Joel Best

Careers in Brothel Prostitution:

St. Paul, 1865–1883 According to the 1870 manuscript census of St. Paul, Minnesota, Mary E. Robinson kept a house of ill fame. Her household contained ten prostitutes, two female servants, and one male servant. Robinson was a forty-four-year-old widow, with \$2,000 in personal property and \$75,000 in real property. Her brothel at 18 W. Eighth Street was notorious:

... the leading and, so to speak, the fashionable resort for men of easy virtue, and the abiding place of the more select among the “soiled doves” of the city. . . . The reputation of the establishment has extended far and wide, and its existence was well known to every citizen of St. Paul.

In addition to her brothel, Robinson owned her personal residence next door, as well as other property throughout the city. In 1874, after operating her brothel for over eight years and accumulating over eighty arrests on charges of keeping a house of ill fame, she announced her retirement and sold the brothel’s contents at public auction. “A woman of more than ordinary ability,” she remained in the city, actively pursuing her real estate interests.¹

Robinson appears to fit one of the stock roles in the history of Victorian prostitution: the shrewd madam who saved her earnings, invested wisely, and retired to a life of comfort. Few women took this career path, but authorities disagree over whether the typical prostitute died in misery or returned to respectability. Sanger, drawing on his pre-Civil War survey of 2,000 New York prostitutes, argued that women entered prostitution in fashionable brothels and proceeded through a series of progressively shabbier

Joel Best is Professor of Sociology at California State University, Fresno.

An earlier version of this article was presented at the 1980 meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems. The article has benefited from the comments of B. R. Burg, Barbara S. Heyl, David F. Luckenbill, and John Modell.

0022-1953/82/040597-23 \$02.50/0

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1 *St. Paul Pioneer*, Nov. 11, 1869; May 13, 23, 1874; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 6, 1875; Feb. 14, 1877.

establishments, dying, on the average, within four years. Finnegan's recent study of York streetwalkers supports Sanger; she concludes that women entered prostitution because they were poor and that they found drink, disease, and destitution, rather than opportunities for improvement. This model, also advanced by Victorian moralists, holds that prostitutes' lives inevitably led to misery and death. In contrast, Acton, Victorian England's leading authority on vice, believed that most prostitutes "return sooner or later to a more or less regular course of life." Similarly, Walkowitz and Walkowitz suggest that in south England "prostitution was . . . a part-time or seasonal activity, or a stage in their lives that they would pass through." In this model, women drifted into and out of prostitution according to their circumstances, many eventually leaving vice for respectable employment or marriage. Although the majority of prostitutes remained poor, they were not doomed to special misery and a few even were upwardly mobile.²

The sociological concept of the deviant career can clarify the issues in this debate. Becker, in an influential essay, defined career as "the sequence of movements from one position to another in an occupational system made by any individual who works in that system." Adapting the concept for the study of deviance, Becker outlined four stages in the deviant career: committing a deviant act; acquiring a deviant perspective; being caught and labeled; and joining a deviant group. Becker's essay became the standard statement of the interactionist or labeling theory of deviance, but other sociologists, Sagarin among them, have criticized his description of the deviant career for being overly rigid. Lemert notes that, whereas respectable bureaucracies structure the careers of their members, deviants are faced with more options. In short, career patterns can vary within a deviant group; although some individuals may take common pathways into, through, and out of deviance, others may blaze new trails. The single-minded models of prostitutes' careers ignore the options open to the

2 William W. Sanger, *The History of Prostitution* (New York, 1972; orig. pub. 1858); Frances Finnegan, *Poverty and Prostitution* (Cambridge, 1979); William Acton, *Prostitution* (New York, 1968, orig. pub. 1870), 72; Judith R. Walkowitz and Daniel J. Walkowitz, "'We Are Not Beasts of the Field,'" in Mary Hartman and Lois Banner (eds.), *Clio's Consciousness Raised* (New York, 1974), 193. Cf. Ruth Rosen, "Introduction," in Rosen and Sue Davidson (eds.), *The Maimie Papers* (Old Westbury, N.Y., 1977), xi-xliv.

women. In nineteenth-century St. Paul, the deviant careers of the women engaged in brothel prostitution followed diverse routes.³

Studies of prostitution in late nineteenth-century America have three principal limitations: they often focus on cities with large, notorious vice districts, e.g., San Francisco or New Orleans; they lean heavily on anecdotal accounts about elite brothels; and they frequently derive the bulk of their information from a single source, e.g., one manuscript census, thereby making the analysis static. As a consequence, they cannot describe typical career patterns in prostitution.⁴

This article attempts to circumvent these limitations. It examines brothel prostitution in St. Paul over nearly twenty years, from 1865 to 1883. As a river city, St. Paul had a regional reputation for vice, but its "under the hill" district was far smaller than the Barbary Coast or Storyville. The city grew rapidly during this period, from 10,401 in the 1860 federal census to 41,473 in 1880, but the sex ratio was nearly balanced (49.5 percent of the population was female in 1870). There was no severe shortage of women to inflate the demand for prostitution. In contrast to the famous vice districts in major seaports and on the frontier, prostitution existed on a modest scale in St. Paul. In this respect, it was typical of many other cities. St. Paul's prostitutes made career choices—to enter or leave vice, to move from brothel to brothel and city to city, and between the statuses of madam and prostitute—which were available to prostitutes elsewhere. The picture which emerges is one of women in motion, choosing among the

3 Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders* (New York, 1963), 24–39; Edward Sagarin, *Deviants and Deviance* (New York, 1975), 137–138; Edwin M. Lemert, *Human Deviance, Social Problems, and Social Control* (Englewood Cliffs, 1967), 51. For introductions to interactionist studies of deviance and sociological writings about careers, see Earl Rubington and Martin S. Weinberg (eds.), *Deviance* (New York, 1978; 3rd ed.); Barney G. Glaser (ed.), *Organizational Careers* (Chicago, 1968). Paula Petrik, "Prostitution in Helena, Montana, 1865–1900," *Montana*, XXXI (1981), 28–41; Neil Larry Shumsky and Larry M. Springer, "San Francisco's Zone of Prostitution, 1880–1934," *Journal of Historical Geography*, VII (1981), 71–89; Al Rose, *Storyville, New Orleans* (University, Ala., 1974).

