like drinking or getting high when worried than Black males. White street male prostitutes were more likely to engage in oral-genital activity, whereas the majority of Black street male prostitutes indicated that they did not use or never used a condom during oral-genital activity. Almost two times as many white males than Black males reported that they changed their sexual habits due to the AIDS problem. More Black males swallowed their partner's semen.

More Black street males learned about places to go for help from their families compared to white street males who received information from their friends. Black males were more reluctant to seek help from traditional helping sources such as employment agencies, alcoholics anonymous or narcotics anonymous. Not having money was a major deterrent to seeking help for white street male prostitutes and for Black youth it was the fear of what others may think of them.

These findings are consistent with Gibbs' (1988) work which found that Black male youth in particular are reluctant to seek help especially from mental health service professionals because of the stigmas attached to seeking help. Mainstream traditional agencies seem not to reach Black male youth effectively (Gibbs, 1988).

Short-term and Long-term Prostitutes

In terms of duration of prostitution experience, differences with important implications for social work practice were found. Significant differences were noted between those who had been on the streets for a shorter time (less than seven years) and those who had been on the streets for a longer time (more than seven years). This is congruent with the literature (Weisberg, 1985). Practitioners in the area of juvenile prostitution have found that intervention strategies for reintegrating street prostitutes into the mainstream are more successful with those young males who have been involved in prostitution experiences a shorter period of time than those who have been involved in business for a longer time.

Significant differences were also found between duration of the prostitution experience (shorter duration or "short-term prostitutes" versus longer duration or "long-term prostitutes") and help-seeking behavioral characteristics as well as with risk behavior and AIDS awareness. Chi-square was computed to explore these differences.

The "long-term prostitutes" were more likely to be restless in their sleep, and to feel like drinking or getting high when worried. "Long-term prostitutes" were more likely to report that they would get help from traditional agencies like social service agencies, mental health centers, private therapists or lawyers. The "short-term prostitutes," because many of them were still in school, were more likely to report that they would get help from school.

"Long-term prostitutes" indicated the major reason as to why they did not seek or engage in professional help as having had to wait too long for service. The majority of the prostitutes, both short-term and long-term, reported that they did not seek professional help because they did not know where to go.

Limitations of the Study

The nature of the sampling method may contribute to limitations of the study. A small non-random sample of youthful male prostitutes from

Washington, D.C. necessarily precludes generalizations of the findings to the general population of young male prostitutes whether they are on the streets or not. Male prostitutes may come from varying socioeconomic backgrounds; younger male prostitutes may be different from older male prostitutes, as well as from younger or older female prostitutes. Therefore, the results must be interpreted with caution and are limited to the study sample.

As an exploratory study involving a non-random, non-probability sample, the findings can be used heuristically to derive hypotheses and research questions which can be investigated for future research.

Despite these methodological problems, the positive aspects of this research will serve as a rare and useful opportunity for describing and analyzing the quality of the social support network in the help-seeking process of young male prostitutes. The cost factors, based on the number of trained interviewers, accessibility of the members of the population, and the geographic dispersion, all contribute to making the design an economical one (Kish, 1965). The advantages of this research exceed the limitations.

Social Work Practice Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

Though individual social workers struggle to help, the profession has not yet made a formal commitment to deal with issues related to prostitution in general, and young male prostitutes in particular. Knowledge about help-seeking behavior and social supports, as well as knowledge, attitudes and safer sexual practices to prevent HIV infection and AIDS are essential if social work practice is to effectively serve this population and other stigmatized groups. The current AIDS pandemic underscores the urgency and need for this knowledge. The broad categories of Fox's (1985) practice stages used with Black urban youth gangs, are used as an organizing framework to discuss the social work practice implications of the findings from this research. The practice suggestions presented here are embraced under: establishing contact and rapport, procuring resources and evaluation.

Contact - The execution of this important first task will influence the acceptance or rejection of services needed and/or offered. To ensure the acceptance of service, social workers must be willing to meet male prostitutes where they are found. This means getting out of the office on to the streets, being flexible and adaptable to work at odd hours when the prostitutes are available. It also means overcoming personal and professional obstacles such as stereotypes and myths about the target population; the reduction of fragmented services, and bureaucratic restrictions regarding job descriptions.

A relaxed manner and comfortable, casual dress usually do not draw suspicions provided workers are honest about who they (workers) are. The introduction should be simple and clear with worker's affiliation stated at the outset and without insisting on full identification from the street males. Young street males who engage in prostitution are cautious of people on the streets in general, but particularly so of police officers. It is helpful to make non-affiliation with police known. It is helpful and strongly suggested that a respected street prostitute act as mediator for contact. Contact is also best started through respected community-based agencies. In this study the Whitman-Walker Clinic and Exodus Youth Services in Washington, D.C., which employ street outreach as one of their methods of intervention, were used. Traditional agencies should develop special outreach components of their service delivery system. In application, the utilization of former prostitutes in outreach has proved effective in the conduct of this research through both the Whitman-Walker Clinic and Exodus Youth Services.

