

## Alvarez tells senators of child prostitutes' ordeals

Cook County state's attorney says office treats them as victims, not criminals

1 2 [next](#) | [single page](#)

By Katherine Skiba, Tribune reporter  
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— Some young Chicagoans are practicing "survival sex" and selling their bodies for food, clothing or a safe place to sleep, Cook County State's Attorney [Anita Alvarez](#) told a [U.S. Senate](#) hearing Wednesday.

Alvarez, addressing a subcommittee looking into human trafficking, told of a girl who didn't want her pimp to face charges because he bought her a Subway sandwich whenever she wanted one. Another girl had sex for cash to buy food and clothing, unable to rely on her mother, a drug addict.

The state's attorney said her office rarely charges juveniles arrested for prostitution-related offenses, treating them instead as victims who need "support, services and a safe future."

The hearing was called by Sen. [Dick Durbin](#), D-Ill., chairman of the Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law. He estimated that 100,000-plus U.S. children become sex-trafficking victims every year.

For nearly two hours, the subcommittee heard graphic, sometimes gruesome testimony about kids trading sex in the streets — or up and down interstate highways — and becoming addicted to drugs while veering between feelings of love for and fear of their pimps.

One ex-teen prostitute told of being left for dead, her face broken into pieces, after turning a trick at age 16 in New Jersey.

Alvarez said criminal enterprises "have made a fortune" exploiting women and girls in Cook County. One survey of Chicago-area women in the sex trade found that 73 percent got in the business before age 18, she said.

Alvarez described a criminal case in 2008 in LaSalle County, Ill., in which gang members distributed heroin and crack cocaine — illicit substances prepared in Chicago — using 17- and 18-year-old girls who smuggled the drugs in their bodies. Gang leaders were videotaped having sex with the girls, she said.

What astonished some lawmakers was the scant number of beds in shelters to give victims safety and social services. Sen. [Ron Wyden](#), D-Ore., put the number at 70 nationwide, though another witness said it was fewer than 50.

According to Alvarez, a residential, long-term care facility known as Annie's House hopes to open by this summer in Oak Park for girls as young as 13 and women up to 25.

1 2 [next](#) | [single page](#)