4 See for example, Curt Gentry, *The Madams of San Francisco* (New York, 1964); Marion S. Goldman, "Sexual Commerce on the Comstock Lode," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, XXI (1978), 98–129; Lucie Cheng Hirata, "Free, Indentured, Enslaved: Chinese Prostitutes in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs*, V (1979), 3–29; Carol Leonard and Isidor Wallimann, "Prostitution and Changing Morality in the Frontier Cattle Towns of Kansas," *Kansas History*, II (1979), 34–53.

available career paths, within the confines posed by the community's economy and morality and the underworld's structure.⁵

MADAMS, BROTHELS, AND INMATES Prostitution in St. Paul was not restricted to the city's brothels. Some prostitutes claimed that they were legitimately employed, often in the needle trades. In the 1880 census, the two young women living with George and Sarah Kimball—a notorious couple with a long history of arrests for managing brothels—listed themselves as dressmakers. This alibi was common enough that the city's leading newspaper sometimes used "plain sewing" as a euphemism for prostitution. Cigar stores provided another common cover for vice: "In front of the dirty little shanties, a beggarly display of cigars and fruits is made while behind is a sitting room containing some gay furniture and a wheezy organ, or jingling piano is found, while several asthmatic [*sic*] painted females are prepared to sing or play cards." Although "sewing girls" and "cigar stores" existed, brothels housed the major portion of the city's prostitutes. A physician, lecturing about venereal disease in 1874, estimated "that there were six regular houses in St. Paul with thirty-six inmates, and six irregular ones, such as cigar stores, with nine inmates who have rooms by themselves, and from forty to fifty 'kept women.'" Three years later, there were eight brothels with fewer than fifty inmates, but reformers argued that "there are in the city several hundreds of prostitutes, who are working an inexplicable evil." This vague figure probably exaggerated the proportion of prostitutes outside the brothels. In 1883, Mayor Christopher D. O'Brien stated that the city had twelve regular brothels with sixty-four inmates, nine other houses with three to six inmates each, and "the usual number of the lower grades of disreputable women. . . ." Brothels played the most prominent role in St. Paul's demimonde because city politics let them operate openly.⁶

Although St. Paul lacked a formally designated vice district, most brothels were concentrated in two areas. Downtown they clustered along and near four blocks of Fifth Street, running from

5 Philip D. Jordan, *Frontier Law and Order* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1970), 126–131; *idem*, *The People's Health* (St. Paul, 1953), 243–252; Frank J. Mead and Alix J. Muller, *History of the Police and Fire Departments of the Twin Cities* (Minneapolis, 1899).

6 *Pioneer*, July 24, 1870; Mar. 10, 1874; *Pioneer Press*, Jan. 21, 1878; Aug. 9, 1883; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Dec. 23, 1874.

Cedar to Silbey. The establishments “under the hill” were on or near Eagle Street, a few blocks southwest of downtown. Both neighborhoods offered other forms of vice; in addition to brothels and “cigar stores,” they contained notorious saloons, gambling “hells,” and assignation houses. Public drunkenness and fights were commonplace. By 1882, the district “under the hill” was patrolled by a special officer as well as a regular patrolman. Not all brothels were in the vice districts; Robinson’s house was located about two blocks north of the downtown area and other houses were on the outskirts of the city.⁷

From 1865 to 1883, St. Paul’s city government adopted a *de facto* system for regulating prostitution within the city. Prostitution was illegal under both state law and city ordinance, but enforcement took the form of arresting each of the city’s madams at monthly intervals and fining them according to the number of inmates in their houses—in effect, taxing their operations. This system was openly acknowledged by city officials and the newspapers often covered the madams’ courtroom appearances. As a consequence, Robinson and her colleagues were familiar figures. There was no need to keep the brothels secret. At the same time, the police and courts prohibited streetwalking, levying heavy fines or jail sentences against independent prostitutes whose activities were visible to the public.⁸

The system of regulation distinguished between madams and the inmates who worked in their brothels. After 1867, madams before the police court (later the municipal court) were charged with keeping a house of ill fame, whereas inmates ordinarily faced charges of visiting a house of ill fame. Although the same charge, violating ordinance No. 10, was made against both categories of women before 1868, the fines were different; madams paid from \$15 to over \$100, prostitutes only \$10. Madams also were distinguished by their regular, monthly appearances in the city’s courtrooms, where they were charged and fined. On some occasions, the inmates appeared in court with their madam, sometimes being charged separately, but often as a “family.” The inmates’ appearance was required; brothels were charged a fixed fee plus an additional sum for each inmate. Typically, a madam was fined

7 *Pioneer Press*, July 24, 1882.

8 *Pioneer*, Apr. 22; July 30, 1870; June 13, 1872; Feb. 4, 1874; *Pioneer Press*, Jan. 11, 21, 1878.

\$25 plus \$10 per prostitute. In other months, the madam appeared in court unaccompanied, paying a single, larger sum, which sometimes took into account the number of prostitutes in her house. Regardless of the system of fines adopted by the court in a given month, the madam apparently paid all of the fines for her brothel.⁹

As a consequence of this policy, madams can be identified by their regular appearances in the court records. If a madam is defined as a person who was, on at least three occasions during one calendar year, either charged with keeping a house of ill fame or charged with violating ordinance No. 10 and fined more than

9 Sources for court records vary over the period: irregular reports of the city justice and the chief of police appeared in *Proceedings of the St. Paul City Council*, 1866–1870; a manuscript ledger of arrests (hereafter arrest ledger), located in the office of the St. Paul Chief of Police, 1869–1870, 1872–1874; official minutes of the city council, published periodically in the *St. Paul Press*, 1871–1872; the criminal dockets, St. Paul Municipal Court (Ramsey County Records Center, section 6, shelf 4, vol. A–Z), 1875–1883. For two gaps in these sources—June, 1870 through June 1871, and Nov., 1874 through Apr., 1875—mention of specific arrests in the *St. Paul Pioneer* served to compile a partial record.

