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Milwaukee: A Hub for Child Sex Trafficking

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By AMY KILEY



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The FBI estimates hundreds of thousands of U.S. children are at risk of sexual exploitation.

The Bureau says most adult prostitutes started as minors and that sex trafficking occurs in almost every community. Still, the world of child prostitution is a secretive one. *Lake Effect's* Amy Kiley enters it through the doorway of Milwaukee, a known sex trafficking hub.

Warning: this story may disturb some listeners.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Joseph Wall says all roads of sex trafficking lead to Milwaukee. "A very disproportionate number of pimps in other states and prostitutes in other states come from Milwaukee," Wall says.

Wall prosecutes pimps in Wisconsin and cites factors he believes are behind the city's exportation of sex workers. Census data indicates 40 percent of Milwaukee children live in poverty. It also suggests the city is the nation's most segregated with the lowest rate of black marriage. Wall says that makes Milwaukee a sex trafficking hub for both children and adults.

It also makes Milwaukee a good starting point to examine the misconception that prostitution is a victimless crime. Laura Johnson says she knows the truth. Her pimp lured her off her mother's Milwaukee porch when was 14 years-old.

Johnson explains, "He used to always ride past, so it was like a familiar face. And, he used to wave, and I used to wave, and then one day he stopped. And, the day he stopped, it was like my childhood was just gone. I felt like he could take me away. (cries) I was always looking for an escape."

Johnson, now 28, won't clarify what she was escaping because she doesn't want to hurt her family. But, she spent her childhood in and out of foster homes.

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Since child sex trafficking is secretive, researchers have trouble estimating how many minors grew up like Johnson. The Polaris Project, an advocacy group, suggests at least 100,000 child sex trafficking victims are currently in the U.S. The FBI indicates another 200,000 are at risk of sexual exploitation. Estimates that include adult prostitutes push the low millions, and the FBI indicates most older sex workers began between the ages of 11 and 14. Some come from well-off families in the suburbs; others are like Johnson, living in poverty without a father figure at home. She thinks her story reflects how pimps convince some children to sell their bodies.

"He was taking me like out to eat, picking me up and dropping me off at my aunt's and them's house. He was like my transportation, like, get me away from here. So I looked up to him. I admired him. I loved him," Johnson says.

After that, Johnson's pimp persuaded her to travel with him. He took her to Chicago to get a fake ID and introduced her to his other victims. Johnson thinks the youngest started at about age 11.

After a while, Johnson began dancing at clubs. Eventually, her pimp numbed her with drugs, alcohol and a false sense of family. Then, he sold her 14-year-old body for sex.

"I was ashamed. I was scared. I felt nasty," Johnson says.

She says, for a while, she did like pretending to be someone else. Her pimp would buy her new clothes and shoes with some of the money she earned him. She says the men who hired her included teachers and police officers – and that many liked her undeveloped body.

The group moved from city to city to stay ahead of the police, but the work was dangerous.

"You just living for that moment. You not living like, to, like plan your life. Cause I don't know. After I get up off my back, I don't know what's going to happen. He might try to shoot me," Johnson explains.

In the end the most dangerous man Johnson encountered – was her own pimp. Between dancing, sex and stealing, she earned him about \$3-4,000 a day. But, it wasn't always enough. Johnson describes the night she left the man she says she loved.

"I mean it was like, if I don't have my money, then I'm going to kill you. And he beat me up. He used to slap me and kick me or push me. But how he was just hitting me, punching me and punching me and punching me and punching me, pulling my hair, kicking me over and over and over and over. And I knew, if I stayed in that room, I was going to die."

After her pimp and the other girls fell asleep drunk and high, Johnson snuck out. A man picked her up and offered her a ride to the bus stop and money for a ticket in exchange for sex. By the time Johnson returned to her Milwaukee family, she was 17.

Just as Johnson points out prostitution is not a victimless crime, law enforcement agents are realizing another reality: almost all prostitutes have pimps.

Edgar "Rock" Williams used to be one of them. He was a 16-year-old gang member in Virginia when his cousin taught him how to choose girls with no father figures and manipulate them into sex trafficking. Once recruited, he says, the gang would give girls alcohol and drugs.

"We pumpin' you up, and we getting' your conscience numb to what the hell you



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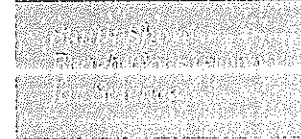
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about to go do. Excuse my language. Because I don't need your conscience kickin' in while you in there layin' on your back having sex for, you know, \$150. I can't have that," Rock explains.

