

JUVENILE PROSTITUTION

SAFE HOUSE

SEDUCTION

There's no doubt teen prostitutes are victims. The question is, should they be treated that way?

BY GLENN CAMPBELL

Underage prostitutes, some as young as 12, are a depressing part of the juvenile delinquency calendar. They are considered "sexually exploited children." Most come from broken homes, and nearly all have been sexually abused in their earlier years. Many come to Las Vegas from out of state. With nowhere else to go, they fall under the sway of persuasive pimps who lure them into the business.

When they are arrested in Clark County, they are currently treated no differently than any other juvenile defendant. They are placed in the Juvenile Detention Center—essentially a jail—for the days or weeks it takes to resolve their case. Some say this is victimizing them a second time.

To avoid this revictimization, the juvenile delinquency judge, the public defender and the district attorney have joined forces to propose a "safe house" where underage girls arrested for solicitation or related offenses can be placed in lieu of jail. There, they would have a comfortable place to stay, would be protected from their pimps, would be evaluated by professionals and could begin the difficult process of deprogramming.

These girls are known as "runners." No matter what home or institution you place them in, they are likely to take off from it, often running right back to their

pimp. Therefore, the safe house would have to be a locked facility, probably built expressly for the purpose.

The project seems to be moving ahead. The land has been acquired, and a women's group is involved in raising funds. The only thing that isn't clear is how the safe house will be used. There is no written plan so far for how it will be integrated into the rest of the juvenile justice system.

Personally, I am having doubts. It sounds like a good idea, but so do a lot of good ideas that turn into bad ideas in the long run.

Who will run the facility? Who is going to fund its daily operations (a very substantial cost, especially if locked)? Is that funding going to be drained from other worthy causes? Will having such a facility available encourage dubious arrests or weaken "due process"? How are we going to decide which girls belong in this facility—even before they have been convicted of anything?

Will the safe house decrease the statistical likelihood that a girl returns to the streets, and by how much? What is the cost-to-benefit ratio?

Nearly every kid in the juvenile justice system is a victim in one way or another. Nearly every repeat offender has been abused or neglected. Why are we giving special treatment to this particular class of juvenile delinquent?

Because prostitution is sexy?

Prostitution is a typical response by girls to childhood sexual abuse. The typical response by boys is to sexually abuse younger children. No one is proposing a safe house for male juvenile sex offenders. On the contrary, they could be tried as adults or be forced to register as sex offenders for life.

The safe house would promote a two-tiered justice system. There would be a justice system for kids accused of "bad" crimes and another for those accused of "good" crimes. Is this justice?

I have no problem with a program that offers alternatives to young prostitutes before they are caught or after they have been convicted. If a girl wants to get out of the business, she should have options, but she is not likely to be changed by any program forced upon her. Prostitution is often called an addiction, but if so, you have to accept that locked addiction programs don't work.

Building the safe house is the easy part. The casinos where most of these girls are arrested would probably love to fund it. It would show they are opposed to prostitution, just like they are opposed to "problem gambling"—even as they benefit from both. Visitors want a "good time," and the casinos don't do anything to stand in the way.

The hard part is defining the mission. Give us a written plan, and we can start thinking things through.

—G.C.