

YOUR CHILDREN, THEIR TARGET

Even in “safe” neighborhoods, predators are luring unwary teens into the sex industry.

by Paula Schlueter Ross

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They were all teenagers who lived in comfortable suburban homes with loving parents.

Three girls, all pretty, who suddenly found themselves doing something they never would have expected: having sex for money.

But here’s the real shocker: all three were students at a Lutheran high school in the Midwest.

Hard to believe? Believe it, says Audrey Duensing, director of Christian education at Cross View Lutheran Church in Edina, Minn. Duensing knew the girls when she served a Missouri Synod congregation in another city.

“A lot of times we assume that young women—or men—who get involved in prostitution are ‘bad’ kids who take drugs and alcohol,” Duensing said. “These were ... innocent kids, beautiful girls,” who lived on the “very, very good side of the tracks.”

From confirmation to prostitution

So, how did this happen? How does one go from confirmation one day to prostitution the next?

Not on their own, that’s for sure. “These were young girls who were lured in” by others, Duensing said. One through a “modeling” scheme, and the other two by an adult who befriended them.

Like many teenagers, they were often left alone while their parents worked long hours. Students in ninth, 10th and 12th grades, they didn’t yet have the self-confidence—or insight—that comes with experience and adulthood.

They all had a “heart for the lost” in society and an unwavering desire to find the good in others—even known gang members and peers with bad reputations—according to Duensing. “They wanted to make sure that they didn’t come across as being non-accepting,” she said, so they sometimes joined others in risk-taking behavior.

Were they naive? A little, she says. “I think we [as a church] do a great job with teaching the kids that ‘Jesus loves everyone, therefore you should love everyone.’ And that’s great, except for we forget sometimes to teach them how to discern.”

And while teens are routinely warned about the dangers of drugs and alcohol, they never hear much about prostitution, especially juvenile prostitution.

That's a subject most churches would rather not discuss at all, according to Heidi Somerset, a former prostitute who shares warnings about the sex industry with thousands of high-school students and Christian-church members each year.

But when you have 100,000 pornographic web sites on the Internet, TV shows and movies that glamorize prostitution and condone casual sex, and a million Americans—including as many as 300,000 youth—involved in sex for money, you have a huge problem that needs to be addressed.

"Nobody ever knows the reality of prostitution," says Somerset. The mind-control techniques used by pimps to control the girls, the beatings, the rapes, the drugs. "All they know is what they've seen on TV or in the movies, like 'Pretty Woman,' that are complete lies. Or all they hear from are pimps who, of course, are going to tell them it's great"

A lost daughter

"Helen," a pseudonym for a lifelong Lutheran woman who worships at a Missouri Synod congregation in the Midwest, knows firsthand the heartbreak of prostitution. She lost her daughter to a pimp who controlled her for several years, beginning when the daughter was 19 and was attending college in a nearby city.

"The mind control that the pimps use is the same as what the cults use," said Helen, who believes her daughter slowly lost her ability to think for herself. The pimp would alternately praise her and degrade her until she got to the point where she just wanted to please him.

"In the beginning, I think she didn't know what all was happening," Helen said. "She'd call home and I'd say, 'Can you give me the phone number where you're at?' and she'd say, 'Oh, sure, just a minute.' But then you could tell that somebody [there] wouldn't allow her to give me the number."

Her daughter would visit home and then suddenly disappear for months, missing holidays like Christmas and Mother's Day. "They were taking her off to the ends of the earth" to use in prostitution, said Helen. "They had her. She was their slave."

Helen and her husband learned their daughter was a "known prostitute" in a nearby city from law-enforcement authorities there. A chaplain referred the family to a counselor who worked with prostitutes and who turned out to be a godsend. She told them to do everything possible to "stay in touch" with their daughter and "let her know you love her."

"You never want to stop being in contact with a child in mind control," said Helen, whose daughter is now out of prostitution and doing well, but still healing. When your child

does reach out to you, “don’t bring up anything negative” about what he or she is doing, she said. “They’ll get this idea that you love them, no matter what they’ve done.”

That parental love and concern needs to start at home, according to Rev. Al Erickson, founder of the Minneapolis-based Alliance for Speaking Truths on Prostitution, or A-STOP.

“Kids need the chance to make choices and experience consequences while they’re still home,” Erickson said. When they make mistakes, don’t step in too soon to help—instead, let the child take care of the problem, he says.

A focus on prevention

Erickson, an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America pastor, started A-STOP in 1990 after a family member got caught up in prostitution. The non-profit organization, which employs Somerset as its national speaker, focuses on prevention.

“My personal goal with A-STOP,” Erickson says, “is to actually shift the lives of 10,000 kids” by arming them with straight talk about Internet pornography, sexual abuse, manipulation and media messages that encourage sexual exploitation.

In 1998, A-STOP produced an hour-long video and six-session curriculum for Grades 7, 8 and 9, using matching funds from Aid Association for Lutherans. These “Wise as Serpents” materials use Scripture, Luther’s Small Catechism, group discussion, prayer and skill-building exercises to help youth develop skills to “live with integrity and safety in contemporary society.” The Wise as Serpents advisory board includes members from the Missouri Synod, such as DCE Audrey Duensing.

