



## I-Team: Child prostitution numbers growing nationwide

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HOUSTON—Last year, a Texas Supreme Court ruled that children under the age of 14 could not be arrested for prostitution, a decision that frustrated law enforcement because jailing a prostitute is often the only way to get her away from her pimp and get her help.

The Department of Justice estimates as many as 800,000 child prostitutes are on the nation's streets. The problem is growing and authorities have no place to house children like Shellyshia Melton.

As she walks down T.C. Jester near Loop 610 North, Melton can't help but remember what she used to endure.

"I used to be out here all the time," said Melton.

Melton was 15 when she ran away from home and started turning tricks. It all began around 2006 after she met Christopher Crawford, who started as her boyfriend and is now in jail on several charges, including assault and prostitution of a minor.

"You're not yourself, you don't even know who you are anymore," said Melton.

Like nearly all underage prostitutes, Melton stayed because she wanted affection from her boyfriend. Investigators call pimps the ultimate con men and Melton was changing before her eyes.

A photo of her at 14 years old shows a fresh-faced girl, her hair tied back, hands

modestly folded. A few years later, her face is distorted, seemingly permanently swollen and her eyes uneven.

"Every time I look in the mirror I see memories of every fight I ever had 'cause there is a story behind each one of those scars," Melton said.

Melton has dozens of scars. That doesn't even count her broken bones.

"[Crawford] hit me in the face with a fire extinguisher that fractured my nose," she said.

The same tactics were used by Bernard Lenard Davis, who's serving 30 years for sex trafficking.

"The streets, the terminology is the track," said Special Agent Pat Fransen, who arrested Davis. "He worked the girls on the track and the internet. He trafficked them all across America."

Fransen is with the Innocence Lost Project Task Force, which focuses on child prostitutes. Davis was based in Houston, advertised online, then drove his prostitutes from state to state.

The internet, Fransen says, has helped fuel the growth of child prostitutes.

"The largest problem with this phenomenon of child prostitution is placement of the kids," said Fransen. "There is nowhere to put them. When we recover them we are very limited on our options."

Melton's options, though, are improving. Her face is different than the one she was born with, but Dr. Canaan Harris attempting to repair her face at St. Joseph's Hospital.

"I grew up in an environment, without being specific about it, that this was not uncommon," said Harris, who's donating his time and skills to help Melton.

It will probably take three surgeries over six months, Harris said.

Melton is also taking GED courses and a non-profit group, Been There Done That, found her an apartment, rent free.

There are longer-term solutions on the horizon.

Half a dozen local efforts are underway to house and treat the growing number of child prostitutes, including Freedom House, slated to open within the year.

If an underage girl is not or cannot be put in jail, she is returned to foster care or her family, which means she will likely run again.

"Statistically, the majority of these girls have been abused at home," said Children at Risk Staff Attorney Jennifer Solak .

Treatment and housing is about \$200 a day. Part is paid for by the state, but most is paid for by private donations.

"It's even more expensive to let them remain on the street or be incarcerated," Solak said. "A lot of these girls are going to have their own children."

They will likely enter the child welfare system, which is not lost on Melton, who is now 19 years old.

"There's no safe houses for most children to go to," she said.

For Melton, her journey continues from a painful education on the streets to one by the books.

In January, dressed in a cap and gown, with her new face taking shape, Melton marched down the aisle. She finally earned her high school diploma, a feat that seemed impossible a year ago.

The teenager is now looking for a job.

"I don't ever want to be afraid like that again, except for God."

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