### *Sexual Abuse and Incest*

Five women's childhood memories were organized almost completely around sexual abuse experiences. These women explained their involvement in illegal activities as a direct result of childhood sexual abuse. For example, Janet, a 28 year old black woman incarcerated for breaking and entering, was sexually victimized repeatedly during childhood. Her first memory of sexual abuse was by a female babysitter around the age of three or four, then by a group of male and female cousins from age five to seven, then by her grandfather at the age of ten, by another male cousin at age twelve, and finally by her step-father from the age of twelve to fourteen. She never told anyone of these experiences. Janet left home at age 14 to escape her stepfather's sexual abuse and became involved in prostitution as a teenage runaway. The resulting drug addiction and abusive domination by her male partner kept Janet immersed in a variety of street crime activities.

Sarah, a 26 year old white woman, was incarcerated for writing illegal prescriptions for drugs. She was sexually abused by her step-father from the age of nine to fifteen. Her step-father gave her drugs, money, and other gifts in order to secure her silence and cooperation in his sexual abuse. She became addicted to drugs while still living at home and being sexually abused by her step-father. All of her criminal activity involved forging prescriptions in order to obtain drugs to maintain her habit.

### *Multiple Types of Abuse and Neglect*

Ten other women organized their childhood memories around multiple forms of abuse and neglect. Marcia, a twenty-eight year old white woman, was one of ten children. Her parents were both alcoholics. Her father battered her mother, both parents battered the children and neglected their basic needs, and the two oldest sons sexually abused Marcia. She graphically portrayed herself as a "guinea pig," a "gopher," and "not human" in the following interview excerpts. At the same time, she minimized the extent of her parents' violence.

Interviewer: Did either of your parents abuse you?

Marcia: No. As far as, what do you mean, sexually? No.

Interviewer: Physically or in any way.

Marcia: No, I just got hit a lot. 'Cause of the lies they used to tell. It was just like I was a guinea pig. You know, I was a gopher, out of ten kids, anything that used to happen, they said "she did it." I used to get beat up all the time from this one and that one.

Interviewer: So your parents both would hit you?

Marcia: 'Cause they both would drink and they wouldn't know the difference. Mmm, picked up, thrown against walls, everything. You name it.

Interviewer: Did you ever have to go to a doctor or hospital for any injuries?

Marcia: No, never went, I always hid it. Bruises and welts all over me. Teachers used to ask me what's wrong with ya? I'd say I fell down.

Marcia, perhaps not unlike other abused children, protected her parents from discovery by covering up the signs of her abuse. Next she described the neglect which accompanied the abuse. In doing so, she focused on the embarrassment she felt about going to school in dirty, ragged, and inappropriate clothing and described a number of strategies she used for coping with the neglect and the embarrassment: hiding, skipping school, daydreaming and fantasizing, and finally giving up.

Interviewer: Do you remember what it was like when you started school? How did it feel to you?

Marcia: Weird. 'Cause I wasn't dressed right or nothin', I didn't feel comfortable, I felt like a black sheep. Didn't have proper care. You know.

My mother would say "Go to school like you are, get your own clothes." You know odd socks, the whole bit. Oh god, I used to dread that.

So I never went, I hated it. Used to hide. Hated bein' laughed at. Teased. . . . Felt like I wasn't a human, like I was a creature or somethin', all dirty and you know. . . . I don't know . . . just didn't like it. And I used to get hit for that too, and I didn't care. My father would hit me and say: "Why wasn't you in school today?" But he wouldn't find out until about six months later. 'Cause they never went to any events or anything like that.

I couldn't do home work, I couldn't concentrate, I couldn't do none of it. It was never quiet enough. And I had to sleep in a room with me and four brothers. . . .

I failed quite a few grades 'cause I used to day dream, and I didn't do the work. I didn't give a shit. I was in a fantasy land. I said: "I'm just going to be a movie star when I grow up, I don't need this homework shit." I didn't care. I didn't have nothin' to care about.

