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Child-Prostitution Cases Reveal Cruel Underworld

By Judy Keen, USA Today

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Norma Hotaling, former prostitute and executive director of The SAGE Project, teaches a class to men who were cited or arrested for soliciting a prostitute, at the Hall of Justice in San Francisco. Hotaling says there's not enough federal funding to help young women who turn prostitution.

CHICAGO — A harrowing picture of the seamy world of child prostitution is emerging in court documents stemming from a nationwide crackdown that has produced 543 arrests and 94 convictions.

Women have told investigators they started working as prostitutes for a suburban Chicago man, Jody Spears, when they were 16 and 17, according to an FBI affidavit filed in U.S. District Court here this week. "So what? Some of my best girls were minors," Spears is quoted saying in the affidavit.

Witnesses, whose names are not used, said Spears took them to New York, Las Vegas and Honolulu.

The case here is part of "Innocence Lost," a project launched in 2003 by the Justice Department. The FBI set up 14 task forces in cities with the most reports of child prostitution; now the task forces are in 27 cities, says Drew Oosterbaan, chief of the Justice Department's child exploitation section.

Legal filings in other "Innocence Lost" cases reveal how pimps recruit and abuse teen prostitutes:

- A Chelsea, Mass., woman, Evelyn Diaz was charged this month with recruiting girls who were 13, 15 and 16 to work as prostitutes. FBI special agent Tamara Harty testified that one girl, 13 at the time, told agents that Diaz took her shopping and to restaurants, then to clients in New York.

- Juan Rico Doss of Reno was convicted last month of recruiting girls 14 and 16 to work as prostitutes in California. They were told to lie about their ages if arrested.
- In Detroit, four Ohio residents were charged in December with holding girls as prisoners and making them call their pimp “Daddy.”
- Indictments of 16 people in Harrisburg, Pa., in December alleged that one 12-year-old girl was forced to have sex to pay for her grandfather’s crack cocaine.

The indictments also said pimps from Toledo, Ohio, bought women from one another and beat them if they didn’t make enough money.

Of more than 100 prostitutes identified in that investigation, more than 20 were underage; the youngest was 13. Many were rotated through rest areas and truck stops from California to Maryland.

The maximum sentence for sex trafficking is life in prison.

“Innocence Lost’ will continue,” Oosterbaan says. “When I see cases cropping up in places like Harrisburg,” he says, “that suggests that the problem is more pervasive than people might think.”

Norma Hotaling, founder of the SAGE Project in San Francisco, which counsels victims, once got calls only from large cities asking for help creating programs for former child prostitutes but now hears from small cities. “It’s like a virus, it doesn’t just go away.” She says there’s too little federal funding to help women make the “long journey” back from prostitution.

Celia Williamson, a professor of social work and prostitution researcher at the University of Toledo, says the crackdown “shocks the community” and prompts discussion about “modern-day slavery.”

In Toledo, she says, 48% of adult street prostitutes started when they were younger than 18. A 50-member roundtable of police, social service workers, health care providers, former prostitutes and others meets there monthly to find better ways to intervene.

Various studies say 300,000-800,000 youths are at risk of sexual exploitation. Hotaling says the crackdown is a first step toward dealing with the problem.

“Everything has been done so wrong in the past,” she says. “We arrest children for their own sexual abuse and their own rape. We don’t provide any services. We let them out (of jail) to their pimps.”

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