

Prostitution and Drugs

Paul J. Goldstein



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To my parents Mac and Estelle Goldstein who first instilled within me a love for learning and a sense of intellectual curiosity.

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Introduction

There are few forms of deviant behavior that are more rife with myth, folklore, and assumptions than drug use and prostitution. But the times are changing. Recent decades have witnessed the shattering of many of these myths. The social sciences can take much credit in this regard, so can the medical profession. Also of great importance have been militant organizations of prostitutes, such as Coyote and Scapegoat.¹ All of these forces, and others, have done much to dispel many of the myths associated with both addiction and prostitution and to replace them with reasoned understanding. We have learned much in the last two or three decades. But there is much that we don't yet know.

The primary intent of this study is to address a gap in our knowledge of the relationship between drug use and prostitution by women. Elaborating upon the nature and scope of this relationship could be a significant contribution to our understanding of both of these phenomena. Increased understanding and the dissemination of new knowledge could have positive effects on social policy.

1. Reasoned understanding might influence those currently engaged in what are generally termed *treatment* or *rehabilitation* programs. Even when operating under the noblest of intentions, such individuals may do damage to women who are temporarily in their care, due to imperfect understanding and perhaps to subservience to social mythology.

2. Reasoned understanding might contribute toward more reasonable legislation. The prevalent societal responses to drug use and prostitution, as reflected in legislation and the enforcement policies of social control agents, tend to be ill informed and to reflect sexual, racial, and social class discrimination. Drug use by the affluent and their paid consorts receives a relatively small proportion of the total attention paid to these issues by social control agents. Female prostitutes are harassed and prosecuted while their male clients generally pay no penalty. The legitimacy of certain economic interests have been exalted above others. Antiprostitute street cleanups have been spurred by white businessmen wanting to rid the streets of black prostitutes and their pimps.² While cigarette and alcohol consumption claims thousands of lives each year, criminal penalties are primarily meted out to sellers and users of illegal drugs. Prostitutes are sent to jail for offering to provide sexual gratification to those who want it.

The principle of objective social scientific research demands that any preexisting biases of the author be made explicit. The bias that characterizes this study is that our laws and their enforcement should be made more rational.

Laws should be enforced equitably across racial, sexual, and class lines. When social harm can be shown to result, the causes of that harm may be justifiably legislated against. When no social harm exists, there can be no justification for repressive legislation.

The initial motivation for doing this research arose after reading a most provocative novel entitled *Howard Street*, written by Nathan Heard.³ In this novel, Mr. Heard portrays street life in Newark, New Jersey, focusing in large part on junkies, pimps, and prostitutes. Much of what he wrote concerning the relationship between drugs and prostitution was a surprise to me. As a sociologist specializing in the areas of crime and deviant behavior, and as someone who had been working for an agency dealing with drug abuse problems, I was rather nettled to be so surprised. However, after immersing myself in the literature on drugs and prostitution, I realized that there was just cause for my surprise. Little real data existed on the interaction between those two phenomena. In the place of data there was a social mythology and many taken-for-granted assumptions.

Taken-for-granted assumptions are both a bane and a *raison d'être* for sociologists. The issues that sociologists confront, unlike those of nuclear physicists or biochemists, are generally phenomena that most citizens have experienced, observed, read about, or at least feel justified in offering an opinion on. Therefore, many people are frequently unwilling to grant that sociologists have more information, or better understanding, than they do. Sometimes sociologists are accused of reporting findings that are obvious to everyone else.

Unfortunately, what is "obvious to everyone" is all too often a distorted image of reality. For example, in certain times and places it was obvious to everyone that blacks were lazy, shiftless, and had lots of rhythm; that Jews were lecherous and miserly; that marijuana consumption led to violent and promiscuous "reefer madness." Today, few people would accept these once "obvious" truths. In fact, what is obvious to everyone varies considerably over time and geography (and between strata of any population) and may tell us more about the sort of people who believe the "truth" than about the phenomenon that the "truth" purports to describe.

Few sociologists would claim to be the sort of "free-floating intellectual" envisioned by Mannheim.⁴ Most are as prone to believe society's myths as any other citizen. Where sociologists should differ, however, is that they should deal with assumptions, not as truths, but as data. Unfortunately, this has not been the case with regard to investigations into the relationship between drug use and prostitution.

Studies of Prostitution and Drug Use

Numerous volumes have been written on both these subjects. These include scientific works by physicians, psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, and

historians, as well as nonscientific works in the form of memoirs, novels, journalistic accounts, and propaganda tracts. It is therefore remarkable that so little information has really been established about the relationship between drug use and prostitution.