### *Caring for Others*

In spite of the violence and neglect the women recalled in childhood, they often framed their presentations of themselves as protectors and caretakers of others. The following narrative by Denise, a 31 year old black woman recalling events when she was ten years old, illustrates this point.

When my mother was going with this guy she really started drinking a lot and she started staying away from home a lot. So we had to get ourselves up for school, get ready, clean the house, fix ourselves something to eat. Me, my older sister and my brother, we looked out for the little ones. And we learned to cook, and we knew how to wash clothes with a rub board and a bucket. We used to get this stool and stand on it

to reach the stove and cook. But we knew how to cook, we could cook anything.

And we didn't like to see her like that. She would be sick, and she would piss on herself and throw up on herself. And we used to clean her up, fix her hair, and try to get her to eat something. But she couldn't keep anything down, so we would get her some liquor, because we thought that would help her. Or if we refused to go get her some liquor, she would hit us. We would get mad at her and threaten to tell our father, but she threatened to flush our heads down the toilet, and we really believed that, so we never told, and we just did what we had to do.

In this narrative Denise recalled very actively trying to cope with her mother's alcoholism. She and her siblings took over all of the household tasks and began acting as parents toward their mother. They tried to intervene to stop their mother's drinking, but were eventually defeated by her threats and abusive behavior. Denise took pride in her ability to nurture the younger children and, in spite of her anger at her mother, remained loyal to her and very lovingly cared for her. This sense of self as a caretaker of others was a positive part of Denise's identity, as it was for many of the other women interviewed. Yet this ability to care for others who are abusive and neglectful caused Denise much trouble throughout her life. The first man she fell in love with was a pimp and an addict who beat her and lived off of her earnings as a prostitute, yet her loyalty to him allowed her to serve an earlier prison sentence for a crime which she now claims he had committed.

### *Educational Neglect and Racial Violence*

Another set of themes in the childhood memories of many of the women, but particularly the black women and the white women who grew up in poor inner-city neighborhoods, were themes of educational neglect and racism. Many of the women attended public schools during the turbulent years of school desegregation.

Three of the black women directly experienced racial violence as children. Denise had seen her uncle murdered by two white

men, Karen had been constantly taunted by white students in her school, and Tina had been insulted and slapped in school by white teachers. The remaining five black women attended predominantly black schools where they were not so directly exposed to white racism, but they were aware that they were receiving a segregated and inadequate education. Some of their parents spent scarce family resources sending the children to private Catholic schools, but the young women again encountered hostility and insults from students and teachers with low expectations and condescending attitudes toward black children. Many of the women recalled that they had once dreamed of going to college and entering professional careers, but had found no support for those aspirations.

Other complaints about school which were echoed by most of the women included teachers who failed to notice the signs of their abuse and the easy availability of drugs in the schools. Feeling like failures and misfits, unable to concentrate on school work, and their pain unacknowledged, the availability of drugs was too easy a temptation to turn down. Many of the young women found their first feeling of acceptance and belonging in the drug subculture of their schools.

## *ADOLESCENCE: SURVIVAL STRATEGIES AND DELINQUENCY*

With the onset of adolescence themes of violence and caring for others, as well as the dreams for a successful future, gave way to questions of survival and escape.

### *Survival Strategies*

Escape from an intolerable home situation may sometimes be the only sane solution for an abused child, and the only way to end the violence. But when children or adolescents run away and seek sanctuary wherever they can find it, usually with "street people" and other runaways, they become delinquents in the eyes of law enforcement rather than children in need of protection from the recruiters for the sex and drug industries who prey on runaway

children. This was exactly what happened during adolescence for many of the women interviewed.

