Sex Trafficking In Chicago: "Victimless" Crimes & Their Victims

By Danny Fenster

Maria is lying on the bed. She's been trying to get up, lifting her head, maybe rolling over onto an elbow, but
she's gotten nowhere. Another half attempt to sit upright. She reaches in her pocket and fumbles with a cell phone. She wants to call her best friend Tammy, but her fingers forget where they're going and never make it past the US Cellular logo above the keypad. "Tammy, you wouldn't believe what I'm about to do," she'd tell her. But she can't get as far as calling her.

The phone is Marco's. He signed the contract and pays the bill, but Maria is the one that uses it. Marco pays for everything, in fact — the apartment on 78th, the food, the designer jeans, the handbags and the dresses. It's been 10 minutes or so since he left the room, but maybe it's been 30 minutes, and maybe it's been an hour. He sat crying with her at the foot of the bed, all the while refilling her cup at every sip. She can't really gauge the time because it was Hennessy in that cup; and she's 15; and she's never drank before. When the cup is finally empty and he's told her how much he loves her and how important this is for them, as tears stream down both their faces, she's already woozy past the point of 12 ounces of Hennessy.

"Would You Ever Have Sex for Money?"

Maria's mom gave birth to her third daughter at 18 in Mexico City. Immediately after, she left for Chicago, where she met Maria's stepdad, leaving Maria feeling rather abandoned, though that wouldn't really be acknowledged until much later. The couple drank too much and he had a cocaine problem; Maria learns all of this much later, after her grandmother set her on a jetliner at 4 years old, bound for Chicago.

Things never went well here. Loneliness festered under the surface while her parents drank and party too much, adding a sense of neglect to abandonment, so it was fairly easy for Marco, on Maria's fifteenth birthday, to convince her to leave home: That place is no good for you, he'd say, come stay with me. He had seen her on the red line when he first tried to pick her up. She was a freshman in high school; he was 23.

She turned 15 on a Tuesday, January of 2007. Her mother got her a gold bracelet for the occasion, the only gift she'd gotten, but didn't have the time to give it herself. Her stepfather gave Maria the bracelet while her mother was down the street fighting with another mother.

On Friday, she packed a backpack full of clothes and headed out the door, presumably to track practice, as per her routine. She told her family she'd see them after school, but rather than going to track practice, a friend drove her to the 55th Red Line stop where Marco picked her up in his car, as they had planned, and they moved her into his place. She wouldn't make it back home until January of 2009.

Marco had been joking about it practically since day one. "Would you ever have sex for money?" he'd ask, but he'd say it with a practiced, pitch-perfect mix of sincerity and jocularity, an impishness that let him play it either way, so when she'd respond with an outright "fuck-no" refusal, he could laugh it off as "just playin," and she could believe him. She carried drugs for him, stuffed it in the backpack she should have been carrying to high school, and they'd ride the bus, always sitting a safe distance from one another, to spots along the South Side's east end where drugs flow freely. They'd get off the bus and rejoin and make the money that paid the bills. But more and more, it wasn't enough. They needed new sources of income.

She watched his lips move; slowly and gradually, imperceptible bits at a time, a sculptor scratching at stone. He had been complaining about the bills for weeks. You need to pay, help out with the rent, pay the phone bill, contribute somehow, he was saying, more and more. Subtly, the formula would alter: a little more sincere, a little less joke. Would you ever have sex for money? Could you ever have sex for money? Will you have sex for money? You could trace in his lips the refrain's change, but only in retrospect. "Baby, we need this. This is the
only way." Have sex for money.

And there he sat with her, at the foot of the bed, crying and caressing. "I don't want you to do this either. But we need it." He poured more Hennessy. He hugged her. He left the room. And some indefinite time later there was the sound of a hand meeting the other side of the door knob, and of the knob's turn; and the door opened, and Maria, still drunk, still unable to get up, rolled her head toward the door to see who it is, and the dark outline of a silhouetted stranger entered the room and shut the door behind him.

**Victims of "Victimless" Crime**

Prostitution is rarely, if ever, a victimless crime, that we can be certain. More certainly, the type of prostitution that occurs in Chicago involving young girls like Maria, and girls across the country, has painfully young victims, and ought rightly to be considered human trafficking.

Conversations about "sex workers" have a way of wandering east, across the Atlantic, where the model is always Amsterdam. It's a decision between two consenting adults, someone will argue, and offer the Netherlands as the beacon of liberty. The more brazen may even offer their own willingness to participate, should the situation allow, should lust, intoxication and capital line up precisely.