Rock says another way to soften up girls is to let everyone in the gang have sex with them. The exceptions are the "dimes," the younger, prettier girls.

"You can't really just let everybody have sex with her because she gonna get used up, and all of them got an expiration date on them. And, once the breasts go to saggin' and things just not as intact as they were at first, you can't get \$200 or \$150 off of her," Rock says.

For a gang, Rock says, pimping is a source of income and payment. When police confiscate drugs owed to a neighboring gang, sending over girls for sex could pay off the debt cheaply.

Gang-based pimping is also more elaborate. Rock says scouts recruit girls, drivers deliver them, and the muscle beats up clients who don't pay enough. This often occurs in front of new girls to incite fear. Rock says he preferred manipulation over violence, but he explains what other pimps or muscle might do to a 15-year-old girl who gets scared.

"She don't feel like she want to have sex with this guy, or she don't feel like she want to partake in whatever he ask for, and I got the guy standing here. Now you're costing me money. You know, unfortunately, a lot of those type of people turn violent, make her act right. Slapping her, choking her, threatening her," Rock says.

Rock says he wasn't one of "those type of people," but sometimes girls he pimped needed a lesson from the muscle too. "You know, just grab them by the back of the head and, you know, squeeze. You can't see bruises that way. I've seen the muscle plenty of time pull knives on females, stick guns out on the table, and ask her, you know, to reconsider her thoughts."

In recent years, law enforcement has switched the focus from prostitutes to pimps, but the other people involved are the clients, commonly called johns.

"And even though they don't have horns and pitchforks and even though, other than that thing they do of buying sex, seem to have normal lives – they're the people who are fueling the entire business."

That's criminologist Dr. Michael Shively. He's published multiple studies on people who buy sex for the research group Abt Associates. The National Institute on Justice and the Department of Justice are among the funders of his work.

He says his research and that of others show about 15 percent of men nationwide have purchased sex. He cites a study from the Shapiro Group in Atlanta in which about four percent of would-be johns asked for an adolescent prostitute – but about 42 percent accepted one when offered.

"It's not everyone, by any means, but it's certainly not like just a tiny percentage of freaks or pedophiles or some fringe experience. It's, you know, it's more common than left-handedness," Shively says.

So, johns are the biggest piece of the puzzle both economically and numerically. And, they often suffer the fewest repercussions because, Shively says, people tend to think prostitutes are consenting adults. But, Shively adds, shame is a major deterrent for those who would hire prostitutes. For this radio story, not a single john was willing to speak on record.

Now, here's how the story ends for the people involved.

"A real story is impossible without a victim, or a survivor, cause I'm a survivor. I didn't stay in it. I didn't like, die, or I didn't get killed. I am a true survivor," Johnson says.

Prostitutes are disproportionate victims of murder. One mortality study suggests their homicide rate is 204 out of 100,000. Serial killers sometimes target them.

Many prostitutes who live to escape their pimps or gangs succumb to drug addiction.

"You don't want to give them nothing powerful because then they become crack whores, and, once you do that, sheesh, you just decreased the value of their product," Rock says.

Even if girls survive death and drugs, Rock says, they'll forever bear the stigma of their former life. He says men especially don't want to associate with those people.

When Johnson left her pimp, she did begin selling her body for drugs. Then she found out she was pregnant. She prayed to God for help and went to Meta House, the only nonprofit for drug addicts she found that let her keep her baby. Now, she's in a stable relationship, has another child on the way and says she's raising her boys to respect women. Given that the average life expectancy for a prostitute is 34 years old, Johnson's outcome is rare.

As for pimps, Attorney Wall says judges are starting to understand the truth about sex trafficking.

"Prostitution is the second-oldest profession. Pimping is the oldest profession in the world because that prostitute almost always has a pimp behind her," Wall says.

Wall says most pimps exploit minors, and that brings 15 years to life in prison. He says prosecutors go easier on prostitutes to avoid victim blaming. The legal system tries to offer them drug rehabilitation, but its effectiveness is questionable.

Wall says, johns convicted of going after minors get at least a decade in prison. He says, legally, sex with a child is sexual assault. In colloquial terms, it's rape.

Shively's research into johns shows education can help. He says, among graduates of a so-called john school he studied, repeat offenses decreased about 40 percent.

Finally, Rock agrees society needs to change its thinking about prostitution. He says he's never been convicted of pimping because his conscience prompted him to leave the trade. He now advocates for sex trafficking victims by telling his story.

"Anything we can do, we owe them that much, to get out here and put a stop to these sexual predators," Rock says.

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