Yvonne, a 20 year old white woman incarcerated for drug possession, began running away from home at age 13 because she was being sexually molested by an uncle, occasionally physically abused by her mother, and emotionally taxed by her mother's episodes of depression and suicide attempts. On one of her first escapes from home she packed a suitcase full of stuffed animals and tried to hitchhike to where she thought a boyfriend lived, only to be picked up by the police and returned home. She continued to run away and was placed in several foster homes. She was raped by a foster brother in one of those homes, and while she was in foster care her mother gave away her dog. Feeling that she had nothing left to care about at home, she went to New York City with a boyfriend. She described the plight of a runaway with no money.

> The third night came, we had no more money. He said "get some money." I didn't understand what he was talking about. But he was talking about being a prostitute. . . . We didn't have a place to stay, we slept on trains . . . I had to steal food. Times I went two, three days without eating, I'd have to steal something.

Yvonne began working as a prostitute and shoplifting to insure that she and her boyfriend had food and a place to stay.

Janet, who had been sexually abused multiple times as a child, engaged in a long narrative detailing the events leading up to the day she left home and the experiences which followed. At age 14 Janet felt pressured to have intercourse with her boyfriend in order to prove that she loved him. After their first sexual experience, her boyfriend left for summer camp. She described in great detail the day he returned from summer camp, and how she baked a cake for him and waited all day for him. He finally arrived at her house and announced that he was breaking up with her because she had not been a virgin for him. She was mortified that he had been able to tell that she was sexually "experienced" as a result of having forced intercourse with her step-father.

After the rejection by her boyfriend she went to her father's

nearby home and waited for him to return home from work. Just as he pulled into the driveway, teenage boys in a passing car yelled and waved at Janet, and she responded by waving back at them. Her father got out of his car, slapped her on the face and called her a "whore." Taking this as another rejection, Janet went home and tried to commit suicide by taking a bottle of aspirin. She slept for several hours and awoke to discover that no one had even noticed her suicide gesture, so she ran away. (Suicide was seriously considered as an escape by many of the women, and ten women made suicide attempts during adolescence).

Janet ran away to a nearby city where she was kidnapped, raped, and injected with drugs by a man who told her he was planning to sell her as a slave to a pimp. She escaped from her kidnapper and eventually returned home, but was once again faced with her stepfather's sexual demands and her mother's lack of concern. She ran away again and lied about her age in order to get a waitress job, only to be sexually harassed by her employer. This was the final straw for Janet; she decided that if everyone expected her to be a "whore" she might as well make some money at it. She went out on a street corner in the downtown prostitution district and tried soliciting customers on her own. Within minutes she was befriended by a man who offered to be her pimp, and she readily accepted. Janet had begun experimenting with drugs at age 12, began intravenous use of heroin shortly after entering prostitution, and reported that she was addicted by the age of 16 when she became pregnant with her first child.

Janet presented the above events as a way of explaining her entry into illegal street work, the best survival strategy she could find as a 14 year old incest victim and runaway.

### *Onset of Delinquency*

Chronologically the first "delinquent" event experienced by 13 of the 20 women was running away from home. When we consider the fact that most of the young women were being abused at home, running away seems to have been a sane and logical response. That logical act of self-protection, however, pushed the young women into finding illegal ways of supporting themselves.

Onset of drug use, truancy, and stealing were closely associated with early runaway attempts. The women talked about how impossible it was to stay in school when on the run, sleeping in cars, parks, or "crash pads," and "hustling" money for food by panhandling and petty shoplifting. The first use of drugs or alcohol was reported at a mean age of 12.7 years old. The average age at leaving home for the whole sample was 16 years old, a very young age to be fending for oneself. Seven of the 17 women who had worked as prostitutes began as juvenile prostitutes, four of them having been coerced into prostitution while young runaways.

## *THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD*

Leaving home at an early age, often coupled with teenage pregnancy, meant that adulthood began early for these women. Patterns of repeated victimization, drug addiction, street work, relationships with men involved in street crime, and the demands of mothering are the themes that mark their transitions from childhood to adulthood. The survival strategies which had helped the women escape from early victimization contributed to revictimization and their adult status as offenders. Yet, much like their childhood identities, the women presented themselves as adults committed to caring for others and organizing their lives around relational commitments. It was usually their relational commitments and their addiction to drugs which they described as creating the conditions which necessitated their continued involvement in criminal activity.