Working in pairs, which offer support and safety in potentially vulnerable situations, is advised. Short-term and long-term prostitutes require different kinds of contacts. More aggressive outreach, as an early interventive technique is particularly needed for short-term prostitutes to help to reintegrate them into society through education and employment before they become completely entrenched in the street culture. It has been found that reintegrating long-term prostitutes into society has been more difficult to achieve than with short-term prostitutes (Weisberg, 1985).

In work with street male prostitutes, workers must be sensitive about the sexual self-definitions of the street males. While some of the prostitutes may be gay, many self-identify as heterosexual or bisexual even though they engage in same gender sex. In this regard, the heterosexually identified male prostitutes were often reluctant to seek services at the Whitman-Walker Clinic because they saw it as a primarily gay-oriented agency. There was less reluctance to make use of Exodus Youth Services because the agency is seen as one serving all youth in the greater Washington, D.C. area. It is advisable that agencies such as the Whitman-Walker Clinic interested in making contact with street populations, emphasize service to all regardless of sexual orientation.

White and Black male street prostitutes congregate in different areas and workers must make concerted efforts to reach them, particularly Black street males. White street males are likely to be more visible about their sexual activities whereas, Black street males are less visible and more reserved about their sexuality. Here too, it is advisable that aspects of sexual behavior be initiated by the street males. The workers must guard not to impose his/her own values and attitudes about sexual behavior in defining the sexuality of street male prostitutes. An uncritical view of their lifestyle is recommended because they tend to be very sensitive and defensive about the same. The basic social work tenets of moving at the client's pace and entering into the reality of the clients' world are valid here if the worker is to be effective to getting to more basic and emergency needs.

Rapport (Relationship-building)

The social worker must be willing to invest a great deal of time in establishing a relationship with a street male prostitute. This is best achieved by patient and active listening and spending time with the street male prostitutes. The distribution of coupons for fast food restaurants, condoms, and healthy snacks such as apples and raisins were well received, and seemed to help cement the relationships. Bear in mind that this was not done in a manner of "buying" time from the street males, but as gestures of gratitude for their willingness to

share their experiences. After all, when they are out on the streets, they are engaged in their work and being mindful and sensitive to this, brought much cooperation. These "gestures" might be incorporated into an agency's outreach services, i.e., the distribution of food and condoms.

Short-term and long-term prostitutes have different issues which they bring to the helping relationship. For example, more time may have to be spent with short-term prostitutes familiarizing them with available services and encouraging the utilization of those services. In this study, short-term prostitutes were less likely than long-term prostitutes to make use of services available to them. This is important for early prevention strategies. Long-term prostitutes were more likely to feel restless in their sleep, use alcohol or drugs when worried. These are essential elements to be cognizant of and to address in educational programs, as well as in the delivery of social services which are further discussed in the next stage, i.e., procuring resources.

The use of language in general has far reaching effects in building a helping relationship with street male prostitutes. Plain language without the use of professional jargon helps minimize a professional air which can create distance with these young men. Involving male prostitutes in cooperative efforts can be successfully effectuated by an openness to their experiences. For example, the young men who participated in this study valued having their opinions asked and heard.

The use of AIDS specific language must be clear because of its potential complexity to street males. Sophistication in sexual activities does not mean a high degree of knowledge regarding sexually transmitted disease. Phrases like "at risk for AIDS" may pose difficulty and even "chance of getting AIDS" is not always clearly understood. HIV disease terminology must be clarified. There was common misunderstanding of HIV infection and onset of symptoms. Many were under the impression that it took about seven years for an HIV positive test result to show. One can test positive for the virus within four to 12 weeks of exposure. The incubation period may last up to ten years before symptoms may appear (DiClemente, 1988).

The majority of the street males worried about AIDS, although only a minority reported feeling at risk. Their behavior seemed to be

governed by the at risk perception not their worry about AIDS. It is important to bear in mind that because a person worries about AIDS, it does not necessarily mean that the person is motivated to be self-protective. There clearly was a gap between worry and at risk feeling and behavior. This is an area where one of the social work tasks might be to help the client translate worry into a feeling of at risk which in turn may result in self-protective behavior.

Flexibility in terms of the social worker's own agenda in order to meet the needs of the street males is an asset. An ability to override one's own agenda will sometimes be required to handle issues seen as more pressing by the street populations. For example, in conducting this research, it was oftentimes necessary to defer the research agenda to spend time with the street males when sensitive issues were brought up. These sensitive issues mainly centered around family. The family and its varied meanings as interpreted by the street males, was of great importance and emotionally-laden even if, at times, there may be elements of fantasy. Many of the street males became emotionally vulnerable when they expressed concern about the welfare of close family members such as mothers, and younger brothers and sisters. For many, participation in this study was a cathartic experience, an opportunity for them to ventilate, requiring patient listening on the part of the interviewer. The acknowledgement of family was indicative of strength and an important resource for effective social work practice. Inquiring about family helps to get street males in touch with their feelings and their wishes about family. It may not always mean actual family reunification; it may mean assisting street males to accept realistically the limitations of what family can or cannot do. The important aspect to bear in mind is that there is a connectedness to family-real or imagined.

