This article examines community perceptions about the legalization of prostitution in a large southern community. The authors utilized a random digit dialing technique to develop a representative sample consisting of 850 respondents.

In addition, the authors interviewed prostitutes to determine their perceptions about how they helped individuals and society. Themes were developed from the personal accounts of the prostitutes and presented to the public to assess their feelings regarding whether or not prostitution is beneficial in certain instances.

One of the major findings of the study was that 32% of the community members interviewed believed that prostitution should be legalized. This finding led the authors to discuss policy implications in the last section of the article.

The research reported in this article was carried out in a large southern city. The purpose was to determine whether or not the community felt that prostitution should be legalized and what benefits, if any, are derived from prostitution. Since the geographic area under study is considered to be in the "bible belt", the authors assumed that the attitudes and beliefs about this subject of study would be firmly established.

To aid the researchers in developing a questionnaire, which was partially designed to examine community perceptions about possible benefits derived from prostitution, the authors interviewed several call girls. Since the authors were engaged in a two year field
research project with "working girls", as the Prostitutes referred to themselves, access was not problematic and their insights were helpful. As one might expect, the prostitutes believed that much of what they do benefits society and felt that prostitution should be legalized.

Although it was not surprising to find that prostitutes believed that their profession should be legalized, it was instructive to note the ways in which they feel they help individuals specifically and society generally. As previously mentioned, these insights aided in the construction of a questionnaire that was then administered to the community. The methodology and results are given after a brief review of the literature.

Literature Review

Since the nineteenth century the public has categorized female prostitutes in basically two ways: those who are forced into it and those who are decadent (Holmes, 1972). Whether or not these assumptions have merit can be debated ad infinitum. However, Widom (1983) points out that understanding the subject has been hampered by "pervasive mythology, research based on faulty methodology, and narrow unidimensional theorizing" (p. 1). Despite a plethora of articles concerning prostitution, the literature indicated that little empirical study of the topic has been reported.

The following section provides the reader with information regarding attitudes about the legalization of prostitution from several perspectives. Attitudes held by police, judges, prosecutors and other members of the criminal justice system are examined in conjunction with the opinions of the general public.

The Public's and Criminal Justice Personnel's Attitudes

In reporting early effects of public opinion on law enforcement, Storch (1977) indicated that although prostitution was in and of itself not an offense in Victorian London, police were sensitive to community pressures as well as the prodding of reform groups. In the twentieth century, with a marked increase in female crime, researchers such as Radelet (1977) have felt that, in general, the increase of arrest rates for women are dependent, in part, on the sex role expectations of the community and changing police practices. Finckenauer (1976), studying 209 police recruits in a New Jersey training academy, found that the subjects responded to what they considered to be the public's expectation of appropriate police