These different policies produced records of varying detail, particularly in the arrest ledger. On some of the occasions when both madams and prostitutes were charged, the names of the inmates in each brothel were listed beneath the madam's name, giving a *structured record*:

Madam 1	Prostitute 4
Prostitute 1	Prostitute 5
Prostitute 2	Prostitute 6
Prostitute 3	etc.
Madam 2	

On other months, both categories of names were listed, but the women in each category were grouped together, producing a *categorical record*:

Madam 1	Prostitute 2
Madam 2	Prostitute 3
Madam 3	etc.
Prostitute 1	

But during most months, the prostitutes were not charged individually, and only the madams appeared in *primary records*:

Madam 1
Madam 2
Madam 3
etc.

Since primary records appear in the vast majority of months under examination, more is known about the madams than about their inmates. For a detailed account of one court session where a structured record was produced, see *Pioneer*, Apr. 22, 1870; for sessions producing primary records, see *Pioneer Press*, Apr. 7; June 2, 1881; Jan. 3, 1883.

\$10, then forty madams can be identified between November, 1865 and May, 1883. Demographic information is available for nineteenth of these women. Thirteen reported being born in the United States; one each was born in England, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, and Sweden, and one madam's birthplace was not given. Nine reported being single, seven said that they were married, and there was no information about three. Of the women who reported being married, at least two lived with their husbands in the brothel; one husband, George Kimball, and not his wife Sarah, sometimes faced charges of keeping a house of ill fame. Unlike the stereotypical middle-aged madam, the women were young; age at first known arrest as a madam ranged from twenty to forty, with a median of only twenty-six. Similarly, the age at the last known arrest as a madam ranged from twenty-two to forty-eight, with a median of twenty-eight. The madams were mostly native-born, single, and in their twenties.

The forty madams accumulated 1,029 arrests for prostitution, including arrests as madams, brothel inmates, and independent prostitutes. The number of known arrests per woman ranged from 3 to 109, with a median of 15.5 (and a mean of 25.7). Sarah Kimball and her husband George had only seventeen arrests, but they spanned a sixteen-year period, 1866–1881. This spotty record may reflect their location well away from downtown and the police. Then, too, the Kimballs may have drifted in and out of brothel-keeping; in various city directories, George was listed as a painter, glass stainer, and laborer, while Sarah was once recorded as doing washing and ironing. Kate Hutton's career was nearly as long (1867–1881) and more consistent, with 109 arrests over almost fifteen years. Annie Oleson had the most consecutive arrests; she was charged in sixty-two of the sixty-three months from May, 1875 to July, 1880. Although her record is exceptional, twenty-one madams had at least ten arrests in one twelve-month period. The city's records, although incomplete, reveal considerable stability in the madams' careers.¹⁰

10 Demographic information was drawn from the manuscript census schedules for the federal censuses of 1860, 1870, and 1880, and the state census of 1875, in the cases of nine madams. Three others were described in the register of prostitutes kept at the back of the arrest ledger. Where the women could not be located in either the census schedules or the register, information was taken from the arrests recorded in the ledger proper (for the remaining seven cases). When madams appeared in more than one of these sources, the

The brothels themselves displayed even greater stability. Addresses are known for thirty-two of the madams. Often, one madam succeeded another in managing the same brothel; altogether, the forty women operated twenty houses. Thirteen establishments had a single madam; Robinson, who ran her brothel for over eight years, had the longest tenure. At the other extreme, the "Lookout," at 1 Jackson Street, operated for ten years under eight madams. One brothel was especially stable: it operated at 94 Washington Street from 1865 to 1883 under the management of four madams; when the original house burned down in 1876, another was built on the lot within a year. The number of brothels in operation rose steadily throughout most of the period, as did the city's population. Five were in operation in 1866, seven in 1870, ten in 1874, and thirteen the following year, dropping to ten in 1878 before reaching fourteen in 1880.¹¹

Brothels displayed different patterns of operation. Several moved from one building to another.¹² When Lou Adams registered with the police in September, 1873, she gave her address as 14 Washington Street, "under the hill" near several other brothels. Six months later, she had moved to 11 Nash Street—located in a respectable neighborhood—but neighbors' complaints drove her out. By the end of 1874, her brothel was located downtown, near Cedar and Third, her third address in sixteen months. Some madams bought their buildings and rented them to their successors. Kate Hutton bought the house at 7 Hill Street in 1869 and

information frequently differed from one source to the next. In such cases, the census was taken as the most reliable source, with the register second, on the grounds that details about the women were more likely to be recorded accurately on these occasions than in routine appearances before the police or municipal court.

11 Many of the madams had other arrests, particularly for drunkenness or disorderly conduct. The women's activities were considered newsworthy; 37 of the 40 appeared in newspaper articles and some, such as Robinson, were the subjects of dozens of stories.

12 Addresses were gathered from St. Paul city directories, 1865–1884, the register of prostitutes kept at the back of the arrest ledger, and newspaper articles. Twenty-eight of the madams appeared in city directories during years when they operated brothels (the directories usually gave no occupation for the women); 4 madams were located through other sources. The process was complicated by St. Paul's irregular method for numbering houses and by the decision to renumber buildings in the middle of the period studied. Sanborn's St. Paul insurance atlases for 1875 and 1885 were used to locate buildings and determine when a house had been renumbered. Although the precise addresses of the remaining 8 madams are not known, at least 3 ran houses "under the hill." These figures include all 40 madams, treating those without known addresses as having their own firms. A firm was presumed to be in operation throughout the period from first to last known arrests, unless there was evidence to the contrary.

ran the establishment until 1875. She left to live with her lover and Maggie Morse took over for a year, presumably paying rent to Hutton. When the latter returned, Morse moved into the rebuilt house at 94 Washington Street, establishing one of the “finest” brothels in the city. By 1879, she was in turn renting her building to Jennie Bateson. In two cases, brothels merged: Florence Campbell ran the brothel at 93 Eagle Street from 1870 to 1877, and during the latter part of this period, Hattie McBride operated a “cigar store” at 71 Robert Street. When Campbell became ill McBride moved to take over the Eagle Street house.¹³

Although St. Paul’s madams and their brothels remain visible in historical records, less can be determined about the brothels’ inmates. Besides the madams, several hundred other people were arrested on prostitution charges between 1865 and 1883, including madams of minor, short-lived establishments, brothel inmates, independent prostitutes, pimps, servants, and customers. Unfortunately, it is frequently impossible to determine the category in which an individual belongs. In particular, since visiting a house of ill fame was an all-purpose prostitution charge, brothel inmates cannot be distinguished from independent prostitutes or those in “cigar stores.” Positive identification of brothel inmates is only possible in two sources: structured arrest records, where prostitutes were listed beneath their respective madams, and manuscript census schedules. The most detailed series of structured arrest records appeared in the arrest ledger between April and October, 1873; sixty-one prostitutes were listed as brothel inmates during these months. Inmates from six brothels appeared in census schedules; three brothels in 1870, two in 1880, and one in the state census of 1875 contained a total of thirty inmates. Two women appeared in both the structured records and a census schedule to bring the total to eighty-nine inmates identified from both sources.

