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OP-ED Columnist

## Young, Cold and for Sale

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The girl approached me on a desolate stretch of Metropolitan Parkway, about halfway between the airport and the clustered lights of the downtown skyline. The night was unusually cold and she was shivering a little. She told me she was 15, but she didnt look more than 12.

It was bad enough that the child was outside at all at midnight. The fact that she was turning tricks was heartbreaking. I explained that I was a reporter for The New York Times and asked if she would wait while I went to get someone to help her. She looked surprised. I dont need any help, she said.

I had already spent a night traveling with undercover vice cops, and they had pointed out the different neighborhoods in which under-age prostitutes, some as young as 10, roamed the streets.

The girls are exploited in every sense of the word, said Lt. Keith Meadows, who heads Atlantas vice unit. The men are all over them the pimps, the johns. The girls get beaten. Thats common. Theyre introduced to drugs. And the pimps take all the money. Its sad.

I would say that in most cases, the girls never knew their fathers. A lot of them were abused at home and they end up in the clutches of these pimps, putting their trust in someone they shouldnt have.

Atlanta, for a variety of reasons, has become a hub of child prostitution and other forms of commercial sexual exploitation of children. The overall market for sex with kids is booming in many parts of the U.S. In Atlanta a thriving hotel and convention center

with a sophisticated airport and ground transportation network pimps and other lowlifes have tapped into that market bigtime.

These guys are even going into rural Georgia and getting these girls and bringing them into Atlanta, said Alesia Adams, a longtime advocate who has worked with the courts and social service agencies to assist young girls who are lured into the sex trade.

Kaffie McCullough, the project director of a federally sponsored intervention program, said Atlantas juvenile prostitution problem is a lot bigger than anybody would really like to know. The sex trade in Atlanta is a huge, huge, huge industry, she said, and the involvement of kids under 17, which is the age of consent in Georgia, is a substantial part of it.

Stephanie Davis, the policy adviser on womens issues for Mayor Shirley Franklin, agreed. Sex tourism is coming south, she told me. There is advertising that Ive seen on the Internet and other places that actually targets the New York market, urging men to come to Atlanta for the day and fly back home that night.

The risks for pimps and other exploiters of children are low, and the payoff is often enormous. Demand is increasing for younger and younger prostitutes, in part because of the cultural emphasis on the sexual appeal of very young women and girls, and in part because of the widely held belief among johns that there is less risk of contracting a disease from younger prostitutes.

For the girls, life on the street can be hellish. A study released last fall by the Atlanta Womens Agenda, an initiative of the mayors office, noted that the girls are always highly vulnerable to rape, assault, robbery and murder, not to mention arrest and incarceration. Added to that are the psychological risks, which are profound.

The girl who approached me on Metropolitan Parkway had walked alone across an empty, rundown parking lot. The usual practice, I had been told, was for johns in cars to pick up the girls and then drive

behind an abandoned commercial building, of which there were plenty in the area.

The girl said she had a boyfriend, which is the word the girls use for their pimps. When I asked if her boyfriend knew what she was doing, she said, He told me to do it.

She lifted her chin and proudly showed me a cheap necklace she was wearing. He gave me this, she said. He loves me.

I tried to think of a way to bring the girl to the attention of some social service agency, or even the police. But taking her into my rented car, even if she had been willing to go with me, was out of the question. I looked around, hoping to spot a passing patrol car.

The girls bangs fluttered as the wind picked up. She looked cold. I gotta go, she said.