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Sex trafficking in the U.S. called 'epidemic'

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The Washington Times

10:42 a.m., Saturday, April 23, 2011

When she first showed up at Children of the Night, a privately funded residential facility, "Jane" was angry. Arrested more than 20 times as a prostitute, she had been hardened by the street. She threw things at her counselors. Everyone was terrified by having to deal with her.



"She was just afraid. She was used to being treated so rough," said Lois Lee, the Los Angeles group's founder and president. "She didn't know what to do with someone nice."

Jane, not her real name, was just 14 when her life was taken over in Seattle by a 36-year-old man who said he loved her and promised to give her a better life. It was an easy sell: She was the product of a troubled home, where she was sexually molested by her father's roommate. The abuse began when she was 4 years old. She also was molested at the day care center where she was taken every day.

"My mom was a junkie," Jane, now 17, said in an interview. "I lived with my dad. He was up and down with his moods. He had a marijuana addiction. ... I can't remember much of my childhood. I block it out."

Jane said the molestation made her shy, and when she finally told someone about it — her aunt — her father turned away from her. "I needed his support, but he started to shut down," she said. "I figured he didn't care anymore [about me] and so I didn't care anymore. I just started staying away from my house."

She ended up with a family friend, a woman who forced her to work as a prostitute and sell drugs. That's when she met James Jackson, the man she called Jay, who persuaded her to go with him to Portland, Ore. He promised to show her a better life, but moments after they arrived, Jackson told her she had to "sell her ass," court records show. When she objected, he choked and punched her until she agreed to be a prostitute.

Jane is not the only girl to fall victim to someone she has trusted, but no one really knows how many others there are.

• [Five young women tell how they got caught up in sex trafficking and how they got out.](http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/apr/25/sex-trafficking-survivors/) (<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/apr/25/sex-trafficking-survivors/>)

Sex trafficking is so widespread, said Nathan Wilson, founder of the Project Meridian Foundation in Arlington, which helps police identify traffickers and their victims, that “no country, no race, no religion, no class and no child is immune.” He said 1.6 million children younger than 18 — native and foreign-born — have been caught up in this country’s sex trade.

But, he said, the number of victims is hard to quantify because of the lengths to which traffickers go to keep their crimes hidden.

Analysts say the number of children sexually exploited in the U.S. or at risk of being exploited is between 100,000 and 300,000.

“We know it is a really large number,” said Anne Milgram, a former high-ranking federal prosecutor who tried and oversaw sex trafficking cases. “We know there are a lot of children being victimized. We just can’t tell you what number.”

‘Never-ending stream’

Rachel Lloyd said she has seen a “never-ending stream” of abused girls since she founded Girls Educational and Mentoring Services’ (GEMS) in New York City in 1997, which helps girls and women ages 12 to 24 victimized by sex traffickers.

“We don’t know the number, but we know it is happening. I am working with 300 girls now,” she said, adding that most came from troubled homes where there was either sexual or physical abuse. “For every single woman I have met that was exploited, you could tell why they ran away and why they were easy prey for a pimp. The pimp becomes their strongest connection in life.”

Ms. Lloyd speaks from experience: Sexually abused as a child in England, she ended up in Germany and at 17 was working in a strip club, where she met an American she thought loved her but who “pimped me out.” She said he beat her to keep her working and when she finally escaped, she was “broken emotionally and physically” before putting her life back together.

The Washington, D.C.-based Polaris Project, which advocates stronger trafficking laws and provides help to victims, has said trafficking for sex and forced labor generates billions of dollars in profits by victimizing millions of people globally. It said the average age of entry into the sex trafficking industry in the U.S. is between 12 and 14 years old.

With an estimated annual revenue of \$32 billion, or about \$87 million a day, law enforcement authorities, government agencies and others say human trafficking is tied with arms dealing as the world’s second-largest criminal enterprise, behind only drugs. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the lead agency in trafficking investigations, has estimated that 800,000 people are trafficked into sex and forced-labor situations throughout the world every year.

U.S. Attorney Rod Rosenstein in Maryland said the sex trafficking of minors is a top priority of his office, but bringing offenders to justice has become more difficult in recent years. He said the traffickers’ use of the Internet has made it harder to locate their victims, meaning that many of the girls and young women are no longer on the street or at truck stops where law enforcement can see them.

Mr. Rosenstein helped create the Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force in 2007, which — working

with state, federal and local law enforcement authorities, along with private agencies — seeks to rescue trafficking victims and prosecute offenders.

Since its creation, the task force has sent many traffickers to prison, including Lloyd Mack Royal III, 29, of Gaithersburg, who received a 37-year sentence in July for using what prosecutors said was “physical violence, drugs, guns and lies” to force three girls younger than 18 into prostitution. A federal judge also ordered that after his release, Royal must register as a sex offender.

‘Kiss his pinky ring’

According to court records, Royal forced the girls to engage in sex; threatened to harm them and their families; hit the girls and held one of them at gunpoint; gave them cocaine, PCP, marijuana and alcohol before forcing them to have sex with customers; and, to assert his authority, forced them to “kiss his pinky ring.” The records show he drove the girls to hotels in Gaithersburg and the District to engage in sex.

Royal also gave the girls drugs before forcing them to engage in sex with him to test their “sexual aptitude,” according to the records.

Last month, Derwin S. Smith, 42, of Glen Burnie, Md., pleaded guilty in a task force case to transporting a 12-year-old D.C. girl to Atlantic City, N.J., to work as a prostitute. She was rescued by the task force after she called a relative.

