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## **Underage prostitutes marketed on Internet**

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If she tried hard, 14-year-old Jasmine could have sex with nine men a day. She'd start posting ads online at 2 or 3 p.m., in time to set up appointments with early commuters.

She'd finish by 5:30 a.m., exhausted and disgusted. The money – about \$100 per trick – went to whichever pimp was profiting from her lost innocence.

In September, Sacramento police Sgt. Pam Seyffert and her vice unit picked up Jasmine at a Good Nite Inn near California State University, Sacramento. They'd found her the same way so many men had: on craigslist.

Well-known as a free online community bulletin board, craigslist has gained the dubious distinction of being a popular site for pimps to market young girls to customers, or "johns."

The young prostitutes often are disguised behind photos advertising older women, Seyffert says, and almost always claim to be at least 18.

It is difficult to estimate just how many children are being pimped out, either locally or nationally. In 2003, the FBI reported about 1,400 juveniles were arrested nationally for prostitution.

Most believe the problem is much larger than that number suggests. Estimates vary wildly and are considered, by law enforcement and other experts, to be based on shaky methodology.

What Seyffert knows is this: In Sacramento, the trade in sex with underage girls is thriving. Between 2005 and 2007, her department picked up at least 65 girls, and she feels certain many more are out there.

As prostitution increasingly moves to the Web, she says, the girls are just getting harder for police to find.

For this report, The Bee interviewed three prostitutes, ages 14 and 15, along with experts, police officers and youth advocates. The newspaper is using pseudonyms for the girls because they are minors, and each girl is a victim of a sex crime.

### **In the shadows**

Since August 2006, Seyffert and her team of four plainclothes detectives have teamed with

FBI agent Minerva Shelton to recover underage prostitutes – that is, locate them and place them in another environment. They post pictures of the girls they've found on a wall in their office on Freeport Boulevard. A few smile; most look sullen. One has a black eye.

"We've opened a Pandora's box," Seyffert said.

She worries that the girls face new dangers as teen prostitution moves from the strolls of Stockton and Del Paso boulevards to the Internet. Posting from motel rooms, girls are less visible to the police and community. They can't rely on gut instinct to decide if it's safe to accept a "date."

Frequently, the detectives say, pimps pass girls along a multicounty circuit; their ads go up in Oakland one week, then Sacramento, then Reno. The unit has recovered girls shipped to Sacramento from Minnesota, Texas, Wisconsin and Montana.

Some Web sites, such as myredbook.com, specifically showcase "adult content and sexually explicit material." By contrast, prostitution postings on craigslist are buried in one corner of the site, past the section for furniture and collectibles.

Clicking on the "erotic services" link brings up a disclaimer releasing craigslist from any liability. Another click leads to a list of posts featuring scantily clad young women promising pleasure in exchange for "donations" or "roses." All claim to be at least 18; police say many are not.

Jim Buckmaster, craigslist's CEO, wrote in an e-mail to The Bee that "there is nothing more gut-wrenching to our staff ... than to hear that our site has been abused to exploit a child."

He said craigslist bans illegal activity and urges users to watch for exploited minors. Staff recently implemented new measures, including verifying phone numbers. The changes have reduced the volume of erotic services ads by 80 percent, he said.

Ron Weitzer, a sociology professor at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., who studies the sex industry, says craigslist bears no legal responsibility for the exploitation of minors.

Since 1996, federal law has protected Web sites from such liability; legal experts say sites such as craigslist – which has about 30 million free postings each month – cannot be expected to monitor such a large volume of content.

In March, the Connecticut attorney general became the latest law enforcement official to raise concerns about craigslist and prostitution, demanding the site purge explicit ads. But some advocates think young girls posting on a well-known site, where police can search for them, is better than elsewhere on the Web.

"The illusion that shutting craigslist down would even put a dent in (the problem) is really a false illusion," said David Batstone, co-founder of Not for Sale, a San Francisco anti-trafficking organization.

## **A difficult search**

On a recent evening, Seyffert and her detectives convened at a Starbucks on Alhambra Boulevard. She wore her traditional uniform: jeans and a T-shirt. The men had scruffy beards

and wore beanies and cargo pants. None of the patrons appeared to notice them.

Despite the chill, the group set up shop at a table out back, armed with mochas and Americanos, laptops and cell phones.

Detective Aaron Borg opened a browser window. Click. Click.

"Sassy & Classy w4m - 18," read one ad.

"Come have some fun with Monica tonight - 18," suggested another.

The group studied the photos, trying - unscientifically - to decide if the girls were minors.

Finally, Borg picked up the phone and dialed. "Hey is Monica there?" Using a pseudonym, he requested an hourlong "date." She told him to drive to Madison and Interstate 80, then call her again.

"She sounds young," Borg said, as they walked to their cars.

The detectives say that in the past 18 months, they've changed their attitudes about these girls. They see them as victims now - not lawbreakers. Most girls eventually share that they've been raped or molested by relatives or family friends. Many are runaways or foster children.

Low self-esteem is universal, and pimps prey on it. Many pimps are current or former drug dealers who've discovered that trade in sex is lucrative and often carries lighter penalties. Initially, they shower the girls with everything they crave: new clothing, affection, praise. According to the detectives and the girls, a new pattern of abuse kicks in: beatings, rapes, verbal lacerations.

As such, Seyffert's team has refocused on two missions: Rescue the girls. Nail their pimps.

Arrest statistics bear out the department's change in attitude. In 2005, the team arrested two men for pimping juveniles. In 2006, they arrested one. But in 2007, arrests jumped to 12. In the first four months of this year, they netted seven.

