

## Who's a victim? More law enforcers treating homegrown prostitution as human sex trafficking

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CICERO, Ill. — Cops in the Chicago area call it a "track," a stretch of street known for its steady sex trade.

Women in tight, scant clothing stand in high heels on street corners along an industrial strip in suburban Cicero. Customers, usually men, slow their cars and roll down a window.

"How much?" they ask.

Some might see these interludes as exchanges between consenting adults, or at the very least, consenting criminals, if the prostitute is, indeed, an adult and seemingly free to come and go as she pleases. They may call it a victimless crime, seeing domestic prostitution as something very different from human sex trafficking — with its cross-border abductions and brutal coercion — a scourge that's come to the forefront of news in recent years.

But are they so different, after all? Increasingly, experts in the field are saying no, and applying the label human trafficking to homegrown prostitution. And now more lawmakers, police and prosecutors across the country are starting to shift their view on this, too. Increasingly, they are focusing on arresting traffickers and customers (pimps and johns, as it were) and on getting help for prostitutes.

"It's almost similar to a domestic violence issue," says Michael Anton, commander of the Cook County Sheriff's vice unit, based in the Chicago. "A lot of (people) say, 'Well, they can just get out.'

"Well, it's not that easy."

As of this year, Illinois became one of several states where prostitution is no longer a felony. It's also one of a growing number where a minor cannot be charged with prostitution, even as a misdemeanor. Meanwhile, prosecutors in Cook County, which includes Chicago, have set up a human trafficking unit and, in recent years, have been using new state laws to put more traffickers in jail.

Cook County Sheriff's police also run regular sting operations to ticket customers who proposition undercover female police officers, or who use popular escort websites. The johns must pay a fine. Police also impound their cars.

"Dear John," read billboards the department has posted near various tracks: "If You're Here To Solicit Sex, It Could Cost You \$2,150. We're Teaming Up To Bust You."

The money funds a rehabilitation program for prostitutes, and Anton says his vice unit officers have never arrested the same customer twice.

"I'm not saying we've stopped it," he says. "They might be going to other areas. But we haven't seen them again."

Elsewhere, a law passed in New York state in 2010 allows women who can prove they were coerced to have prostitution convictions wiped from their records — a move that advocates say allows them more options for housing and employment.

And in California, voters recently passed Proposition 35, which increases prison terms for human traffickers, as well as fines, which also are to be used to pay for services for victims.

It's progress, experts say. Yet a question often persists: Who is really a victim?

"We've got this idea of an ideal victim — someone who is physically locked in a room, chained up . and who makes no money," says Catherine Longkumer, a Chicago attorney who works with victims of trafficking to help them get their lives back together.

Certainly that classic example of the locked-up trafficking victim exists on our shores, too.

But others, she says, are forced into prostitution with more subtle, yet equally paralyzing coercion. While it's not always obvious to the outside world, intimidation and drug addiction become tools for control.

"The reality is that traffickers are very smart," Longkumer says. "You can use a lot of psychological coercion to keep a person bonded, things like threats, or 'If you try to leave, you'll be deported, or your family will be harmed.'"

But the matter of victimhood can get even murkier than that.

Bridget Carr, a trafficking expert and clinical professor of law at the University of Michigan, sees it all the time. She is director of the law school's human trafficking clinic, where students get credit for representing clients, many of them teens and young women who are trying to break free from traffickers and start new lives.

But can people be "victims" if they sell their bodies for sex — and keep some of that money or trade it for drugs? Are they victims if a pimp provides cellphones, buys them clothes, or even cars, or places to stay? In some instances, a prostitute might even have children with her pimp.

"Do we believe that people who make bad choices are victims?" Carr asks.

Often they are, she believes. But sometimes she says the public — and the people who are supposed to enforce these new laws — still have a difficult time seeing prostitutes as victims, even when they're young.

One recent Friday morning in a stuffy, crowded classroom at the Cook County jail in Chicago, a few women shared stories at a meeting of a group called Prostitution Anonymous. If they agree to get help, the women usually are not charged with prostitution in Cook County, though they may face other charges, from drug use to disorderly conduct.