The social science literature makes two assertions about the relationship between drug use and prostitution: (1) many prostitutes, because of the rigors of their lives, will become drug abusers at some point in their prostitution careers; and (2) many female addicts, because of the expense associated with narcotics addiction, will turn to prostitution in order to support their drug use at some point in their addiction careers. Both of these assertions appeal to common sense, but they have little empirical support. What data do exist tend to be contradictory.

Most of the early commentaries focusing on drug use and prostitution are polemical rather than empirical. However, some early research findings were established. A Dr. Bingham of the New York Probation and Protective Association studied 111 prostitutes in the early 1900s. He reported that 61 percent smoked (cigarettes, apparently), 31 percent used liquor, and only 2 percent used drugs.⁵ A study of the medical records of 647 prostitutes who were incarcerated in the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills was made in the early 1900s. Only 77 (12 percent) of the arrested prostitutes were reportedly "suffering" from "excessive use" of alcohol and only 42 (7 percent) were suffering from excessive use of drugs.⁶

However, other sources present a somewhat different picture. In 1880, Charles W. Earle, a Chicago physician, reported the results of interviews with fifty Chicago druggists concerning customers for opium.⁷ Of the 235 habitual opium users listed by the druggists, females outnumbered males nearly three to one. Of the 169 females listed, 56 (33 percent) were alleged by the druggists to be prostitutes. Emma Goldman, the great anarchist and feminist leader, reported that while incarcerated on Blackwell's Island in New York in 1894 she witnessed a large influx of female prostitutes who had been arrested during raids instigated by the Lexow Committee. She stated that most of these prisoners were narcotics addicts.⁸ Kneeland reported scattered observations in New York City in the early twentieth century indicating that opium use was quite common among prostitutes.⁹ Rose reported that laudanum (a narcotic ingredient of patent medicines) and marijuana were commonly used by prostitutes in Storyville, the New Orleans red-light district, in the early 1900s.¹⁰

Unfortunately, most of the early research in this area is typified by a lack of methodological rigor and sophistication, primarily a failure to define adequately key variables or to specify sample characteristics. For example, most studies fail to distinguish between different types of drug use and different types of prostitutes. The generic category *drug use* is almost always the basis of discussion. Yet there are many different kinds of drugs. Some are stimulants and some are depressants. Some are addictive and others are not. Some

are costly and others are cheap. Further, drugs may be used consistently or irregularly. Presumably, any or all of these factors, or additional ones, could influence the interaction between the phenomenon of drug use and the phenomenon of prostitution.

The generic category of *prostitute* is also inadequate for research purposes. There are many different kinds of prostitutes ranging from streetwalkers to house prostitutes to high-priced call girls. Housewives may engage in part-time prostitution to raise some extra money; struggling actresses, models, or college students may turn to prostitution as a means of support while they pursue other goals in life. The nature and scope of drug use among these different types of prostitutes can be expected to vary. Also, demographic variables such as age, race, or geographical location may influence the relationship between prostitution and drug use.

The criminological literature prior to World War II was characterized by a sort of structurally oriented muckraking. After World War II, attention was focused far more on individual criminals and deviants. This change in emphasis corresponded to a generalized effort within the field of sociology to make research methodology far more rigorous. But the substance of contemporary social scientific research, in comparison with the historical perspectives, appears rather thin. It seldom moves beyond simple correlations between drug use and prostitution.

Later studies typically used samples of lower-class prostitutes and drug users (those who were arrested or were patients in public treatment programs) because these groups were the easiest for researchers to gain access to. High-level prostitutes seldom get arrested, higher-class female substance users seldom end up in public treatment programs, and therefore, few of these women were included in research studies. In most studies, little attempt was made to differentiate the drug use patterns of the women (nature, frequency, and durations of drug use). The potentially varied patterns of prostitution and the chronological sequences of women's involvement with drugs and prostitution were not explored. Winick and Kinsie stated that it was "not possible to say with any certainty what proportion of prostitutes became addicts before or after their entrance into the vocation."¹¹ Another observer stated that "many prostitutes become heroin addicts and vice versa. It is impossible to say which is more prevalent in life course."¹²

James suggested some reasons for the limited quality of recent research on this issue: the general preponderance of male addicts in American society; an alleged negative attitude of researchers towards topics involving sexuality; the low number of female researchers; the problem of bias against women; and an alleged lack of interest in studying female populations.¹³ After reviewing the literature in the fields of sociology, criminology, psychology, psychiatry, and anthropology, James argues that the literature fails to provide a

practical understanding of the situation. In the end, the literature says little because the absence of controls, completeness, or objectivity is obvious.¹⁴

So What?