Demographically, the inmates resembled the madams.¹⁴ Their ages ranged from sixteen to thirty, with a median of

13 Arrest ledger; *Pioneer*, Nov. 7, 1869; Mar. 10–14; Dec. 2, 1874; *Pioneer Press*, Aug. 24, 1876; Nov. 14, 1877; Jan. 21, 1878; Feb. 4, 1880.

14 Where information about a prostitute appeared in two sources, the rules described in footnote 10 were followed: census data were considered most reliable, followed in order by the listing in the arrest ledger’s register, and information recorded under an arrest. There was one exception: since the arrest ledger’s register recorded the woman’s age when she first arrived in the city, arrest records were taken as the more reliable measure of the ages of women working in the brothels.

twenty-two; twenty-three were under twenty-one, fifty-one were between twenty-one and twenty-five, and ten were over twenty-five (ages were unrecorded for five women). Of the fifty-six for whom marital status is known, fifty-five were single. Over three fourths were native-born: United States—sixty-seven; Canada, Ireland, and Sweden—three each; Germany—two; England, France, and Italy—one each; with eight unknown. Census schedules gave the state of birth for twenty-four native-born women; eighteen of these (75 percent) came from only five states—Minnesota, New York, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Pennsylvania. (The same states accounted for 79 percent of the native-born residents in the 1880 federal census of the city.) Compared to their madams, brothel inmates were slightly younger, somewhat less likely to be married, but about equally likely to have been born in the United States. If geographical and cultural differences are taken into account, this pattern resembles those found in other studies of nineteenth-century prostitutes.¹⁵

Brothels fluctuated in size from month to month, but a typical establishment had four to six inmates in residence, plus the madam. Sometimes brothels were small; the Kimballs had only two “dressmakers” living with them in 1880 and Cora Webber had only one prostitute (as well as a handful of other men and women) in her house in 1870. At the other extreme, Robinson had ten inmates with her in 1870 and Hattie McBride had nine in 1880.¹⁶

In sum, the structural context for brothel prostitution in St. Paul from 1865 to 1883 is relatively clear. The police supervised

15 U.S., Census Office, Tenth Census, *Statistics of the Population of the United States* (Washington, 1883), I, 536–537. All 40 madams and 89 inmates were apparently white. Occasional newspaper reports mention black prostitutes, but never in the context of the established brothels. By 1880, blacks accounted for barely 1% of St. Paul’s population. Cf. *Pioneer*, May 29, 1867; July 23, 1870; *Pioneer Press*, July 7, 1877.

Two-thirds of Nashville’s prostitutes were born nearby in Tennessee, Kentucky, or Alabama. Virginia City’s prostitutes were slightly older than St. Paul’s; the median age for whites was 26, suggesting that some women moved west to the frontier when they became older and less competitive in the urban marketplace. Oriental prostitutes were concentrated in the far west. Cf. Goldman, “Sexual Commerce”; Hirata, “Chinese Prostitutes”; Yuji Ichioka, “Ameyuki-san: Japanese Prostitutes in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Amerasia*, IV (1977), 1–21; David Kaser, “Nashville’s Women of Pleasure in 1860,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, XXIII (1964), 379–382.

16 The 1873 city directory counted, by sex, the number of inhabitants in each dwelling. Five brothels appear, with 5 to 13 women apiece—figures including the madam and any live-in help.

the brothels, but let them operate openly. Most firms, located in well-established vice districts where brothels could attract customers with minimal interference, sometimes operated from the same building for several years. The brothels were small, managed by women who often had stable careers as madams. The women involved in brothel prostitution, both as madams and inmates, were typically in their twenties, single, and native-born. Within this structure, however, these women experienced fluid careers, finding their way into the world of vice, changing locations and sometimes status, and ultimately leaving prostitution.

ENTERING PROSTITUTION Most sociologists studying deviant careers focus on the initial step—becoming deviant. For theoretical and practical reasons, it is important to ask why some people turn to prostitution or other deviance. Interactionist studies of deviant careers argue that, in addition to committing their first deviant acts, individuals entering deviance must modify their definition of self, redefining deviance as an appropriate activity and justifying their involvement in it. For some, deviance may be a defense against a threat, whereas others may seek adventure through deviance; in any case, entry into deviance involves assessing options and, ultimately, choosing deviance.¹⁷

Other explanations assign the individual a less active role in the process of becoming deviant; in these models, the person becomes a pawn of outside forces. Nineteenth-century sexual ideology favored explanations which denied that prostitution was a calculated choice. Medical and scientific literature, as well as popular writings, minimized female sexuality and emphasized women's innocence and purity. Since purity was woman's essence, prostitution represented a fundamental contradiction—purity depraved. This contradiction accounts for the choice of explanations for prostitution favored by nineteenth-century moralists. Reformers pointed to the white slave trade's role in ruining young girls; innocents were said to be abducted and forced

17 For general discussions of the process of becoming deviant, see: John Lofland, *Deviance and Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, 1969), 39–205; David Matza, *Becoming Deviant* (Englewood Cliffs, 1969); Rubington and Weinberg, *Deviance*. Most sociological studies of prostitutes' careers focus on this initial stage: James K. Bryan, "Apprenticeships in Prostitution," *Social Problems*, XII (1965), 287–297; Diana Gray, "Turning Out," *Urban Life and Culture*, I (1973), 401–425; Barbara S. Heyl, *The Madam as Entrepreneur* (New Brunswick, 1979).