The acknowledgement of their fun times with regard to leisure time activities was important. Many of the men reported fun times in their lives and enjoyed sharing these times, presenting a balanced view of their existence. Their lives were not complete misery.

Procuring Resources

The social worker can be a broker for service and a resource with access to persons, places and services from which the street male prostitute may be isolated or alienated, and as such, can facilitate resource utilization. However, the clients themselves bring their own resources and strengths particularly from informal support networks, which with the worker's resources can contribute to a mutually beneficial experience and ultimately the client's well-being. The use of referrals, especially to social service agencies, employment agencies and so forth, may be indicated, particularly when comprehensive services are not available from a single agency. A 24 hour drop-in shelter, with simple intake procedures, offering comprehensive services, and located in proximity to where young street males congregate is especially needed in the Washington, D.C. area. A shelter staffed with trained personnel who can appreciate the importance to privacy, safety, dignity and respect for the lives of young prostitutes is absolutely essential. Overcrowding, lack of safety, and humiliation were often reported as barriers to shelter use by those who had used shelters, as well as by those who had not used them. It is not easy to have a street male who engages in prostitution readily admit to a life of prostitution. Questioning about their lives, particularly family background and sexual history must be handled with sensitivity.

There was a general tendency for Black street males and particularly, the younger males, to utilize informal sources of help instead of the traditional sources excluding legal and medical services. The results of this study suggest that relatives and friends may be valuable resources for many Black male prostitutes. Given this situation, it is imperative to determine which factors influence the utilization of these sources. Demystifying help-seeking and helping Black street males to view seeking help as a strength is something social work must pursue and understand. For many of these males, opportunities for success have been few so that acknowledging a need for help may not be an easy thing to do; it may represent failure.

The need for education about sex and about services available for street males is an ongoing and urgent one. Education about HIV disease is important information needed by street males. The illusion of

immortality and invulnerability is a strong one and creative ways must be found to deal with these issues. Sex education should not be limited to gay sex but should include education about vaginal intercourse and other heterosexual practices as well. For example, some of the street male prostitutes reported condom use with male customers but not with their girlfriends or with persons they loved. However, as ominous as the findings were, there was some evidence that sexual behaviors have changed due to HIV infection and AIDS. Innovative ways must be found to communicate with street male prostitutes so they can hear and act upon educational messages.

Evaluation

One of the prime measures of accountability for the worker is client perception of intervention outcome. With workers on the street, there may not be an immediate agency context for evaluation and so that client feedback becomes especially important. Asking street male prostitutes for their opinions and ideas makes them important sources of information. If evaluation is done in this way, the clients may offer their contributions freely and willingly.

There are several advantages to the practice suggestions discussed, namely that they have been used by other practitioners and researchers. Few resources are needed apart from a social worker who is willing to operate autonomously in the role of "detached worker" and someone who is willing to risk possible failure. The suggestions are economical and consistent with the basic and traditional values and principles of the social work profession. The practice suggestions follow the non-traditional mode of scholarly analysis which encourages the development of a conceptual framework with which to understand the life experiences of special or displaced populations (Fox, 1985).

Recommendations for Future Research

As the conclusions of this study cannot be generalized to all young street male prostitutes, several research areas are suggested for future study. Continued efforts must be made to develop and test the validity

and reliability of unidimensional and multidimensional measures of social support as well as knowledge, attitudes and practices regarding HIV infection and AIDS as they apply to street males. Culturally sensitive measures of the life experiences of Black street males who engage in prostitution, should in particular, be developed and tested and existing measures examined in terms of their relevance. For example, the instrument should be tested with a probability sample of Black males and females so that questions which address sex differences can be explored. Similarly, questions which address race, social class, and other similarities and differences on these measures should be tested.

Given the general tendency of the males in this study to utilize informal sources of help, additional research is recommended to explore the characteristics of those street male prostitutes most likely to use informal sources, as well as, those who provide help. Relatives and friends, should in particular be included in the research.

Barriers to help-seeking, particularly in the case of formal sources of help is an area for future investigation and prevention. Frequent fragmentation of services, the stigmatization of the target population, and bureaucratic limitations regarding job descriptions have been observed as barriers. Research involving persons, groups, and organizations such as the Whitman-Walker Clinic and Exodus Youth Services which offer services that are sensitive to the needs of street males who engage in prostitution, should be undertaken to determine what services are needed and how they should be rendered.

Future research should include comparative studies of older and younger street male prostitutes, as well as those involved in more organized prostitution, e.g., "escort services." Similarities between male and female street and non-street prostitution should be studied. Various intervention approaches should be studied including group versus individual techniques and strategies. Studies should incorporate larger and more representative samples, and varied methodologies used, e.g., participant observation, focused group discussions and longitudinal designs.

It is imperative that social workers recognize the value of the life experiences of street male prostitutes for practice and research. These

life experiences may also reveal the influence and importance of help-seeking behavior, social supports and networks which are relevant to social work practice.

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