Over the same time period, arrests of juveniles have dropped. In 2005, they arrested 23 girls for prostitution; in 2006 they arrested 24. But they arrested just eight of the 18 underage girls they picked up in 2007.

Detectives now see incarceration as a last resort. They dislike the notion of holding young sex-abuse victims behind bars. Whenever possible, the team tries to send girls to live in foster homes, or with caring relatives.

Unfortunately, Seyffert says, if they pick up a girl in the middle of the night, juvenile hall is often the only safe place to put her.

After racing out of Starbucks the other night, the vice team hit a dead end - Monica wanted to have the "date" in an apartment that the team thought sounded risky.

They pulled into a church parking lot, and sat in their cars scrolling through the craigslist postings. "Just turned 18 and ready for fun," offered one ad. The detectives started calling.

Around 10:15 p.m., one detective arranged a date at a Motel 6 with a blonde who claimed to be 20. He went inside, carrying a wad of money. The others followed soon after.

They found the girl sitting on a neatly made bed.

She was, indeed, 20, but Seyffert felt no less determined to catch her pimp.

"Who do you work for?" she asked.

"Myself," the girl whispered, her lower lip quivering.

"Why are you protecting this guy?" Seyffert pushed.

"I'm not protecting him," the girl sniffled.

Seyffert found a laptop in a desk drawer. She noted some bank deposit slips and receipts for jewelry, and pointed out the girl's tattoo: her pimp's initials.

"You don't need to be doing this anymore," Seyffert said, wiping away the girl's tears.

## **Childhood lost**

What is it that lures a young girl to prostitution?

For Jasmine, it started with a rape when she was 11.

She was living in her grandparents' North Sacramento home, attending elementary school. Her mother was addicted to drugs, she said. Her father was physically abusive.

She said she confided to her mother about the attack, and her mother responded that it was the girl's own fault. Jasmine ran then – first to the streets, then to a friend's house.

There, she met a man who told her all kinds of nice things – compliments she'd rarely heard. He also gave her physical affection. "In other words, sex," she said recently, her big brown eyes unblinking as she sat in Seyffert's office.

Before long, the pimp taught Jasmine to sell her body, sometimes for \$80, sometimes \$300. He kept the profits, buying her cheeseburgers and sexy clothes.

From him – and the other five pimps she worked for between ages 11 and 14 – she learned to keep her eyes trained on the ground, and to shut off her mind when johns climbed on top of her.

She wrote about her experiences:

"We wanted so desperately to believe that the physical, mental and emotional abuse was over. We trained ourselves to believe the lies because we wanted to believe we had found someone."

Jasmine shared this writing sample in January. She was living then with her grandmother and said she wanted to become a pediatrician. By March, detectives had found her back on

craigslist.

Many girls say that, though they feel repulsed by the fast life, its pull is difficult to overcome.

"It feels like once you're in it, you're stuck in it," explained 14-year-old Ashley, a pretty, blue-eyed girl who was sitting in a south Sacramento Starbucks with Shelton on a recent afternoon. Ashley said she was lured into prostitution by a man who saw her walking through her neighborhood in a suburb south of Sacramento. He invited her home and asked if she would like to be paid to perform oral sex.

Ashley was depressed. Her family was broke, and she fought with her mother. At 12, she already was having sex, and said she was intrigued by the prospect of getting paid for it.

"Let me sample what I'm going to be selling," the man told her. Then the spiral began.

She left home to work for the man. Soon after, that first pimp sent her to another, who in turn put her on a plane to a pimp in another state. She arrived in the airport with just the clothes she was wearing – and her first pimp's name, freshly tattooed on her adolescent torso.

One john pulled a gun on her. Another stabbed her in the leg. By 13, she'd had two miscarriages.

But, until officers finally picked her up, she never thought to go home.

"It's so hard to get out of it unless you're pulled out of it," she said.

## **Finding a safe haven**

For Seyffert, Shelton and the detectives, pulling young girls out of prostitution has become a calling.

The real dilemma comes afterward, when they can't figure out how to keep them safe.

Most officers and advocates agree that rescuing child prostitutes will prove successful only if they have a secure, therapeutic place in which to heal.

Tasha Norris, director of the WIND Center for Homeless Teens, said many of the teenagers she works with engage in survival sex. She's often reluctant to ask them what they've been through, since her agency doesn't have the resources necessary to help.

"We're overwhelmed by the trauma," she said.

The other day, Lauren, a 15-year-old with almond eyes, sat in a classroom at Norris' center, and recalled being raped by a relative and a baby sitter at 11, then gang-raped at 13.

For a while, Lauren lived in a car with the mother of a friend – the woman made her work Del Paso Boulevard. She would cry as she walked, thinking she was supposed to be in school. She picked up chlamydia, gonorrhea and genital warts.

Despite the adults who have failed her, she recently placed her faith in a new pimp, who

promised a big house in the suburbs with a Jacuzzi, a pool and a photo shoot.

"He only wants the best for us," she said. "He said, 'You ain't walking no more. That's what the photo shoot is. You're going to be on craigslist.' "

In hopes of breaking the cycle, Seyffert's team has sent a few girls, including Ashley and Jasmine, to a Los Angeles program for child prostitutes called Children of the Night.

They've also begun conversations with people interested in starting a similar program in Sacramento.

Among them is Dellena Hoyer, a 46-year-old former child prostitute who now does marketing for a drug and alcohol mental health treatment provider.

Hoyer recently purchased a three-bedroom home in Elk Grove. Once she completes her foster care certification, she plans to take in adolescent girls.

"The one thing a child needs more than anything is love," she said. "If somebody knows they're loved, that can change the world."

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