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## 9 arrested for sex trafficking ring involving girls as young as 12

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Some of the victims were as young as 12 when they were recruited to work as prostitutes.

Some were forced to sell their bodies for sex on a daily basis — sometimes working shifts as long as 24 hours — and then gave 100 percent of the money they earned to their pimps.

Those that didn't cooperate, were beaten, whipped, threatened with death, branded with tattoos and even stuffed in car trunks for hours as punishments.

Those are some of the details provided by authorities Wednesday in describing what they alleged was a "major" human sex trafficking operation run by Vice Lords and other gang members on the South and West Sides — not overseas. The operation preyed on dozens of girls and young women from Chicago, Indiana and Wisconsin — not foreign countries.

In announcing charges against nine people Wednesday following an 18-month undercover investigation called "Operation Little Girl Lost," authorities described the ring leaders as "vicious predators" who sought girls and young women to work for them on the L and local grocery stores.

"Gang members are not just selling drugs any longer. They're selling children and young women for sex right here in our own backyard," Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez said at a news conference announcing the charges Wednesday.

"These offenders first prey on their vulnerabilities such as poverty, homelessness or addiction and then force them into a violent and demeaning cycle of violence."

She disputed that the girls involved, many of them runaways, worked voluntarily:

"I hardly think that there's an 11 or 12-year-old girl out there who is prostituting herself. Obviously she is being put on the street and sold and someone's making money off of this."

The eight men and one woman were all arrested earlier this week and charged with involuntary sexual servitude of a minor and human trafficking.

At hearings Wednesday, four men involved in the ring were ordered held on bonds ranging from \$400,000 to \$1 million: Sahura "Hollywood" Allen, 26; Jaymes Hart, 25; Travis Creekmore, 31; and his nephew, Jerrell Creekmore, 21.

Others awaiting bond hearings include Arthur Deshazor, 29; Vincent "Snake" Davis, 39; Norman Hicks, 37;

and Lenaris “Lil Daddy” Brown, 25. Deshazor and Davis are cousins, court documents state.

All the men have gang ties from the West and South Sides of Chicago, except Brown, who is from Evergreen Park.

Katrina “Lollypop” Zaia, 24, also of Evergreen Park, was described as the “recruiter, manager, overseer” of the operation by prosecutors. She was in an on and off relationship with Travis Creekmore, prosecutors said.

In bond hearings and in court documents, authorities painted a picture of a complex operation that recruited girls and women between the ages of 12 and 30 years of age to work as prostitutes in homes and hotels around the city.

Prosecutors said sex transactions were largely arranged by the pimps or Zaia via the Internet. The girls also were forced to work the “tracks” — walking the streets, authorities said.

One of the victims, court documents state, was a 13-year-old girl recruited by Deshazor, Zaia and another person in May 2009 while the girl was on a CTA train.

They asked the girl “if she wanted to learn how to make lots of money from ‘dates’ (to engage in sexual acts for money),” the court documents state. “After some seduction and deception on the part of Deshazor and others, [the girl] was eventually recruited and prostituted.”

The girl told authorities she and other girls were taken to hotel rooms paid for by those involved in the prostitution ring. They also provided the girls with marijuana and ecstasy, the documents state.

Another 13-year-old was seen by another prostitute having unprotected sex with as many six men at a time, prosecutors said.

Many of the girls and women in the ring spent time at Travis Creekmore’s former home at 4626 S. Lake Park, the documents state. When Creekmore brought a girlfriend he met in Milwaukee to the three-bedroom apartment, he introduced her to his mother, who also lived there. But when she heard Zaia negotiating prices for sex and creating an Internet ad while she was also at the home, she confronted Creekmore about being a pimp, the documents state. He allegedly became “enraged” and wouldn’t allow her to leave the apartment unescorted.

He then told her she would now be working for him, the documents state. When she told

him she was going back to Wisconsin, Creekmore allegedly knocked her down and took \$400 from her. He later punched her, the documents claim.

The girls or women with children had to pay Creekmore’s mother \$50 to babysit while they worked, prosecutors said. The documents allege Creekmore once became so angry when a victim asked to visit her 2-year-old child that he grinded her face into the carpet until she got a rug burn.

Perry McCain, the maintenance man at the 4626 S. Lake Park building, told the Sun-Times that Creekmore moved into his mother’s apartment 1 1/2 years ago.

“Next thing I know, he’s got about 10 different females going in and out of the building,” said McCain, who said his uncle owns the building. “...There were black, white, Asian all sorts of girls in there.”

Creekmore was a sharp dresser, preferring “shiny black pimp shoes” and slacks and a white T-Shirt, McCain said. The women often wore tight shorts and high-heels.

“He called them bitches and hos and they’d call him daddy,” McCain said.

One of the girls reluctantly let McCain into the apartment one afternoon after he said he was an exterminator. He saw girls sprawled across the living room floor sleeping. Other times Creekmore made “the girls sleep on the porch” — even in November, McCain claimed.

McCain said he saw Creekmore swearing at the girls and said he saw at least one get slapped.

The Creekmores left the building a few months ago when they were threatened with eviction. McCain said he saw marijuana in the apartment and found a bag of 40 condoms and a drug pipe after the family moved out.

Other relatives of Creekmore, who still live in the building, declined to speak with a reporter Wednesday.

Thanks to the new legal provision of the Illinois State Children’s Act, Alvarez said the joint investigation marked the first time law enforcement agencies used state-based wire tapping in a human trafficking investigation. Authorities said thousands of cell and landline calls were wiretapped.

The wiretaps caught a number of conversations in which those charged discuss hurting the victims, officials said. Hart allegedly said in one that any girl that reported him to police would be “kidnapped, murdered and her body dumped in the river.” During another conversation with Creekmore, Hart allegedly said, “You gotta beat on them hos man. ... Just f--- em all up and they gonna stay in love.”

In another call, Hicks said he beat the “dog s---” out of one victim. Hicks once put Creekmore on speaker phone while he whipped a woman with what sounded like a belt, court documents state.

Many of the victims have since received counseling and changed their lives, authorities said. Already, there are many “success stories” and some teenagers have graduated high school, said assistant state’s attorney Lou Longhitano.

Lynne Johnson, policy and advocacy director for the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, which worked with the Cook County state’s attorney’s office to draft the Safe Children Act, described the charges announced Wednesday as “very gratifying.”

Contributing: Stefano Esposito

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