Maryland task force members Amanda Walker-Rodriguez and Rodney Hill, Baltimore County prosecutors, said in an FBI law enforcement bulletin in March that 300,000 American children are at risk of becoming victims of sex traffickers. They said the children often are forced to travel far from home and their lives revolve around “violence, forced drug use and constant threats.” They called sex trafficking in the U.S. a “problem of epidemic proportion.”

“These women and young girls are sold to traffickers, locked up in rooms or brothels for weeks or months, drugged, terrorized, and raped repeatedly,” they said. “The captives are so afraid and intimidated that they rarely speak out against their traffickers, even when faced with an opportunity to escape.”

For many law enforcement officers, the crime can be deeply personal.

“When I heard what happened, I cried,” said Sgt. Chris Burchell, a 28-year veteran of the Bexar County, Texas, Sheriff’s Office when he learned that a 13-year-old girl had been kidnapped, raped and forced to work as a prostitute in a San Antonio crack house. He has since founded a nonprofit group called Texas Anti-Trafficking in Persons, which builds rapid-response coalitions across the state.

In the San Antonio case, Juan Moreno, 45, was convicted in December and sentenced to four life terms. Prosecutors said he charged crack customers \$25 to rape the teenage girl, who had come into the house with a friend looking for drugs and was held for more than a week.

“He threatened to kill her,” said Kirsta Melton, an assistant Bexar County district attorney who prosecuted the case. “She was literally tied to the bed. ... A guy from the neighborhood recognized her and rescued her.” She said the neighbor had refused an offer of sex and “figured out a way to get her out.”

“It never occurred to me how many child sex trafficking cases there were,” said Ms. Melton, now in charge of such prosecutions for the county.

Knows firsthand

Ms. Milgram, the former New Jersey attorney general, also knows firsthand about prosecuting trafficking cases. She tried two of the Justice Department's biggest international sex trafficking cases and one of the first ever under the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000. In that case, two sisters went to prison for 17 years for forcing Mexican girls, some as young as 14, into prostitution. Later, she became the lead prosecutor for sex trafficking cases.

Now teaching a course in human trafficking law at New York University, Ms. Milgram said prosecutors need to bring more cases. The 243 her Justice Department office brought between 2000 and 2009, she said, were "a great start but not enough." She also said local prosecutors were not getting the job done and that while New York City advocacy groups have identified hundreds of sex trafficking victims, New York police have made only a small number of arrests.

"We have to do better," she said.

The issue of sex trafficking has attracted the attention of several elected officials. This month, Oregon passed a bill establishing harsher penalties for sex trafficking, as did Texas. Maryland passed three such bills this month to pay for training in schools, to give law enforcement additional surveillance and wiretapping tools, and to remove prostitution convictions from sex trafficking victims' records.

Similar laws were enacted this month in Minnesota, Nevada, Missouri, Tennessee, New York and Michigan.

State Sen. Renee Unterman, a Republican from Gwinnett County, outside Atlanta, has been pushing for years to strengthen Georgia's sex trafficking laws. She said it has been "very, very tough" to get men to talk about the issue, but added that people are starting to understand that the girls should not be treated as criminals but as victims. She said more services and facilities are needed to treat them, but it is "very costly to take care of these types of victims."

Georgia lawmakers passed a bill last month that toughens penalties for people who traffic children for sex. The bill is awaiting the governor's signature.

'I was not human'

Jane's fall into the world of sex trafficking began in May 2008, just before her 15th birthday. Jackson, her pimp, forced her to work as a prostitute in Portland. When she protested, he beat her. "He made me believe I was not human and I was just for one thing — to make money for him," she said, calling her life a nightmare and suffering bruises and scars from many beatings.

Asked why she didn't leave, she said, "I had nowhere to go. I didn't know anybody. Where was I to go? He threatened to kill me all the time."

On one occasion when he got mad because she had not made enough money, she said, he pushed her down and punched her in the face, saying, "You are going to die tonight." She said she pleaded for her life and promised to do whatever he said: "Just don't kill me. I thought I was going to die."

Of that beating, the FBI later said, “She awoke to find Jackson holding a firearm at her head and swearing on his mother’s life that he would kill her.” The bureau said that “several times a week,” Jackson choked her, pulled her hair, pushed her and struck her with his hands, a belt and a coffee pot, and that he “tried to bite off her finger.”

“I trusted him even after all this stuff. After he abused me, I still thought it was love — I thought that this is how it was supposed to be. ... Most of our arguments were about money,” she said, adding that she had sex with six men a day, sometimes eight or nine. “I was bringing him \$600 a day, but he wanted more.”

Jane got out of that life when she was arrested in October 2008 and an FBI agent asked her whether she wanted to go to Children of the Night, where she now lives. She said it was the first time she was treated like a victim instead of a criminal. “I had the FBI on my side. I could actually tell they were trying to help me,” she said.

She since has earned her high school diploma, and is attending college and getting help at a place where, she said, “people actually care about me.”

But the memories persist: “It still affects me ... in a very, very scary way. I am scared when I walk out the door to walk to the bus to go to school. In class, I am scared to raise my hand. I am scared someone is going to hurt me. I am scared to sit in the front row because there are too many people behind me I can’t see.”

Jackson pleaded guilty in March. Sentencing is scheduled for June 3 in Portland, where he faces a minimum of 15 years in prison. In announcing the plea, U.S. Attorney Dwight C. Holton in Oregon said: “Human slavery is alive and well — as cases like this make all too clear. We have got to put an end to this violent trade in young women and girls.”