“It’s not like we think that we can get to everybody and protect them,” Erickson said. “But we can at least tell them that this is going on, give them some of the ploys.”

Somerset said: “My hope is that if something that I share helps turn even one kid away from this, then it’s all worth it, because it’s such damage, it’s so life destroying.”

“No one gets out [of prostitution] unscathed—not one single person,” she said. Most escape “through suicide, drug overdose or by being murdered.”

The most victimized

Statistics indicate that as many as 85 percent of those who end up in prostitution suffered some sort of physical, sexual or emotional abuse earlier in their lives. Nevertheless, even kids who have never been abused are at risk, according to Somerset—especially “the small-town girl who wants some excitement in her life and is incredibly naive.”

Girls between ages 12 and 19, in fact, are the most victimized segment of the U.S. population, according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Most

juvenile prostitutes are in their mid to late teens, and come from middle-class, rather than poor, families. Many suffer from low self-esteem, which leads them to crave attention and affection.

A pimp offers comfort and understanding. He alienates the teen from family and friends, increasing her dependence on him. Finally, when the teen is financially and emotionally dependent on him, the pimp introduces her to prostitution.

But aren't kids raised in the church familiar with the Sixth Commandment? Don't they know sex outside of marriage is against God's Law?

To Erickson, the problem has more to do with identity than sin.

"The kids have to have a clear sense of who they are in Jesus Christ, and of their calling [as disciples of] Christ," he says. Any doubts are "open doors" for predators and manipulators, who try to gradually alter how the teen thinks of herself.

As Jesus tells His disciples in Matt. 10:16: "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves."

All three of the Lutheran high-school girls told Duensing "it was easy" to get involved. "It wasn't like they ever sat back and said, 'Maybe I shouldn't be doing this.' It was more like they just got pulled right in," Duensing said. From their first contacts with people working in the sex industry to their own participation took less than a year.

And, perhaps most alarming, no one noticed. Duensing said that as a youth director, she can usually tell if a teen is drinking or doing drugs, but she "had no idea that they were involved in prostitution." Two of the girls were discovered after one was arrested, and, in the other case, after the girl disappeared for a few days (she was working for the prostitution ring in another city).

Duensing said the experience has taught her to be "more aware," and she finds herself watching her congregation's teens a lot more closely.

And she has this advice for Lutheran families: "First of all, being in Scripture daily gives you that medicine of discernment" to recognize right from wrong. She also urges parents to keep tabs on their kids—know what they're doing, whom they're with. Talk to them.

"The best thing any mom or dad can do is to just be really intentional about [parenting]," Duensing said. "Just keep an eye on how things are going with your children."

Why are teens so vulnerable?

According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, teenagers—especially girls—are the most victimized segment of the U.S. Population.

Girls ages 12 to 15 are victims of violent crimes at a rate 84 percent higher than the general public, and most rapes involve victims younger than 18.

The reason teenagers are so vulnerable, according to the Center, is because many:

- are fearless, with a sense of immortality;
- are highly mobile and come into contact with many people each day;
- are targeted by adult exploiters due to their youth and vitality;
- experience common problems and are working through emotional issues that can make them easy targets; and
- consider themselves too smart and too big to be victims. They lack the awareness, knowledge and savvy necessary to stay safe.

The organization, based in Alexandria, Va., urges teens and pre-teens to follow these “rules for life:

- Never go out alone.
- Always tell an adult where you’re going.
- Say “no” if you feel threatened.
- Avoid situations or places that make you feel uncomfortable or confused.

For more information, contact the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children at (800) 843-5678; web site: www.missingkids.com.

Teens: Beware of sex-based scams

Today’s world is full of scams designed to lure teenagers into the sex industry, said Heidi Somerset of the Minneapolis-based Alliance for Speaking Truths on Prostitution, or A-STOP.

Somerset’s workshops focus on warning teens about the dangers of sex-based scams, and she offers this rule of thumb: “If it seems ‘too good to be true,’ it is.”

Here are a few more tips from Somerset:

- “If somebody is offering to buy you all kinds of things and spend money on you and pay your bills, there is a price to pay, and that price is going to be sex.”

- “For runaways, if somebody offers you a place to stay, there’s a catch, and that’s going to be sex.”
- When a guy gets so possessive he starts drawing you away from your friends and your family, look out, because he’s got an ulterior motive.”
- “Watch out for modeling agencies. If anybody ever tells you to ‘meet us, and you don’t need to tell your parents—we’ll tell them about it later,’ don’t ever, ever go, because it’s not legitimate. Any legitimate business is going to want the parents involved.”
- Beware of all “escort” services and even newspapers ads that promise “fast cash” but don’t offer a company name—just a phone number. They could be bait for a prostitution ring.
- And, be careful at parties. “All across the Midwest, the use of ‘rape drugs’ is increasing,” says Somerset. “Don’t ever take an open drink from anybody. Don’t ever set your drink down and turn your back on it. If you’re going to get a pop, open the can yourself and keep it with you.”

“Just take the time and check things out,” Somerset tells teenagers. “Be very careful and look out for each other. Know that you’re so loved and special to God.’

Since the time the above article was written, A-STOP has been re-named “Adults Saving Kids”. You may visit its web site at www.adultssavingkids.org.