But such banter is only theoretical, of course, and theory depends on presuppositions that may or may not hold in practice. The theorists likely have not read the extensive research being done by Jody Raphael, a senior research fellow at DePaul University College of Law who has for years been studying prostitution and the sex trade in Chicago. A 2008 report of hers looked specifically at how young girls enter prostitution in Chicago. The results were shocking.

One third entered the trade between the ages of 12 and 15; average entry occurred at 16, the age by which 56 percent were in. Almost three quarters of the girls entered before their eighteenth birthday. (Another study [PDF] prepared for the state of Illinois puts the average age of entry at 12.)

Girls were recruited by family members — brothers, sisters, parents and foster parents, aunts and uncles — by friends and by girlfriends.

Nearly 30 percent were convinced by boyfriends.

Another report of Raphael's focused on interviews with five former Chicago pimps. One said that any girl that found him attractive was "suspect to get copped. Every woman was a suspect," a potential recruit. They said recruitment "never stopped. It is part of the daily routine."

And another:

I looked for girls who needed things, who would do whatever to come out of the messed up homes and escape from their messed up parents, and I pulled those girls. Women who had been abused by some sucker, who wanted better treatment and nice things.

I would tell them I was an agent. I would say I designed clothes. I even told them I sang with certain bands. It was more challenging when I got girls who were older. I really became more creative the older the girls were.
Many girls in these studies, having fled abusive or negligent homes, found themselves on the street and in search of food, housing, and basic necessities — toiletries and hygienic products — a situation so common in the academic literature it’s been termed "survival sex."

One girl's stepfather "recruited" her into the trade to support the two of them when her mother went to jail. She was 14 at the time.

Another girl's foster father forced her to service his friends. "He would bring his buddies home from work and they would take turns with me. My foster parent taught me what to do. My foster mother didn't say anything. She said I was a whore anyway."

That study included only girls under the age of 18 and working directly under someone serving as a pimp. It included 100 girls found on the streets or in court-mandated anti-prostitution programs following an arrest, and was in that sense not a fully representative sample. But a representative sample in this line of research is remarkably hard to come by. Study briefs almost universally begin with lines like "Little statistical and research information exists about the prostitution of juveniles... However..." and "Due to the hidden nature... it is difficult to study and quantify the problem."

In yet another study Raphael did, for the Center for Impact Research, she found that of the "early starters" (the term given to the one third of the girls that began prostituting between the ages of 12 and 14; the ages of the more than 200 girls interviewed for that study ranged, in total, from 4 to 50 years old), 72 percent had run away from home.

Usually, these studies depend on finding former prostitutes that can reach and speak frankly with the girls still in the trade. This is how Raphael met Brenda Myers-Powell and Stephanie Daniels-Wilson, two survivors of Chicago's sex trade, then recovering. Raphael forged a relationship with the girls and they have been collaborating since.

Brenda and Stephanie met at The Women's Treatment Center when they were both trying to get out of the trade. They found strength in each other and the promise they made to return to the communities where young girls faced the same risks they had and try to make a difference.

**Getting Used to the Lifestyle**

Human adaptability amazes. It's in the refugee's new life, in the amputee's new routine. Within months, it's in Maria steeling herself. First it takes a couple of weeks to happen again. Then, maybe one. By the eighth, she turns tricks a few times a week. Slowly, if still uncomfortable, it's codified, rendered quotidian. She drinks more. She turns the tricks and the Johns pay Marco directly. But that's OK because he feeds her, clothes her, houses her, pays the U.S. Cellular bill. He also burns her regularly with cigarettes and Swisher Sweets, punches her, throws her down flights of stairs. She's still living at Marco's place, occasionally with his brother, who tells her what a loser Marco is. He tells her to leave, that she deserves better. She ignores it. He tells her that Marco has other women, women that work for and sleep with him, just like her. She denies it.

But one day, when Marco has been gone too long, a day or more, she finally calls to see where he is. She wakes him up, she can tell. In the background she hears another girl telling Marco to be quiet, she's trying to sleep. He says he'll be home later. Maria says nothing, and hangs up.
Months later, she finds out about more girls. Marco has a child with one.