Sheila Johnson, a 33-year-old inmate, told her peers how she had a difficult time breaking free from a boyfriend who was also her pimp. even though she feared him. She was addicted to drugs

— and, she admitted, "the money."

"As a regular person, I wouldn't dare do the things that I did because I was on drugs," Johnson said after the meeting, as tears streamed down her face. "Being sober, I wouldn't DARE prostitute."

Tiffany Schipitz, a 35-year-old inmate, said she eventually escaped from a pimp who threatened to kill her if she didn't work for him.

"I'd never been put out on the street. I'm a white suburbanite girl.. That was unheard of growing up," Schipitz says, describing how she fled the car of the first man who came to pick her up for sex. Eventually, though, she ended up back on the street, high, looking to earn more money for drugs.

"The next thing I know, I'm out on that corner, taking cars — one, two, three — like it's nothing," she says.

These are the sorts of stories Sgt. Craig Friesen, head of the vice unit for the police department in Anaheim, Calif., hears often.

"I never met any prostitute who said, 'This was my ultimate goal in life,'" Friesen says. "They've all been brought into this life by someone. They've been exploited by someone."

When determining who's a victim of trafficking, though, his officers are trained to look for signs of coercion. They might ask a hotel clerk if the prostitute was not allowed to speak, or seemed frightened, when checking into a room. They look for bruises and other signs of abuse and bring in former prostitutes to do the interviews.

"You can dig more deeply and ask specific questions," say Friesen, whose department began working with a local social service agency in 2010 in hopes of getting help for prostitutes and cutting the number of repeat offenders.

Department statistics show that from August 2011 through October 2012, Anaheim police arrested and charged 38 pimps. In that time, the department also got help for 52 women who were determined to be victims of human trafficking — and thus, were not charged. Of those, four are known to have returned to prostitution.

Carr, at the University of Michigan, says she hopes more departments will focus on screening prostitutes, female and male, and training officers to recognize the signs of trafficking.

"Really good screening can't take place 10 minutes after an encounter with a law enforcement officer. The victim needs to be put in a safe place," Carr says.

"There are lots of incentives to not say what's happening to you."

But even when officers determine that help is needed, there's often not much they can do.

"Getting assistance is the weakest link in the chain," says Mark Friesen, a trafficking expert

"Victims assistance is the weakest link in the chain," says Mark Ensalaco, a trafficking expert who's director of the human rights studies program at the University of Dayton.

He recalls one case, in recent years, when a young woman was rescued after an Ohio state trooper stopped a car on the interstate and recognized that she was a victim of sex trafficking. Beyond abuse, those signs can include malnourishment, having few possessions, avoiding eye contact and not having control of personal identification, such as a driver's license or a passport.

This woman, too, was addicted to drugs, Ensalaco says, but never got the help she needed. Eventually, she committed suicide.

Even in states such as Illinois, long-term help — housing, mental health counseling and trauma services that are survivor-led — are lacking, says Lynne Johnson, the policy and advocacy director for the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation.

"We have little pockets of progress," she says, noting that much of it is aimed at minors. In Chicago, for instance, there's now a long-term safe home with space for eight girls that is funded by a private donor. A drop-in center for youth on the city's West Side, funded by federal grants, is open a couple days a week, Johnson says.

The Salvation Army, as it does in other cities, also helps for victims of human trafficking through its STOP-IT initiative. Those services might include giving victims cellphones, clothing and food, items traffickers may have provided to keep them dependent.

The victims also have access to counseling, but aren't required to attend.

"We don't tell them what to do. Our goal is to build independence, both from traffickers — and from us," says Elyse Dobney, STOP-IT's volunteer manager in the Chicago area.

Brenda Myers-Powell — a former prostitute who now works as a peer specialist and counselor at the Cook County jail — agrees that independence should be the goal.

Early in the process, it's good for the public to understand that victims are victims, she says.

"But you can't stay a victim forever," she says. "At some point, you become a survivor."

As a hand-made sign on the jail wall where the Prostitution Anonymous group meets says: "It's never too late to be what you might have been."

On the Internet:

Salvation Army STOP-IT initiative: <http://sa-stopit.org/>