Having established that a knowledge gap existed, I must decide whether to design and implement a research study. What of significance might result from a study of the relationship between prostitution and drug use?

Statistics indicate that narcotics addiction among females has been growing at a significantly higher rate than among males.¹⁵ The problem of female drug use has become sufficiently alarming that a major conference on the topic was recently held in Florida;¹⁶ congressmen such as Peter Rodino of New Jersey have become active and vocal on the issue;¹⁷ and regional coalitions have been established throughout the country to deal with the problem. Statistical increases in the comparative growth rate of female crimes have also been reported.¹⁸

While social scientists have long believed that there is an association between drug use and crime, there is still considerable disagreement concerning the nature of the association. This is because there has never been an adequate data base from which to address the issue. The mass media frequently attribute 50 percent or more of the crime in the United States, or in specific localities, to drug addicts. Many informed sources argue that since narcotics are prohibited in the United States and a black market exists, the cost of narcotics is very high. Since few narcotics addicts can support the high cost of their addiction through legitimate employment, they are forced to engage in thievery, drug dealing, or prostitution. These arguments are supported by surprisingly little empirical evidence. The President's Task Force on Narcotics and Drug Abuse stated that "the simple truth is that the addicts' or drug users' responsibility for all non-drug related offenses is unknown."¹⁹ In fact, the pendulum seems to be swinging, and several recent sources have argued that addicts are responsible for far less nondrug offenses than is commonly believed.²⁰

Establishing a causal relationship between drug use and criminal activity remains controversial. It is possible to argue that addiction causes crime via an economic necessity model. Conversely, crime may be a causative factor in addiction (for example, by providing individuals with the financial resources to buy enough drugs to become addicted). It is also possible to argue that no causal relationship exists between crime and addiction, but that both are products of the same socioeconomic factors. All of these arguments refer to narcotics addiction. Little work has been done to date with regard to possible relationships between nonopiate drug use and criminality.

Obviously, the first step toward establishing causal linkages between variables is to establish sequential relationships. A cause must precede an effect. However, even the sequence of events with regard to drug use and criminal activity remains problematic. Studies of this issue have provided mixed or inconclusive findings.²¹

Thus, an important justification for this study is the focus on prostitution as one form of criminal activity in interaction with the phenomenon of drug use. If issues of sequentiality and causation can be resolved with regard to prostitution,

then one may hypothesize that similar patterns exist for other criminal offenses, or that they do not. Empirical research can be designed to test these hypotheses, and perhaps some of the current controversies regarding the etiology of criminality and drug use may be resolved. This study should be viewed as a step in that direction.

It has been argued that, among women, drug addiction and crime most often combine in the criminal activity of prostitution.²² Many researchers have pointed to the quantitative significance of this relationship. Lemert wrote, basing his statement on research done thirty years ago, that "a markedly high percentage of women arrested or otherwise treated as prostitutes are addicted to drugs or alcohol."²³ Winick and Kinsie stated that drug abuse among prostitutes is up greatly since 1939,²⁴ and that "a substantial proportion of prostitutes today are addicts."²⁵ A literature search for estimates of the proportion of female drug users who were also prostitutes uncovered a range from about 30 percent to about 70 percent. Conversely, there was a reported range from about 40 percent to about 85 percent with regard to the proportion of prostitutes who were also drug users.²⁶

The ranges cited above are rather large. Further, although social scientists have long posited that there is a strong association between drug use and prostitution, very little is really known about the complex realities and dynamics of this relationship, especially with regard to the interrelationships between different types of drug use and different levels of prostitution. A primary intent of this study is to investigate the dynamics of the process and to clarify the various sequences of the interaction between the phenomenon of drug use and the phenomenon of prostitution.

Another important reason for doing this study relates to the fact that prostitutes are a much maligned social group. In the United States, their activities are usually labeled as criminal. The epithet *prostitute*, or any of its more vivid synonyms, is frequently used in an insulting fashion, and prostitutes are the butt of many jokes. "Straight" males may reject them as partners in normal man-woman relationships. Prostitutes are frequently depicted as jaded and dissolute creatures, both physically and mentally unhealthy. They have been viewed as major transmitters of venereal disease.

It has been a frequent practice in this country to stigmatize the social groups we wish to vilify as having a drug vice.²⁷ For example, turn-of-the-century anti-Chinese sentiment depicted the Chinese as opium smokers.²⁸ Prejudice against Mexicans and Negroes in the 1930s portrayed these groups as, respectively, marijuana smokers and cocaine users.²⁹ Antihippie feelings in the 1960s and 1970s frequently focused on hallucinogenic use. It now appears that the prevalence of drug consumption among these stigmatized groups was actually far less than was commonly believed, and further, the alleged effects of those drugs were grossly exaggerated.