to enter brothels, or they were tricked into beginning a “life of shame.” Other contemporary explanations suggested that women could be overcome through a weakness in their character: loving “not wisely but too well,” they were seduced; permitted to read novels, they were corrupted by false, romantic ideas; or, proud and greedy, they longed to wear fine clothes. Yet nineteenth-century newspaper stories revealed the inadequacy of these explanations and the ideology which lay behind them.¹⁸

St. Paul’s newspapers shared the fascination with women’s descent into vice, but they offered little support for claims that abduction or trickery led women into prostitution. Prostitutes occasionally accounted for their “fall” in this fashion and their stories sometimes were believed. However, investigations usually revealed that these stories were fraudulent attempts to gain sympathy; only five cases were substantiated, and only one of these involved an established brothel.¹⁹

Although there was limited support for romantic explanations for women’s entry into prostitution via abduction, trickery, or seduction, such incidents lay outside the general pattern. In newspaper accounts, the most common pathway into vice involved a calculated decision, reflecting the available opportunities for women in the city. Some young women saw prostitution as a means of escaping unhappy family lives. Others, probably the majority, entered prostitution because it was one of the few occupations in which a woman could earn a comfortable living. Working-class women were otherwise largely restricted to employment in the needle trades or domestic service—careers which paid notoriously little. The 1880 census listed 3,081 St. Paul women in selected occupations; two categories—tailors, dress-makers, and milliners and domestic servants—accounted for 77 percent of their jobs. Although there were reports of prostitutes whose parents were respectable or even wealthy, most women

18 Cf. Peter Cominos, “Late Victorian Sexual Respectability and the Social System,” *International Review of Social History*, VIII (1963), 18–48, 216–250; Deborah Gorham, “The ‘Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon’ Re-examined,” *Victorian Studies*, XXI (1978), 353–379; David J. Pivar, *Purity Crusade* (Westport, Conn., 1973); several of the essays in Hartman and Banner, *Clio’s Consciousness*.

19 *Pioneer*, Dec. 31, 1867; Mar. 4; Aug. 30, 1870; Nov. 21, 1871; Aug. 19, 1873; Feb. 25, 1875; *Press*, Aug. 17, 1873; *Pioneer Press*, Oct. 29, 1875; Nov. 1, 1878; Jan. 28–30; Oct. 26, 1879; Jan. 2–4, 26; Oct. 27, 1880; May 9, Aug. 22, 1882. Cf. Barbara J. Berg, *The Remembered Gate* (New York, 1978), 177–182.

chose prostitution because it offered one of the few chances for a more comfortable life.²⁰

One story, well designed to shock the Victorian reader with its theme of vice as a calculated choice, appeared repeatedly in the newspapers. In its simplest version, an adolescent girl enters a brothel. Her relatives enlist the aid of the police, who find her and offer her a chance to return to her family. She refuses, sometimes remaining defiant even when threatened with jail. This story, which appeared in seventeen different cases, caused reporters some discomfort. Faced with a woman's clear, calculated choice of prostitution, the image of female innocence could not be maintained; instead, the young women were characterized in harsh terms: "The girl's action is explicable only on the grounds of precocious perversity. . . ." ²¹

Not every adolescent girl who tried to enter a brothel was admitted; madams discouraged or turned away some young applicants. Moreover, there were other routes into prostitution. Some women were born to the scarlet—daughters of madams or inmates; others may have started out as servants in the brothels. Some older women, who were already married, entered brothels. One woman left her husband of eleven years, a Minneapolis policeman, to enter Sarah Mason's house. Sometimes the husband played a more direct role; one young woman fled Minneapolis, joining her sister in a St. Paul brothel, after her husband tried to force her to prostitute herself. Other reports mentioned women who were married to their pimps, but did not say whether they entered prostitution under their husbands' direction.²²

MOBILITY IN PROSTITUTION Once an individual embarks on a deviant career, new options become apparent: the individual may learn new skills, develop contacts with other deviants, or become aware of additional opportunities within deviance. Different pathways were open to St. Paul's prostitutes. For economic as well

20 U.S. Census Office, Tenth Census, *Report on the Social Statistics of Cities* (Washington, 1887), pt. 2, 901; *Pioneer Press*, May 18; June 13, 1883. On the conditions of domestic servants, see David M. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week* (New York, 1978).

21 *Pioneer*, Jan. 12; Aug. 31; Dec. 31, 1867; Aug. 12, 1869; Jan. 10–11, 1871; Feb. 15, 1874; Mar. 12, 1875; *Pioneer Press*, July 20, 1875; Apr. 19, 1876; Jan. 30; Apr. 22, 1878; Feb. 1, 16, 18; Aug. 14; Sept. 20, 1879; Sept. 4, 1881; Dec. 6, 1882.

22 *Pioneer*, Apr. 22, 1870; Aug. 23, 1872; *Pioneer Press*, Jan. 21, 1878; Jan. 21, 1881; May 18, 1882.

as personal reasons, most prostitutes kept moving. Geographical mobility, from one city to another or between brothels in the same city, was very common. In addition, some women were upwardly mobile within the world of vice, changing status from brothel inmate to madam.²³

Movement to and from St. Paul was commonplace. For some women, moving to the city was part of the process of becoming a prostitute; a typical pattern had a young woman leave her home town, travel to St. Paul and take a low-paying but respectable job as a waitress or domestic, and then enter a brothel after a few months. The news stories about parents hunting for their young daughters spoke of girls from Faribault, Shakopee, Mankato, and other towns in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Others moved to St. Paul after becoming prostitutes; the register of prostitutes kept by the police was unsystematic, but it occasionally listed the places of origin or, less often, the destination of women leaving St. Paul. Although some of these women may have been newcomers to vice, many probably came from brothels elsewhere. Many entries named towns in Minnesota or the surrounding region, but some women were on the move to or from major cities in other states. Only one woman's origin was listed as outside the country—Norway. Sometimes madams deliberately imported inmates; in 1867, Robinson brought four prostitutes from Chicago, although they left St. Paul after a couple of weeks, complaining that the customers were not as wealthy as those in Chicago.²⁴

In most cases, the women probably had their own reasons for moving. Some prostitutes were ordered to leave the city and just as St. Paul authorities drove some women away, others came to the city fleeing officials elsewhere. But not all pressure to move came from the authorities. When fire struck Chicago's vice district, 500 prostitutes fled, some to St. Paul. Although newspapers were more likely to cover these dramatic stories, most women probably moved on simply because the opportunities seemed better elsewhere. The proximity of Minneapolis made it especially

23 There is no general sociological statement about the middle stages of deviant careers. The most detailed study describes compulsive gamblers: Henry R. Lesieur, *The Chase* (Garden City, 1977). On career shifts among prostitutes, see Paul J. Goldstein, *Prostitution and Drugs* (Lexington, Mass., 1979); Heyl, *Madam*.

