What We Know About Pimps and Traffickers

Most information regarding pimps and traffickers is anecdotal because, not surprisingly, it is difficult to identify and interview large numbers of people who have trafficked or pimped out others. However, there are enough similar articles from across the country and around the world to draw some important lessons about who pimps are and where they come from.

*Pimps and traffickers don’t share a particular look, ethnicity, age, etc.*

Despite what Hollywood may want you to believe, pimps and traffickers come in all ages, ethnicities, and may be either male or female. While there are certain groups of youth who are more at-risk of turning to the pimping and trafficking lifestyle, it is not the case that traffickers have a particular “look” or appearance by which they can be distinguished from the rest of the population.

The following people are either known pimps or have been arrested at one time or another for pimping and trafficking. As you can see, they are examples of people who have come from very different walks of life but who have nevertheless engaged in the sexual exploitation of young women and girls.

- [Dennis Hof](#), the owner and operator of several brothels/nightclubs/restaurants in Nevada
- [Anna Gristina](#), the “soccer mom madam” who ran a high-end escort ring in New York
- [James Lipton](#), pimped out women in 1950s Paris, currently “Inside the Actors Studio” host
- [Four gang members](#), ages 17 to 22, arrested for pimping out a young girl

*Youth at-risk for gang involvement are also at risk for turning to pimping and trafficking others*

It may seem counter-intuitive to consider someone “at-risk” of becoming a pimp or a trafficker, particularly when we see people like Dennis Hof and Anna Gristina, who apparently knew very clearly what they were entering into when they decided to exploit women for their financial gain. Even though pimps and traffickers don’t share a particular look, ethnicity, etc., there are a growing number of traffickers and pimps who are also members of local gangs. Many people who are getting arrested

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for pimping are young men – one group of gang members arrested in Clark County, Nevada was between the ages of 17 and 22.

**Pimping and trafficking are a lure to pimps and gang members for the money and respect**

Reports in various cities around the U.S. have found that gangs are increasingly turning from trafficking drugs to humans in order to make money; finding that it is more lucrative than drugs. Drugs can only be sold once – girls can be sold over and over again. In addition to this, drugs can’t be made to look legal, but girls can be trained to say that they are sisters or cousins so the pimp/trafficker can avoid liability. One report in Seattle said that one gang member who had been pimping out several young girls was making $30,000 per month. Police in San Diego said that pimping out one girl can earn a pimp $500 to $1000 per night.

In addition to the money, gang members who had been arrested said they did it for the money and the respect that they earned for themselves and their gangs. “Pimping out girls gets me money, which gets me respect,” said one gang member, age 21, from Seattle. "And if I’m respected as an associate of the West Side Street Mobb, then the gang gets more respect… Next to money, respect is all that matters.”

**What this means for advocates**

Since a large percentage of pimps are also gang members, it is important to prevent youth from entering gangs in the first place. Studies about youth involvement in gangs have found that factors that correlate with delinquency in schools also correlate with school failure, drug and alcohol use, family problems, and abuse. About 25 to 30 percent of disruptive children in schools are at risk of becoming child delinquents and about one-third of delinquents become violent and chronic offenders. Children are particularly vulnerable when they live in high-risk areas of large cities where gang activity is prevalent.

Key risk factors for youth gang involvement:

- Individual:

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7 Id.
8 Id.
13 Id.
- Antisocial behaviors such as drug/alcohol use, early dating, precocious sexual activity, aggression
  - Mental health problems such as hyperactivity, depression, conduct disorders
  - Suffered physical or sexual abuse, neglect, or assault

- Family:
  - Weak family structure, poverty and poor supervision
  - Abuse or neglect in the home

- School:
  - Low academic performance
  - Feeling unsafe at school, numerous suspensions or expulsions
  - Lack of connection with teachers and other staff

- Peers:
  - Aggressive, antisocial, and delinquent peers
  - Rejection by peers

- Community:
  - High levels of criminal activity or youth participating in illegal activity
  - Existing gangs
  - Feeling unsafe
  - Availability and use of firearms and drugs, media portrayals of violence

**Gang member pimps pose as boyfriends or “loverboys” to attract vulnerable girls**
In order to lure vulnerable girls into commercial sexual exploitation, young men will pose as boyfriends or “loverboys.” They target young girls, typically between the ages of 12 to 15 who come from abusive or neglectful homes, and the men convince the girls that they love them and care for them. A typical pattern is that once a girl is convinced she is in love, the “boyfriend” will work with his friends or fellow gang members to abuse and/or rape her, thus initiating her into the life. After initiation, he convinces her that she can’t tell anyone because it was somehow her fault and she is increasingly isolated from any friends or family she may have had. This draws her closer to the young man who recruited her in the first place and gives him the power to manipulate her until she is selling herself for sex to earn him or the gang money.

**Boyfriend pimps typically recruit multiple girls who are made to compete with each other**
These boyfriend or loverboy pimps often have several girls they have recruited in the same manner, and they pimp them out to other men to earn money. Because each of these girls has been made to believe that he is her boyfriend, there is often jealousy, manipulation, and competition between the girls. One girl often becomes the most “powerful” among the other girls and is given extra authority by the pimp or trafficker to control the others as well as to recruit new girls to the operation.

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14 This is a term commonly used in the Netherlands for pimps who pretend to be boyfriends to the girls and young women before they force them into the commercial sex industry.


This girl, commonly called the “bottom girl” or more derogatory forms of that phrase, may often come to be viewed as a pimp or madam herself. She will help to keep the other girls in line, may help to set up dates with customers and will often manipulate the other girls more than the pimp himself. Regardless of her behavior, however, it is often the case that she has succumbed most completely to the pimp, becoming his primary pawn and she becomes even more dependent on him because she cannot form friendships with the other girls.17

Key Lessons for Advocates

1. **Be aware of the people surrounding teenage girls and boys.**
   If you are a parent, teacher, youth pastor, or other individual involved with working with young children, be aware of who it is they are spending their time with. Be wary of older boys who are spending too much time around younger girls and older gang members spending time with young boys. Watch for warning signs in their behavior – withdrawal, depression, delinquency at school, etc. – and get involved.

2. **Become a mentor or role model for at-risk youth.**
   Research has shown that where young boys and girls have strong relationships with parents, teachers, youth pastors, school counselors, or other adult mentors, they are less at risk of falling into delinquent or violent activities and are more capable of making good decisions for their lives. One key factor for youth joining gangs is that they are seeking community and safety – when kids live in dangerous areas and live largely without supervision, they seek that safety in gangs.

   This could mean getting involved with local community mentoring programs, volunteering in after-school programs in inner city schools, participating in urban outreach opportunities, etc. Be willing to build relationships with challenging kids.

3. **Don’t participate in the culture’s glorification of the word “pimp”**
   The word “pimp” is almost synonymous with the word “cool” in today’s culture. There is a television show called “Pimp My Ride,” which is about restoring and customizing cars to make them “cool.” Pimp has become synonymous with cool, when the practice of pimping is about exploitation, manipulation, and power.

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17 Id.