

Sex Trafficking Victims Get Care from NYC Prosecutors

Recent arrests put spotlight on local prosecutors' new sex trafficking unit

By [Colleen Long](#)

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A 13-year-old runaway was promised love and support from a man she met on New York City streets. Instead, she was beaten and forced into prostitution for months, her services advertised online.

When her pimp was [arrested this month](#) in Brooklyn, the girl, like many other victims of sex trafficking, was set free, but was fearful, alone and empty-handed.

That's when a special unit within the Brooklyn district attorney's office stepped in. The teen will see a social worker who's part of the sex trafficking unit, and she will be given help finding shelter, schooling and a job, if she needs it. And she was able to go to the unit's "closet," a room where victims can choose from donated toiletries, clothing, shoes and bags.

"We spend a lot of time establishing what she needs," said Assistant District Attorney Lauren Hersh, chief of the office's sex trafficking unit. "We ask 'What can we do for you?'"

The approach, Hersh says, helps girls feel more comfortable talking about their ordeals, and makes it easier for prosecutors to get critical details they need by establishing a relationship with victims, making them more willing to talk and making it easier to put pimps and kidnapers behind bars.

The unit at the district attorney's office was created less than two years ago to combat what District Attorney Charles Hynes called a disturbing, often overlooked crime of sex trafficking in the United States. New York City is thought to play a role in the international trafficking trade, both as an entry point for smugglers from abroad and as a city where victims are put to work.

While other parts of the city have prosecutors who specialize in sex trafficking cases, the Brooklyn unit is unique for its dedicated staff that includes the social worker, and the social services aspect. A boutique hosted a clothing drive, and Avon recently donated bags full of toiletries for victims.

It's difficult to gauge how many victims are out there. Right now, the Brooklyn office is dealing with 31 indicted defendants, and that means multiple victims, including a 12-year-old girl lured into the trade and forced to perform

oral sex and dance at seedy strip clubs for nearly a year. Authorities this week announced they had arrested a man they accused of being her pimp.

The U.S. government investigated more than 2,100 instances of suspected sex trafficking from January 2008 to June 2010, according to the federal statistics, which included exploitation of a child as well as adult prostitution. Hundreds of victims were identified.

But the crime is vastly underreported, and prosecution is slow.

Some victims are scared to come forward and may not know their legal rights. Industries into which people are trafficked are generally marginalized, and in the case of sex, illegal.

"Corruption and exploitation can really flourish because no one is looking," said Sienna Baskin, co-director of the Sex Workers Project, which offers legal help, social services, clothing and support for sex workers. "It's hidden, it's under the radar."

This year in New York City, there have been 35 arrests for sex trafficking, and 30 of those cases are still open, according to statistics from the state Division of Criminal Justice Services. It often takes longer than a year for cases to go to trial.

In the meantime, it's important for victims to know they have avenues for help, with or without the criminal justice system, Baskin said.

"We need to be supporting programs that are not law enforcement-focused. Law enforcement, their goal is to prosecute and convict, they may have a secondary goal of helping victims of crime, but it's not their primary goal."

In New York, sex trafficking was included in the penal code in 2008, and last year, former Gov. David Paterson signed a law allowing women to clear their names after prostitution arrests due to trafficking.

There is no one profile of a trafficked sex worker. The victims aren't necessarily all immigrants, or young, or female. Some are U.S. citizens, some are boys, some adults, all preyed upon by manipulative pimps and lured by promises of fancy clothes, or love and support. They share one major trait, Hersh said: They are vulnerable.

The 12-year-old's story was eventually uncovered by authorities who arrested 29-year-old Gary Whitfield and a suspected accomplice; both are being held on charges of sex trafficking and promoting prostitution. Whitfield's attorney didn't return a call seeking comment.

The 13-year-old had fled a New York group home when she met 21-year-old Kendale Judge. He promised her love and care but instead raped her, beat her and forced her into prostitution, prosecutors said. His Facebook page read: "Pimps don't cry, they slap that bitch and say get out there and grind."

After two months, she escaped and called 911, which led to arrests announced this week of Judge and an alleged accomplice. They were being held on charges including trafficking, rape and kidnapping. Judge's lawyer didn't return a call seeking comment.

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