24 Arrest ledger; *Pioneer*, Sept. 4, 1867.

easy to shift cities. Police raids or rumors of a crackdown occasionally led women to move across the Mississippi into the other jurisdiction.²⁵

Once in St. Paul, brothel inmates often moved from one establishment to another. Reasons for changing houses varied: at least one inmate regularly alternated between two brothels; some left at the madam's orders; on other occasions, madams were angry when inmates left, particularly if the prostitute attracted customers.²⁶

Mobility between cities and within St. Paul gave brothels shifting populations. Madams might remain at one address for years, but most inmates moved on after a few months, particularly if the brothel was not under stable management. Tables 1 and 2, drawn from the arrest ledger's structured records for April to October, 1873, illustrate the high rate of turnover. Brothel A, shown in Table 1, was run by a madam who controlled her house for several years. A total of twelve prostitutes were arrested as inmates of Brothel A, with between one and seven arrests apiece. In addition, one of these women was arrested in another brothel during this period. A second prostitute had an arrest as an independent, i.e., she was not arrested on the same day as the brothel inmates and was presumably working on her own. If we assume that all of its inmates were arrested, Brothel A fluctuated in size from four to seven inmates; counting the madam, between four and six of the women arrested each month had been there the previous month. This reflects a reasonably stable population within the establishment; occupants tended to be in residence from one month to the next.²⁷

By contrast, Table 2 shows the arrest pattern in a second, less stable house. Brothel B had four madams during the seven-month period, with control passing from A who had managed the house for six months, temporarily into the hands of B and C, before D took over for about a year. Six other women were arrested as inmates of Brothel B; none had more than five arrests in the seven months. This establishment had considerable turn-

25 *Press*, Feb. 12; July 19, 22; Aug. 27, 1874; *Pioneer Press*, Apr. 29, 1875; Nov. 8, 1878; Dec. 21, 1878; Mar. 13; May 4, 1879; Oct. 22, 1882; Apr. 17; July 25, 1883. *Pioneer*, July 19, 1870; Apr. 15; Aug. 19, 1873; Feb. 8, 1874.

26 *Pioneer*, Apr. 21; Dec. 31, 1867; May 10, 1870; Nov. 21, 1871; Aug. 23, 1872; *Pioneer Press*, Dec. 12, 1880.

27 *Pioneer*, May 10, 1870; 1870 manuscript census; city directories for 1868, 1870.

Table 1 Arrests within Brothel A, April–October, 1873

WOMAN	DATE OF ARREST							ARRESTS PER PERSON
	APRIL 10	MAY 13	JUNE 12	JULY 11	AUG. 13	SEPT. 10	OCT. 4	
A	K	K	K	K	K	K	K	7
B	V	V	V	V	V	V	D	7
C	V	D		D	D	D	D	6
D	V	V	V			O	O	3
E	V	V	V					3
F	V	V		V				3
G		V	V	V	V	V		5
H	I	V	V			V	V	4
I			V	V				2
J				V				1
K				V				1
L					V	V		2
M						V	D	2
Total	6	8	7	8	5	7	5	46

(Totals include only arrests within Brothel A.)

K = Arrest for "Keeping a House of Ill Fame," fined \$20.

V = Arrest under this madam for "Visiting a House of Ill Fame," fined \$10.

D = Arrest under this madam for "Visiting a House of Ill Fame," dismissed.

O = Arrest under another madam for "Visiting a House of Ill Fame."

I = Arrest for "Visiting a House of Ill Fame" but not listed under a madam (on an odd day of the same month).

over; the number of occupants who remained in the brothel from one month to the next ranged from only one to three. Whereas Brothel A was a relatively large, relatively stable establishment, Brothel B was smaller and considerably less stable.

The cumulative impact of shifting populations, even in the relatively stable brothels, was to repopulate the city's houses every few months. Although the data are limited because brothel inmates were not arrested systematically during most months, comparisons can be drawn between the summers of 1873 and 1874. Table 3 includes all women arrested as madams or brothel inmates during these months. It confirms that madams were more likely to have stable careers than their inmates. Six of the ten women arrested as madams during the summer of 1873 were also arrested in 1874; two had been downwardly mobile and their 1874 arrests

Table 2 Arrests within Brothel B, April–October, 1873

WOMAN	DATE OF ARREST							ARRESTS PER PERSON
	APRIL 9	MAY 13	JUNE 12	JULY 10	AUG. 13	SEPT. 10	OCT. 4	
A	K							1
B		K	V					2
C	V	V	K	K				4
D	V	V			K	K	K	5
E		V	V	V	V		V	5
F		V						1
G			V	V	V	V		4
H	O ₁	O ₁		V	I	O ₂	O ₂	1
I					V	V		2
J						V		1
Total	3	5	4	4	4	4	2	26

(Totals include only arrests within Brothel B.)

K = Arrest for "Keeping a House of Ill Fame," fined \$15.

V = Arrest under this madam for "Visiting a House of Ill Fame," fined \$10.

O = Arrest under another madam for "Visiting a House of Ill Fame" (subscripts denote different brothels).