In none of this is Maria unique. Raphael's 2008 study found that of the girls participating, 62 percent gave or had taken from them their money by pimps. "He uses most of it to pay bills," one girl told the researchers, the same concession Maria makes. Much later, years even, she'll realize she was making far more than rent, food and a phone bill.

In the study more than half were not allowed to keep any of the money they made. "I give him the money to hold, but it's for both us," said one. Nearly 60 percent were told they were indebted for food, clothing and gifts; 36 percent were threatened of being kicked out of their pimp's home if they did not participate; 61 percent faced the threat of an end to the romantic relationship with their boyfriend-pimp. (64 percent said their pimp was either their boyfriend or "my man." Two-thirds knew of one or more women or girls under their pimp's control, the average number being about three but with a range of up to 15.)

Violence was ubiquitous. Some pimps avoided hitting girls in the face as a way of limiting product damage. "He gave me a black eye once, said he won't hit me on my face again. It messes with his money," said one.

It comes overwhelmingly from the customers, but it comes from all over. According to Raphael's report, "regardless of the type of prostitution activity" — from so-called "high-end" prostitution to strip clubs and street corners — "high percentages of women had experienced violence ... from customers, pimps, intimate partners, managers, police officers and neighbors."

Just over 21 percent of the women in escort and exotic dancing services — the "high end" venues that many people falsely believe is clearly demarcated from street prostitution — reported being raped more than 10 times.

Forty-three percent were made to live in a specific location; 63 percent either could not or were unsure if they could leave without facing physical harm. Sixty-four percent said, at one point or another, they wanted to leave the trade but couldn't. Fear of homelessness, hunger, violent retribution, a lack of knowledge of how to survive on their own, drug addiction, all contributed to keeping girls involved.

Perhaps in this Maria was unique. Her movement was freer, and opened up wide in January of 2007 when Marco got locked up for a parole violation. She got a text message about it from a friend but didn't believe it; it was a scenario that had been the butt of practical jokes before. But when she got home that day, the panic of the other girls and affirmation from Marco's brother let her know it was real.

**Finding a Way Out**

"What am I going to do to live?" Maria asks herself.

Maria and a friend go into business for themselves, setting up an escort service on Craigslist. She meets an affluent doctor, just entering his middle years, who works in the city and lives in the suburbs with his wife and kids, and will pay for just about anything. He is flirtatious the first time they meet, asking for her phone number so he can call or text her later, but Maria doesn't have a phone at the moment because she hasn't been able to pay the bill. The doctor solves that one pretty quickly.

He becomes a regular, a stand-by. She spends a lot of time at his large, suburban home, decorated with pictures of his family, selling infidelities by the portraits of his children.
But she's starting to question it. She's been going with what she knows, but lately wonders how she got here. She never made the decision to do this for a living. She said she wouldn't in those early days with Marco, who is now in prison and with whom she'll never have a relationship again. She talks to her friends about it. Some of them, to varying degrees, have been thinking the same thing.

She keeps working, but enrolls in a G.E.D. program. She makes some friends in the program, young girls her own age, and, though it takes a while and nobody wants to be the first to talk about it, it eventually comes out that many of the girls in the G.E.D. program have been doing the exact same thing as Maria. They all talk about the work, and some talk about getting out. One of the girls tells Maria about a place in Englewood where there are two survivors running a program to help young girls get out of, and prevent younger girls from ever entering, the trade.

In January of 2008 Maria and two friends go to the Dreamcatcher Foundation. She's hesitant — she heard that one of the women works for the police department — but she wants to check things out. This is where Maria meets Brenda and Stephanie, the survivors-cum-researchers, and the Dreamcatcher Foundation is the promise they made to one another in recovery.

For a couple of hours every Tuesday evening the Christian Liberation Center becomes the site of the Dreamcatcher Foundation. It exists on a dark and largely desolate stretch of Ashland near 68th street. In January, all bitter winds and early darkness, the trickle of fluorescence spilling from the front door onto metal security bars and the rusting steel cross outside can be the only light on the block. Inside neighborhood girls 12 to 25 gather — sometimes 10, sometimes 20 — and talk about life. It must retain much of the vibe it began with, when Stephanie started gathering young girls in the area at her South Side apartment to talk once a week.

