

A heavy toll for the victims of human trafficking

By Adriana Hauser and Mariano Castillo , CNN
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Miami (CNN) -- Their descent into prostitution followed different paths but ended up in the same nightmare: abuse, drugs and fear.

For years, the girls who sell their bodies on certain Miami streetcorners and in hotels were treated as criminals. But new state laws have instructed police and judges to look at the wider context and consider them victims of sex exploitation.

South Florida is the third-busiest area for sex trafficking in the United States, the Department of Justice says, and oftentimes it is children who are drawn into the web without even realizing it.

"You always think that it is not going to happen to you and that that would never happen. It turns around, and it is you, and you don't know what to do," one former prostitute said. "April" agreed to an interview as long as her identity was concealed.

The 18-year-old was in and out of prostitution as an adolescent and eventually jailed.

But the passage of the Safe Harbor Act, which went into effect in January, transformed the way she was treated in the justice system. She was released from jail and given access to treatment for abuse.

The new law is designed to ensure the safety of child victims who have been trafficked for sex, according to the Florida Department of Children and Families.

April says she first ran away from home at age 14 after enduring years of sexual abuse by her grandfather. She met two girls who had jewelry, cars and popularity. April wanted that, too.

They told her, "You know, if you do this and this for us, you can have all this, too."

So she started selling her body.

"As bad as it sounds, it is really easy to just open your legs for five minutes instead of going to work all day and coming home with nothing," April said. "It is very easy, but it is very hurtful on the inside."

Cyber-sex trafficking: A 21st century scourge

A problem in Miami

Miami is a hub for human trafficking because the city attracts travelers from around the world.

"We have a booming tourism industry. We have a very active transient male population here, where guys come and go," said Wifredo Ferrer, U.S. attorney for the Southern District of Florida. "If they are here for sporting events, for example, a lot of these victims are used, so to speak, to

service them.”

His office has indicted and convicted 35 sex traffickers in the past 2½ years.

In Florida, those who solicit sex can get 60 days in jail plus an embarrassing public record; pimps face up to five years in prison or more if minors are involved or for repeat offenders.

What is happening in Florida is just a slice of a criminal racket that is seen at the national and international level.

Opinion: Rescued children shouldn't be in handcuffs

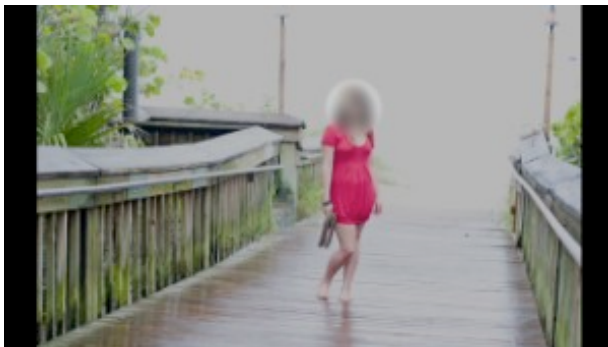
Nationwide, the Department of Justice says, between 15% and 20% of men admit having paid for sex at least once. The estimated revenue of the sex industry worldwide is more than \$32 billion a year, the department says.

There are international sex trafficking cases and forced labor cases but also domestic cases that happen in plain sight.

Traffickers "use coercion, violence, fraud, (and) they threaten them with harm to their families if they do not listen to them," Ferrer said.

In April's case, things got worse after her initial foray into prostitution. At one point, she ended up in a strange house, locked up by her pimp and drugged. She's not sure but thinks she was held there for eight or nine days. The days seemed long because she didn't have anything to occupy her in her room except for the men who paid to be with her.

The drugs that she was introduced to during that period kept her in a haze as she fell deeper into the sex trade.



A tragic past turns into positive action

April was already on probation during her time as a captive inside the house, and when she got out, she was promptly arrested for probation violations.

She would get out of jail, and the cycle would repeat itself. Prostitution, then jail.

Only when the Safe Harbor Act was enacted, April said, did things change.

"It was really awesome, and I got out (of jail), and they just realize that I was a victim and that I should have been treated like a victim first, and they should have investigated me as a victim before they tried to criminalize me," she said.

Exposed at young age

Samantha, another former prostitute, first was exposed to the sex trade before she even knew what it was. This is not her real name, as she requested that her identity be concealed.

She left her home at age 15 with her sister, "being rebels," as she put it.

Her sister began working as an escort, and Samantha paid attention, even though she didn't know the term for what she was seeing.

"I watched how she got herself ready, and she would tell me little things, a few stories. It wasn't glamorous, but I was amazed by the money. She always had a lot of money," Samantha said.