I = Arrest for "Visiting a House of Ill Fame" but not listed under a madam (on an odd day of the same month).

were for prostitution, but four continued to hold the status of madam. Even discounting the two downwardly mobile madams, the retention rate for madams was 40 percent. In contrast, only twelve of the fifty-two women arrested as prostitutes in the summer of 1873 were arrested one year later—a retention rate of only

Table 3 Prostitutes and Madams Arrested during the Summers of 1873 and 1874

STATUS	TOTAL ARRESTED IN		
	1873	1874	BOTH
Madams	10 ^a	9	4
Prostitutes	53	49 ^a	12
Total	63	58	18 ^a

a Includes two women who were arrested as madams in 1873 and as prostitutes in 1874. Note that they are included in the total for "Both."

23 percent. Further, this table ignores intracity mobility; many of the inmates still in town after a year might have moved to other firms.²⁸

The high turnover among brothel inmates reflected the nature of the market for vice. Nineteenth-century madams argued that customers demanded variety. Symanski accounts for the high turnover rates in Nevada's legal brothels by identifying four functions of turnover: minimizing social friction among the brothel's staff; giving prostitutes a variety of customers and colleagues; supplying customers with a variety of prostitutes; and reducing the risks of a customer becoming emotionally involved with a prostitute. Presumably, most of St. Paul's prostitutes moved on for similar reasons.²⁹

Geographical mobility was a feature of nearly every prostitute's career, but social mobility was less common. The major step within the demimonde was from independent prostitute or brothel inmate to madam, from paying a keeper a portion of one's earnings to collecting from one's "boarders." This pathway was not open to every woman, but a substantial number took it. At least thirteen of the forty madams had spent time as an independent prostitute or brothel inmate in St. Paul and, given the gaps in the inmates' arrest records, the proportion may have been much higher. Some madams may have opened houses without having served as prostitutes, but the evidence is insufficient to establish this. A better index of opportunities for mobility is that only four of the sixty-one brothel inmates arrested from April to October, 1873, went on to manage brothels in St. Paul within the next ten years. Some women may have moved on to run houses in other cities, but former inmates would be most likely to open firms in a city with which they were familiar, particularly in St. Paul, where both the general population and the number of brothels were expanding and the authorities were not repressive. This suggests that perhaps a tenth of all prostitutes were upwardly mobile.

Downward mobility from madam to prostitute was less common, but it did occur. One woman, Frank Livingston, operated a brothel in St. Paul in 1886. She moved to Minneapolis

28 Arrest ledger for June–Sept. of 1873 and 1874. The former period had structured records, the latter categorical records.

29 *Press*, Aug. 26, 1871; Richard Symanski, "Prostitution in Nevada," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, LXIV (1974), 371; Gentry, *Madams*, 146.

for a time, then returned to St. Paul where she had several arrests for visiting a house of ill fame (i.e., she was no longer a madam). At least two other madams stayed in St. Paul and were downwardly mobile, becoming brothel inmates or independent prostitutes.³⁰

LEAVING PROSTITUTION The final stage in the deviant career often is hidden because ex-deviants try to divorce themselves from their past to avoid stigma. Sociological studies of deviant careers emphasize the reforming influence of formal social control programs featuring punishment, treatment, or interaction with other ex-deviants; little is known about individuals who find their own pathways out of deviance. Yet most nineteenth-century prostitutes left vice on their own after a few years; no inmate in St. Paul reported being over thirty. Even if the women lied, they could not hope to remain in prostitution long; each year made them less attractive, less competitive in their marketplace. Finding that the great majority of New York prostitutes were under twenty-five, Sanger concluded that a typical career led the women through a series of increasingly disreputable brothels, until they died within a few years. Nineteenth-century newspapers embellished this theme; the death of a prostitute contrasted nicely with the surface glitter of her life, offering an obvious moral for newspaper readers.³¹

St. Paul's newspapers gave detailed reports of the deaths of several prostitutes. These accounts suggest the array of risks faced by madams and brothel inmates. One inmate died from the complications of an abortion. Fights and other disorders broke out frequently in the brothels. Although there were no reports of women dying in these incidents, some suffered serious injuries. Suicide attempts were common.³²

30 *Pioneer*, July 18, 1868.

31 On the process of leaving deviance, see Lofland, *Deviance and Identity*, 209–295; Robert A. Stebbins, *Commitment to Deviance* (Westport, Conn., 1971); Rubington and Weinberg, *Deviance*, 461–508. There is no sociological study of the process among prostitutes, but see the remarks in Jennifer James et al., *The Politics of Prostitution* (Seattle, 1977; 2nd ed.), 44.

32 *Pioneer*, Aug. 30, 1870; July 28; Nov. 11–12, 1871; *Pioneer Press*, Nov. 13, 1875; Apr. 1, 1876; Apr. 19, 1879; Aug. 26–27; Nov. 9–10, 1881; Feb. 9, 1882; Jan. 7, 1883. The newspapers also occasionally reported suicides or suicide attempts by customers who had fallen in love with brothel inmates: *Pioneer*, Apr. 5; Oct. 1, 1872; *Pioneer Press*, Apr. 3, 1881.

Prostitution was a hard life and many women turned to drink or drugs. Drunkenness was an everyday occurrence in the brothels, contributing to the frequent disorders. The testimony at the Robinson arson trial, which offers a glimpse of a typical evening in a brothel, revealed that several of the inmates had been drinking or were drunk. Many prostitutes preferred using morphine or laudanum; they accounted for most of St. Paul's narcotics users. Alcohol and drugs probably contributed to deaths by natural causes. At least four madams died from disease—three before they were thirty-five. Unfortunately, the newspapers were less likely to cover brothel inmates' or independent prostitutes' deaths from disease. The annual reports of the Magdalen Home, however, describe three deaths of prostitutes, including a former inmate of Henrietta Charles' brothel, who entered the home and found salvation. Obviously, the Home's officers were especially likely to relate tales demonstrating the effectiveness of their good works; there were no reports of deaths of unrepentant women.³³