Maria is stand-offish, unsure of how such a gathering could help her much. She likes that they give young girls toiletries and bus fare, and a free dinner, and definitely takes advantage of that, but she doesn't yet realize what the program really offers — a sense of belonging and a community of people that really do care about and pay attention to her; family dinner every Tuesday night.
In the back of her mind, Maria remains wary of getting too close to anyone associated with the police. Brenda works days for the Cook County Sheriff, going out on prostitution arrests and talking to young girls about alternatives to what they’re doing. Her story is compelling, and she can speak with a startling immediacy to the girls that are in the same position she once was.

The full weight of this truth doesn't hit Maria until one day, at the foundation, Brenda and Stephanie find a gun on her. Trying to get out of prostitution, she had started in business with some friends who sold weapons, and she found it to be a pretty good alternative income. That's when Brenda took her by the arm and into a private room to sit her down and tell her, pointedly, how much Maria's life was worth, and why she cared. She had been there before. In short, she told her story.

**Trading Sex for Candy**

Brenda was born on the West Side of Chicago where, in her infancy, her mother passed away, leaving her to be raised by her grandmother. Her grandmother had fled with five children from a forced marriage to a corn liquor producer and a hard-scrabble life in the Jim Crow South. In Chicago she drank a lot and would occasionally bring home men from bars. Some of them were nicer than others, but the others would offer Brenda, then about 5 or 6 years old, her first introduction to sexual education. Somewhere along the line one of them had offered her candy, and soon she was demanding it. It was a way for Brenda to create some sense of control in an awful, chaotic situation, she would much later reflect.

In between these unwelcome visitors the child would glance at the young girls outside the front window of their home, with the pretty new clothes and shiny gold jewelry, and ask her grandmother what they were doing. In unguarded terms, her grandmother told her. Like what she did, really, but not for candy.

When she was old enough she took to the corner of Rush and Division and began almost immediately making money for herself. But just as quickly she was grabbed by two men in a car and thrown in their trunk, where she was trafficked to Indiana and made to work truck stops for them. Months and months later, when she was able to make an escape, she swore off prostitution. But back in Chicago with nowhere to go and little else to do, she came back. This time she needed protection: a pimp. Thus began a decades-long journey of violence, drug use, rape and arrest. Like for the overwhelming majority of girls out there then and now, there was no Dreamcatcher Foundation to turn to.

It was only when things became so bad, so bloody — after a client dragged her body blocks down a West Side street from the side door of a Mercedes, trying to take his money back — that she finally found the resolve to get out for good.

Hear her tell it:

**What About the Johns?**
Buried deep in one of Raphael's studies is a map of prostitution in Chicago, dotted with high traffic locations. The dots vary in size according to the amount of traffic, with many smaller ones scattered around the South and West Sides. The largest are near an airport, a south suburb and a North Side location at or near where many of degree-holding twenty-somethings live or frequent, some more brazen than others.

A 2007 report conducted by a few local research and advocacy groups (1, 2, 3) studied the men who bought sex in Chicago. Blacks and whites split almost perfectly evenly; 79 percent had attended and/or gained a degree from a college or a masters program. Just under two thirds were in committed relationships. The average age for first time purchases was 21.

Seventy-five percent bought girls with pimps; 57 percent said they believed that the majority of prostitutes experienced sexual abuse as a child; 42 percent said prostitution causes mental and physical damage to women, a handful of whom witnessed directly an "act of extreme violence perpetrated against women in prostitution."

Only 22 percent expressed feelings of shame or guilt.

Raphael's research now is looking further into the men who buy sex — their motivation, mindset, demographics. Brenda and Stephanie are still leading the girls at Dreamcatcher, and paying all the foundation's costs out of pocket.

Maria is still attending the Dreamcatcher sessions every Tuesday night. She got her G.E.D. and now works evenings at a home for the elderly. She wants to be a nurse, and is enrolling in classes to that end.

The girls at Dreamcatcher speak exultantly of the foundation; they speak of second chances and of lives being saved with the emotion of true believers. But while each girl there is a miracle, and the effort is estimable, the program is still a coffee mug under a torn-off roof trying to collect a rainstorm. The flooring underfoot is being destroyed. It's a marvel the determination to keep the effort up isn't drowned out completely by the tide of at-risk girls rushing past. Estimates are between 16,000 and 25,000 prostitutes in Chicago. But, of course, "Due to the hidden nature... it is difficult to study and quantify..."

The ideas on viable alternatives to enforcement (interestingly, in the study where only 22 percent of men felt shame or guilt over buying sex, 87 percent said public exposure — a name or photo in the paper, etc. — would deter them from doing it) and the provisions of social services are out there. Certainly, more funding for the Dreamcatcher Foundation and groups like it is a start. But perhaps the most needed change is more fundamental, in our own perceptions and attitudes and conversations. Like any other service for sale, it is driven by demand.