There are cases where girls or boys are kidnapped and forced into the sex trade, but in most cases they are seduced by men who make them feel loved and offer them other stability, said Maria Clara Rodriguez, the outreach and education supervisor at Kristi House, an advocacy center dedicated to fighting child sexual abuse.

"The girls don't see themselves as victims. 'No, this is my boyfriend; we are going to get married; he promised me the world.' They believe that," she said.

Once girls enter the sex industry, their average life expectancy is seven years, with homicide and AIDS being the top killers, Rodriguez said.

Samantha was 17 the first time she was paid for sex. She remembers feeling remorseful about it, but she would get pulled back in.

A friend invited her to a hotel when she was 18.

"She knew what was going to happen, but I didn't," Samantha said. "I didn't realize it until later."

Her friend, it turned out, was a recruiter for a pimp and that day left Samantha alone with a man. Samantha "felt forced" to re-enter the world of prostitution.

The drugs and the alcohol followed, and eventually Samantha herself would recruit other girls for the pimp.

She escaped that life only after she was caught in the act by authorities. Now Samantha is pregnant with a girl and wants to return to school and focus on raising her child.

Her former pimp is the father.

Mexico: 46 women rescued after sex trafficking bust

Sharing stories to empower

Kat Rosenblatt, an anti-human trafficking activist, began sharing her own story five years ago, when she found that children in that world could relate to her and want to get out of it.

"The issue is more serious than anyone can put a number to," Rosenblatt said. "The numbers that we have found are greater than anything that has been reported."

Rosenblatt has done outreach at truck stops, schools, jails and strip clubs, where she has found

many victims of child sex trafficking who are willing to come forward and confront their situation.

Victims of sex trafficking come from all socioeconomic backgrounds, she has found, and of all races and ethnicities.

"There is no discrimination," she said. "Trafficking does not discriminate. It just exploits."

The pattern she has witnessed is one of girls who are vulnerable, because of drugs, alcohol, sexual abuse or domestic violence.

The top method for luring new girls into the sex trade is to use other children to recruit them, Rosenblatt said.

Her own story begins when she was 13 and left home with her mother to escape an abusive father. Mother and daughter moved into a hotel, where Rosenblatt was often alone while her mother worked.

At the hotel's swimming pool, she met an older girl.

"She was 19 and thin and pretty and all I thought I wanted to be," Rosenblatt said.

The girl introduced her to a man who Rosenblatt would later learn was a pimp.

He gave her attention and acted in a way that filled the gap that leaving her father had left.

"Never would I have imagined he was grooming me through this other girl for the life of sexual trafficking," she said.

It wasn't long before the older girl arranged for Rosenblatt to sell her virginity for \$550.

"At 14 years old, I didn't know where to begin," she recalled. "I didn't understand that this was a crime. All I knew is that I wanted to get home and that I was willing to do or say whatever they wanted."

Fighting sex trafficking in hotels, one room at a time

New approaches by police

With Florida's new laws, police take an outreach approach rather than an enforcement approach with juveniles who are selling their bodies.

Miami-Dade police use undercover officers to determine whether a girl is prostituting herself and whether she is a juvenile.

"A lot of juveniles do not identify themselves as victims, and it takes several interviews of going back and getting the trust of the juvenile to let them know that we are there to help them," police Sgt. Nicole Donnelly said.

If the girls are minors, police check to see whether they are reported missing and will try to

in the girls are minors, police check to see whether they are reported missing and will try to reunite them with family.

Ferrer, the U.S. attorney, says his office is pleased with the new approach.

"We are very happy that the state has changed the laws and amended to help these victims come forward and declare themselves as victims without fear of prosecution," he said. "That is very helpful."



Undercover effort against prostitution

CNN accompanied undercover officers in about 10 patrol cars on an operation to dissuade prostitutes from working on the streets and to rescue minors from the sex industry.

While patrolling one of Miami's known prostitution "tracks," officers came across a youth who identified herself as April, like the woman at the beginning of the story. This April told officers she is 24 and has been working the streets since she was 21.

April has two children, ages 2 and 4, and works as a prostitute to pay for their needs and for her education, she said.

Initially, it was a boyfriend who got her involved in prostitution.

She was working as a stripper, she said, when she met the guy, who promised her clients and money. He made it sound easy.

The first time she stood out on the corner, it was against her will, but she liked the guy, said April.

"And then, the money. It gets addicting," she said.

It is a life that she never imagined. She had been in juvenile detention when she was younger and had met girls who had been prostitutes and told herself she would never go down that route.

But after being pulled in that first time by her boyfriend, lack of economic opportunities influenced her to continue.

"I want to stop," she said.

When?

"If I can find a job."

CNN's Adriana Hauser reported from Miami and Mariano Castillo wrote the story in Atlanta.