Deaths from violence and disease are consistent with the Sanger thesis of inevitable decline, but they are not sufficient proof that most prostitutes died after short careers. The newspapers mentioned eleven deaths of madams or prostitutes but, as the women passing through the city's brothels must have numbered several hundred, far more must have died if Sanger were correct. One method of testing his thesis is to compare brothel inmates with independent prostitutes. If Sanger were correct, women worked in better brothels when they entered prostitution, before moving down to "cigar stores" and independent prostitution. As a consequence, inmates should have been younger than other prostitutes. Yet an examination of the arrest ledger's entries in 1873 and 1874 shows no difference in the ages of the two groups. Eleven independent prostitutes were located, with a median age of twenty-one (range eighteen–twenty-seven), compared to twenty-two for brothel inmates. Similarly, five women had one or two arrests for keeping a house of ill fame (suggesting that they operated minor establishments); their median age was twenty-seven (range eighteen–thirty-five)—the same as the forty madams in mid-career. A further challenge to Sanger's thesis

33 *Pioneer*, May 10–13, 1870; *Pioneer Press*, May 27; Sept. 30, 1874; Jan. 24; Oct. 25, 1875; Nov. 14, 1877; Apr. 23, 1878; Oct. 25, 1879; Feb. 19, 1882.

appears in the pattern of inmates' movements between brothels. Although Robinson's house ranked above her rivals' brothels, inmates often worked for another firm before joining Robinson. From April to October, 1873, six inmates moved from rival brothels to Robinson's house; two of the women each worked in two other firms before moving to Eighth Street. Contrary to Sanger's claim, prostitutes did not always move down to shabbier establishments.³⁴

Furthermore, some prostitutes and madams left vice for respectable or quasi-respectable lives. They retired, married, or took up legitimate work. Their numbers are difficult to estimate because they left few records; most tried to conceal the facts of their past to avoid hostility from respectable citizens and, once they were no longer "women of the town," newspapers ignored them.

Retirement on one's savings was an option open to the frugal. Robinson's resources were substantial and Lilly Thompson was said "to have a large number of United States bonds carefully laid away, besides a good sized bank account." If they owned their buildings, madams could turn over the firm to a successor and collect rent; Hutton, Morse, and Oleson all retired in this fashion.³⁵

Marriage probably offered a more common route out of prostitution. Some marriages were unsuccessful; one woman returned to vice and later killed herself. Others married and dropped from sight: "a nolle prosequi was entered, as the defendant had left the business, got married, and was respectable." Newspaper stories hinted that prominent men frequented the brothels and sometimes fell in love with the inmates, but the papers were too discreet to publish the details of a marriage between a respectable man and a madam or prostitute, making it impossible to trace the women once they entered respectable lives.³⁶

Still other women entered respectability through a deliberate

34 Only women who had no arrests on days when brothels were "pulled" were defined as independent prostitutes, i.e., a woman who was arrested on an odd day in one month but had other arrests in later months on days when madams were arrested was assumed to have joined a brothel. Comparison groups are the 40 madams and 89 inmates discussed above.

35 *Pioneer*, Apr. 23, 1870; *Pioneer Press*, Aug. 24, 1876; Feb. 4, 1880; Nov. 10, 1881.

36 *Pioneer*, Jan. 16; Mar. 19–23, 1872.

effort to reform. The Home of the Good Shepard and the Magdalen Home admitted prostitutes as well as other fallen women. The court sentenced some to serve a term in the Home of the Good Shepard; St. Paul lacked other facilities for incarcerating women during much of this period. Other prostitutes entered the homes because they were pregnant, angry with their lovers, or sincerely interested in reform. The homes' regimen consisted largely of religious instruction and training for domestic service. The annual reports of the Magdalen Home contained accounts of successes—prostitutes who found religion and left the home for marriage or respectable employment. Others' experiences ended in failure; they returned to vice. The *Pioneer* mocked one inmate who returned to the brothel: "Black gowns and a quiet respectable life do not possess the charms for the little siren, that pinchbeck jewelry, flashy clothing and panniers do."³⁷

Respectable society's refusal to admit former prostitutes made attempts at reform more difficult. A fallen woman's stigma was not easily shed. After Robinson confined herself to legitimate real estate ventures for four years, a newspaper reminded its readers about her past. Reports from the Magdalen Home speak of more serious setbacks. One woman left the Home to work as a domestic but, when her employers learned about her past, they discharged her: ". . . she left the house at 10 o'clock at night, without shelter or friends, after ten months of faithful service and earnest strivings to do right."³⁸

Nineteenth-century authorities described typical careers in prostitution but, like other popular explanations for deviance, their accounts treated the women as passive—pawns of age, disease, and procurers. In contrast, the sociological concept of the deviant career suggests that prostitutes typically confronted similar problems and chose similar methods of solving them. Although prostitutes' careers did not duplicate one another, the women tended to travel down similar pathways. Madams and brothel inmates actively shaped their own careers: they typically entered vice

37 John E. Forliti, "The First Thirty Years of the Home of the Good Shepard, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1868–1898," unpub. M.A. thesis (St. Paul Seminary, 1962), 52–54; *Pioneer*, Dec. 19, 1868; May 27, 1874; *Pioneer Press*, Oct. 29, 1875; Oct. 20, 1877; Sept. 29, 1878; Apr. 1; Oct. 25, 1879; Oct. 15, 1880.

38 *Pioneer Press*, Oct. 20, 1877; Dec. 21, 1878; Oct. 15, 1880.

because it offered a higher income and more independence than the other jobs open to them; they sought better opportunities by constantly moving from place to place; some inmates became entrepreneurs, opening their own brothels; and, of those whose fates are known, as many returned to respectability through retirement, marriage, or reform as died at an early age.

In seeking to control their own careers, prostitutes, like respectable men and women, were active participants in the fluid urban scene of the nineteenth century. The city's social structure shaped career paths. For St. Paul's prostitutes, the demand for vice, the limited opportunities for respectable work for women, the police department's policy of regulating brothels through regular arrests, and the stigma which followed the women back into respectability provided part of the context within which careers developed. The individual's choices—to enter or leave vice, to move on to another place or up to another status—took this context into account. The same process shaped respectable careers.

Discovering patterns among people's lives is a central task for social history. Studies of occupational mobility or marriage age assume that individuals' life decisions reflect the social structure, that coherent collective patterns emerge from personal assessments of opportunities and risks. The concept of career offers a framework for such analysis. By examining the impact of changing social structure on career contingencies, historians can better understand the lives of ordinary people, both within and outside deviance.