

January 7-13

News - Child Prostitution

COVER

Atlanta's slave trade

A young woman's escape from the city's underworld of child prostitution

By Diane Loupe

When three young girls walked over and handed a wad of cash to the driver of the green Cadillac, the 14-year-old girl in the back seat was paying attention.

The cash seemed like a fortune to her: \$789.

Trey, the driver, glanced at Nicole, the girl in the back: "Know how long they've been working?" he asked, gesturing to the girls standing in the parking lot of the auto parts store on Metropolitan Parkway. "Three hours. That's the house note right there," he laughed.

Then he climbed into the back seat and looked Nicole dead in the eyes. Just a day earlier, Trey had picked up Nicole from a gas station near Greenbriar Mall, taken her to a party and let her spend the night at his house. That day, he'd taken her on a shopping trip and outfitted her in low-cut jeans, a tight T-shirt and flashy shoes. The heels were so high, Nicole could barely walk in them.

"I'm not no fool," he told her. "I know you ran away from someone because since I picked you up, you ain't called nobody to tell 'em you're OK. You're young and you have nowhere to go. You're on Metropolitan and you have no money. You're fixing to work."

And that's how Nicole became one of the legions of underage Atlanta girls forced into sex for money. Which should come as no surprise: The appalling fact is that Atlanta does a booming business in selling children's bodies for sex, according to a study commissioned by the Atlanta Women's Agenda, which advises Mayor Shirley Franklin.

"The sexual exploitation of children has become the third-largest moneymaker for organized crime, right behind guns and drugs," reads the report, titled *Hidden in Plain View*, released in



CREDIT: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

Underage, on the streets "Nicole" *on her life as a child prostitute*

- "I wanted to do what I wanted to do. School wasn't in my plan."
 - "I want to go home. That's when he slapped me and told me, 'You're fixing to get out here and work.'"
 - "That was a real dangerous thing to do. I heard a lot of stories of girls who
 - lost their life turning in a pimp."
-

2005. The city's robust adult entertainment industry, which thrives alongside conventions and major sports events, often serves as a front for prostitution.

But child advocates dislike even calling these girls prostitutes.

"Sometimes people think that they've made this choice," says Kaffie McCullough, project director for the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. "If you're 13 and 14 and you've come from a house that was totally dysfunctional and you were forced into prostitution at age 13 or 14, you don't have a lot of resources at your beck and call."

Nicole (her name has been changed for her own protection), whom The Sunday Paper found through a local child advocate, had been in and out of foster care since she was 13. She had stolen money from her mother and run away. She didn't even speak to her own father until she turned 18 not long ago, and she's never met him in person.

Nicole looks back at that not-so-distant past and admits that she could have made the honor roll if she'd tried harder in school. But she finished only the sixth grade before mentally checking out. "I wanted to do what I wanted to do," she says. "School wasn't in my plan."

Recruited in schools and churches

Nicole's striking good looks always attracted the attention of older men. One 28-year-old boyfriend continued to have sex with her even after she admitted she was 14. He invited friends to have sex with her, too.

Girls such as Nicole often engage in "survival sex"—trading sex for food or shelter—says McCullough. That's due in part to the fact that 68 percent of adult prostitutes were sexually abused as children; many, like Nicole, actually became prostitutes as children. Which again puts the very term "prostitution" in question, as it suggests a choice.

"Is that really a free choice?" asks McCullough. "These girls are so damaged they may think sex is the only worth they have. That's where their power is."

Since 2000, Atlanta law enforcement officials and the Atlanta Women's Agenda have worked together to crack down on the sexual exploitation of children, making pimping minors a felony and working hard to clean the streets.

But their success has had unintended consequences. The pimps have gone high-tech, plying their trade via the Internet—and not all of it overtly illegal. After all, escort services are legal in Georgia, and a girl need only be 18 to work for one.

Nicole's background mirrors that of most sexually exploited girls in Atlanta. She's black and poor, and was molested by an adult friend of her mother's. Ninety percent of 2004 cases referred to the Center to End Abuse and Sexual Exploitation, an Atlanta group working with exploited girls, were identified as African-American. Most recruiters are young men, who call themselves the girls' boyfriends. But women and other children are also helping to recruit girls into the trade, according to the Hidden in Plain View report.

These days, exploited girls are increasingly more likely to be white and suburban, thanks to the reach of the Internet, says Lt. Keith Meadows, commander of the Atlanta Police Department's Vice Unit

"We had a 14-year-old from Cumming brought down here by her 34-year-old female pimp," says Lt. Meadows. Both were white, and the girl was a runaway.

Pimps have an "uncanny ability to identify and exploit the needs of girls" who have been sexually

abused, according to Hidden in Plain View. Like Trey, Nicole's driver, they know how to spot runaways—at MARTA stations, bus stops, malls and even a place as seemingly safe as Underground Atlanta.

"Men drive around in their cars stopping and talking to these little girls," says Sgt. D.M. Williams of the Atlanta Police Department, quoted in Hidden in Plain View. Girls are even recruited in schools and churches.

Chat rooms have become a new recruiting tool, as well. Which means Atlanta police investigators spend a lot of time on Web sites like MySpace and Craigslist, where the erotic services advertisements offer girls who are allegedly 18, but who appear to be much younger. "It's hard to find the juveniles hidden among the adults," says Lt. Meadows.