### *Street Work and Revictimization*

Survival on the streets of any city is dangerous for a young woman. If she is too young to look for legal work or has too few skills to find work at a living wage, she has few choices other than to find a "hustle" which will generate income for food and a place to sleep. Whether looking for shelter, panhandling, shoplifting, selling drugs, or turning tricks, a young woman alone on the streets is often "fair game" for male violence (see Weisberg,

1985; Delacoste and Alexander, 1987). Rape, assault, and even attempted murder were experiences reported by 16 of the 20 women, with an average of three rapes or violent rape attempts per woman as adolescents or adults. Many of the rapes and assaults occurred while the women were working as prostitutes. A common scenario was for a trick to pick up the woman in his car, drive her to a remote location, rape and torture her, and leave her perhaps to die. The women who reported these crimes to the police were ridiculed and/or threatened with arrest for prostitution. Sometimes police officers would demand sexual services in exchange for not arresting the woman.

### *Battering Relationships*

Sixteen of the women had been in battering relationships as adults, some as many as five different battering relationships. These were typically co-addict relationships in which the couple shared the activities of securing and injecting drugs, but had a gendered division of labor for illegally obtaining money for drugs. The female partner was often expected to supply money from her work as a prostitute and from shoplifting. Male partners, if they did any work other than pimping, were likely to commit robberies or did the fencing of the goods the women shoplifted. Severe battering episodes were likely to occur if the male partner felt the woman was using more than her "share" of the money on drugs, or if she was not producing "enough" income, or if he felt like punishing her for working as a prostitute.

Marcia, whose childhood narrative of abuse and neglect was presented above, ran away at age 13 to the streets of a nearby city. There she met Charlie, a pimp for whom she worked from the age of 13 to 18, whenever she was not in juvenile detention halls. Charlie employed the techniques pimps often use to "season" young women into dependent and loyal prostitutes (Barry, 1984): isolation, physical violence, occasional indulgences of presents (usually drugs), and romantic vows of love. Marcia described being kept in darkened hotel rooms, heavily drugged, turning tricks, and being beaten periodically. At the time she was interviewed, Marcia had served a sentence for a crime which took place while Charlie

was recruiting a new runaway to work for him, yet she still felt a strong bond of loyalty and affection for Charlie.

### *Addiction*

Substance abuse has repeatedly been found to be one of the major long-term psychological effects of childhood sexual abuse (Briere & Runtz, 1988; Peters, 1988; Russell, Sherman & Trocki, 1988; Stein et al., 1988). Nearly all of the 15 women who reported intravenous drug abuse histories began experimental drug or alcohol use *prior* to engaging in illegal activity (other than running away from home), on average by age 13. Accounts of why they started using drugs were strikingly similar, using terms such as "wanting to be obliterated" and describing their initial work as prostitutes as so "disgusting" that they "had to be high to do it." Additional reasons for beginning drug use included acceptance by peer groups and feelings of greater self-confidence when high. But the primary pattern of shifting from experimental use to intravenous use of opiates and/or cocaine typically occurred *after* entry into illegal activity, primarily prostitution. Many of the women attributed their continuing motivation for illegal activities to their deepening addiction to drugs. They also described numerous efforts to give up drugs, efforts which were often motivated by pregnancy or by the fear of losing custody of their children.

### *Mothering*

Thirteen women became pregnant as teenagers; only four of them kept their first baby, struggling to survive as single teen parents. The nine women who miscarried, aborted, or gave their babies up for adoption deeply mourned the loss and felt that the loss had pushed them further into drug abuse and illegal activity. It was not long before some of the women became pregnant again and tried to keep their children in spite of their worsening addiction. Fifteen of the women had custody of their children prior to incarceration. All of the women whose mothers were still alive were in regular, nearly daily, contact with their mothers prior to incarceration, and most of the women had placed their children