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Kate / April 6, 2010 12:33 PM

Unfortunately, crimes like this happen all over the world. Sex trafficking is the third most lucrative business
Besides the drug trade and the weapon trade. The numbers of trafficked women rise each year and America is usually a destination for women trafficked out of eastern Europe. Most people live under the assumption that things like sex trafficking don't happen on American soil but they are sorely mistaken. Sex trafficking is a huge business not only in eastern Europe but also in America where young girls are tricked into selling themselves. New legislation has been created to help the victims of sex trafficking and place the offender in jail for longer but nothing will be as effective as awareness.

Dawn E. Worswick / April 6, 2010 1:54 PM

It is of my experience that men simply don't care. After working in the sex industry for over 7 years as a stripper and private dancer, I seen and heard tons from the actual men who buy these services. If a man pays money for services, he expects to get laid unless otherwise noted, such as a lapdance or private show/message with a "happy ending." These men don't care if you have a pimp, have been sexually abused, or are 12 years old - just as long as they get off. Some men actually get off on the "sex slave" syndrome and seek out girls with pimps because this makes them feel more powerful. I get tired of all the regurgitated bullshit these men spew about most women don't have pimps, or they didn't know she was only 11. Some of these men are prolific child rapists trying to assuage their guilt by using a child prostitute instead of their own children or family members. I was sexually abused as a child in a human trafficking sort of way, pornography being made from the abuse - these men don't care! I hate it when a man tried to say different because, those of us that have been abused by these animals know the truth. Just because I chose as an adult not to sleep with my clients for the most part, doesn't mean my eyes were closed to the ugly truth that was right in front of me. Pimps bullshit didn't work on me because I had already been used in that way as a child, but a young girl or boy looking for love in all the wrong places might as well sign the slave certificate because pimps are slick and Johns are great at "Not trying to feel guilty" for raping a child or young woman trapped in the trade.

G / April 7, 2010 2:23 PM

An excellent story.

It's worth mentioning however that the criminalization of many forms of consensual sex work only further empowers those who exploit and abuse these women.

There are tens of thousands of sex workers who not only work to humanize the laws, but also put an end to human trafficking and police abuse. These men and women are not victims, because they refuse to be. I think a follow-up to this story, in which you engage sex workers who chose to enter their profession, would be very eye-opening. The dehumanization of sex workers, both by the callous in the media and those well-meaning folks who see them simply as a mass of victimhood, is a huge issue. I'd encourage you to contact the folks at the Sex Workers Outreach Project of Chicago.

http://redlightchicago.wordpress.com/

Shira / April 7, 2010 6:03 PM

Thank you for this article. I had no idea.

Debbie / April 8, 2010 7:43 AM
The content of the article is good, but, my God, isn't anyone editing these things? The frequent mistakes taint the power of the subject matter.

cripes / May 11, 2010 3:40 AM

As bad as the lives of prostitutes can be, much of what this describes is social exclusion and economic exploitation that is common in many sectors of "criminal" economy, drug dealers thieves, etc. Do you think 12 yr old boys turned out to sell drugs have much more choice than their sisters? Or any better chance of joining the legal economy when they grow older with criminal records?

Don't kid yourself that working in coal mines, maquiladoras or waitressing isn't a brutal dead-end life and there's sexual exploitation there as well.

Locking up the johns, along with the prostitutes is a dead-end prohibitionist approach and will never end prostitution.

In fact, I distribute safe sex kits and talk with prostitutes all the time, taking them to drug rehabs, etc. and over five years I have learned the most likely way any of these girls finally leave the life--is by moving in with straight johns, some of whom they marry, getting off drugs and having a safe place to live.

I can tell you that police harrassment, jailing and drug rehab is a revolving door. The criminalization itself only compounds the damage.

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Revenge of the Second City

**Out of Turn: The Story of the Will Guzzardi Campaign**

By Caroline O'Donovan / 0 Comments

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Classroom Mechanics: Annie

By Micah Uetricht / 1 Comments
Annie appears born to teach. A third grade teacher near Bucktown, she bursts with enthusiasm, gesticulating excitedly when talking about her students or a math curriculum she thinks highly of. The majority of her students are Latino; she is white.... More...

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