More than 90 Web sites offer escort services in Atlanta, and most of those services are a front for prostitution, he says. "I've seen rates of \$1,500 per hour on down to \$85," he adds, and at those prices, customers expect more than charming conversation.

Most of those who end up exploited start out as runaways. Once on the street, one out of every three teens will be lured toward prostitution within 48 hours of leaving home. Like Trey, pimps groom girls for prostitution by making them feel attractive and special and by spending money on them. To foster dependency, pimps give the girls drugs and always have sex with their recruits. Nicole confesses that she initially trusted Trey because the first night she spent with him, he didn't make a move on her.

"I felt safe," she says.

Nicole's first trick was a "Mexican dude" who paid her \$90 for oral sex in the back of his car. When she returned to Trey's Cadillac, he took the money and searched her thoroughly to make sure she wasn't keeping any cash from him. He even went through her ponytail.

"I want to go home," Nicole remembers saying. "That's when he slapped me and told me, 'You're fixing to get out here and work.'"

For the next month, Nicole was a sexual slave. Although she earned hundreds of dollars a night, her pimp took it all, leaving her penniless. She slept during the day, locked up in her pimp's small house in Atlanta. Burglar bars covered the windows and doors and her pimp kept them locked and did not give her a key. When she awoke, she was expected to clean the pimp's house, cook his food and wash and iron his clothes. He liked a nice crease in his baggy pants.

"In my mind, I had to be out there," says Nicole. "I did what I was told."

In some cases, girls are kidnapped and detained for days and even months, according to Hidden in Plain View. Some are abducted by someone they know and then sold to pimps against their will. FBI debriefings of sex traffickers or pimps indicate that approximately 20 to 40 percent of the victims forced or recruited into prostitution are juveniles.

The reasoning is simple: Pimps like young girls because "they're easy to manipulate, because they are so young," Lt. Meadows says. "They can almost have them believing anything."

Nicole's streetwalking workday started at 10 or 11 p.m. and ended at dawn. She worked every Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Tuesday—and sometimes more. Because she was the youngest one on the street, she tended to get more customers. The johns "looked like normal men," she says, and came in all sizes and races.

She earned \$300 to \$400 per night, working even if it was cold. When she was menstruating, she continued to work, selling oral sex. Nicole always used a condom when turning tricks, but her pimp insisted on having sex with her at home without one. And he discouraged her from talking to

other streetwalkers, only adding to her isolation.

Help and hope

Nicole never even considered turning Trey in.

“That was a real dangerous thing to do,” she says. “I heard a lot of stories of girls who

lost their life turning in a pimp.” That fear greatly hampers his department’s prosecution of pimps, says Lt. Meadows.

As for the girls themselves, police often have no choice but to arrest them and put them in juvenile facilities. There is, in fact, only one facility solely devoted to prostituted girls nearby, Angela’s House, and it has only six beds.

Nicole landed in Angela’s House when her pimp forgot to lock the back door. She waited 20 minutes to be sure he was gone, then grabbed an oversize T-shirt and a pair of his shoes (he’d thrown away her tennis shoes and normal, everyday clothes). She had no money, so she ran to the bus stop and persuaded the bus driver to drop her off at a police station. After spending some time in the Metropolitan Youth Detention Center, she found herself deep in the country at Angela’s House.

But spending time so far away from the city wasn’t to Nicole’s taste.

“I don’t like to be secluded,” she says. So when the directors of the facility brought her and the other girls to the city to see a doctor, she ran away again.

She spent some time on the street, living from man to man. Finally, she wound up on the case list of Antavious Weems, an attorney in the Fulton County Child Advocacy office. He defended Nicole in court when she faced charges of prostitution and convinced her to cooperate with police.

But her case is rare. Those who try to help girls like Nicole admit that very few success stories exist.

“They’re tremendously difficult to treat just because they have so many emotional and physical issues,” says McCullough. “It’s not something that you put a Band-Aid on, or just give them a teddy bear to hold.”

Stigmatized, these girls often become isolated. Some age out of the juvenile justice system and into the adult system. Many don’t ask for help because the only “help” they’ve ever gotten is from their exploiter. Those with supportive families have the best odds for success.

Advocates for these victims plan to ask the state of Georgia to pay for more treatment center space for sexually exploited girls. The Center to End Abuse and Sexual Exploitation is also working with girls inside the court system, the Department of Family and Children’s Services and other agencies, alerting case workers to be aware of girls who might be at risk of sexual exploitation. So far, Fulton County District Attorney Paul Howard has obtained 25 convictions against pimps and has eight more cases pending. The city is also targeting johns, with tougher penalties for soliciting sex.

Nicole is now living in a transitional home, working at a part-time job and hoping to go to vocational school. In some ways, she is fortunate: Despite her time on the street, she did not contract HIV or any other sexually transmitted disease. She had sex for years without contraception and, she says, “I actually thought I couldn’t get pregnant.” She found out differently last year: She now has a baby daughter with a boyfriend who has been in and out of trouble with the law.

She hasn't told her boyfriend or her family the gritty details of her life on the street, but her experience bears itself out in her protective attitude toward her own child.

"I don't trust her around men. I know that my boyfriend would never do anything to hurt my daughter, but I was hurt by a man I thought would never hurt me," she says. "If it was left up to me, she wouldn't be around any men."