Thus, a question to be raised in this study is whether drug use is *uncommonly* prevalent among prostitutes, or whether the assumption of an association between prostitution and drug use is not simply an artifact of a general prejudice against prostitutes. The racist drug user stereotypes appeared to be epiphenomenal to basic economic factors and conflicts of the times such as the competition with laborers of European ancestry for jobs. Are there economic interests that benefit from having prostitutes portrayed as addicted, drunken, dissolute, disorderly, criminalistic whores? The answer is yes.

For example, New York City's Times Square area has long been the site of intense economic competition between "legitimate" businesses (theatres, restaurants) and sexually oriented enterprises (prostitution, peepshows, pornographic book stores, massage parlors). On April 28, 1976, a rally was held at Broadway's Majestic Theatre allegedly sponsored by "organized labor, 100,000 voting residents, the business community and the legitimate theatre." Handbills printed for the occasion advertised the rally in the following manner, "Subject: The Plague. Remedy: The enactment of the Ohrenstein Bill . . . seeking to prevent loitering for the purposes of prostitution and pimping and the enforcement of our existing obscenity laws. Alternative: Death from the Plague." The economic competition was explicitly symbolized as a life and death struggle. Portraying prostitutes in the worst possible fashion could stir up public sentiment and pressure the state legislature into passing a bill designed to clear the streets of prostitutes and their pimps and thus exalt one set of economic interests over another.³⁰

It may serve the interests of certain occupational groups to give prostitutes a deviant public image. Journalists may wish to present especially "juicy" material to a sensation-loving public. Rehabilitation program entrepreneurs may seek to generate maximum publicity for their efforts, as well as maximum grant money for their programs.

Do these arguments mean that the posited association between prostitution and drug use is necessarily a spurious one? The answer is no! All that has been shown is that certain groups do have real economic interests involved in the attempt to portray prostitutes in a negative fashion or to suppress prostitution. Other groups have real economic interests in the attempt to promote prostitution. The actual nature and scope of a relationship between prostitution and drug use remains an empirical question that objective social science research is best suited to answer. The results of such inquiries may contribute to an amelioration of the sort of economic warfare previously described and to a better understanding of the most appropriate types of programs to fund.

I have always found accounts of "sociologists at work" among the most interesting and useful contributions to the social scientific literature. With the hope that others share my feelings in this regard, I decided to structure certain sections of this book so that not only substantive findings on the relationship between drug use and prostitution are presented but also a case history

of a rather interesting research effort. The women I met during the course of this study had a profound and enlightening effect upon me. To the greatest extent possible, I will allow them to speak for themselves in the pages to follow so that readers of this work can participate with me in seeking to understand the worlds of prostitution and drugs and how the two interrelate.

Notes

1. Coyote was founded in California by Margo St. James and now has chapters all over the country. *Coyote* is an acronym standing for Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics. Scapegoat is a New York City organization. Both groups lobby for prostitution law reform, provide services to prostitutes, and appear at a variety of public forums such as television talk shows.

2. On the racial issue, see, for instance, Maureen E. Kelleher, "Anatomy of a Law: Politics and Prostitution in the Big City" (paper presented at annual meetings of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, New York, 1976).

3. Nathan C. Heard, *Howard Street* (New York: New American Library, 1968).

4. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Harvest Books, 1936).

5. Reported in Howard B. Woolston, *Prostitution in the United States* (New Jersey: Patterson Smith, 1969), p. 57.

6. Katherine Bement Davis, "A Study of Prostitutes Committed from New York City to the State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills," in George C. Kneeland, *Commercialized Prostitution in New York City* (New Jersey: Patterson Smith, 1969), p. 196.

7. Reported in John S. Haller and Robin M. Haller, *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), p. 282.

8. Emma Goldman, *Living My Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931, reprinted, 1970, v. 1, pp. 141-142).

9. Kneeland, *Prostitution in New York*, pp. 28, 29, 62.

10. Al Rose, personal correspondence, 1976.

11. Charles Winick and Paul Kinsie, *The Lively Commerce: Prostitution in the United States* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971, p. 86).

12. Arthur Maglin, "Sex Role Differences in Heroin Addiction," *Social Casework*, 1974, 55:162.

13. Jennifer James, "Prostitution and Addiction: An Interdisciplinary Approach," *Addictive Diseases*, 1976, 2:602.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 605.

15. See, for instance, Robert Newman, Margot Cates, Alex Tytun and Bent Werbell, "Narcotic Addiction in New York City: Trends from 1968 to