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New task force targets traffickers who force children into the sex trade

FBI, Chicago police join forces to go after pimps

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FBI Special Agent Jonathan Williamson, left, and Chicago Police Sergeant Traci Walker speak to police officers Thursday as part of a joint effort to combat human trafficking by identifying and helping child prostitutes. (Terrence Antonio James, Chicago Tribune / April 26, 2012)

By Annie Sweeney, Chicago Tribune reporter

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Inside the Harrison Police District station, the officers sat in a semicircle to be briefed about the shift ahead in one of Chicago's most beleaguered areas.

But on this recent day, the topic was not the shootings and murders on these West Side streets, but a crime often pushed far back into the shadows — the thousands of young girls and women who are prostituted, pushed into the violence of Chicago's sex trade.

FBI Special Agent Jonathan Williamson and Chicago police Sgt. Traci Walker were there to

announce a new joint effort by the FBI and Chicago police to target child traffickers in the city.

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"Our main goal here is to go after guys pimping out juvenile girls or putting any underage juveniles into the sex trade," Williamson said. "Certainly, most, if not all, (investigations) are going to start with you guys on the street."

Williamson and Walker urged the officers to call with any tips, passed out some recent arrest sheets and headed for the door.

"You looking for any pimps?" an officer quietly asked Walker. She nodded.

"I got one," he said.

Walker took out a scrap of paper and wrote down the name.

The clandestine nature of sex trafficking makes it difficult to know exactly how many young women and girls work in prostitution, said DePaul College of Law researcher Jody Raphael. She has estimated that in Chicago as many as 25,000 are involved in the commercial sex trade, including exotic dancers.

Many who work the street or are sold on the Internet started out in the business in their teens. A 2008 survey of Chicago women working in prostitution who were 25 or younger and under the control of a pimp found that they began at 16 on average.

The younger the girl or woman, Raphael believes, the more likely it is she has a pimp or trafficker, in part because she is often recruited first into a romantic relationship.

Over the past decade, advocates have pushed law enforcement to re-examine how it views the crime of prostitution — especially for the young adults caught in the trade. Today, investigators are going after traffickers on one hand while extending social services to women working in prostitution. Chicago police, Cook County and federal authorities meet monthly to target offenders for the toughest punishment.

Victims' advocate groups are embedded with law enforcement, attending meetings and even raids at times so that they can offer social services to the women and children who are detained.

The effort seems to be paying off, say local and federal law enforcement.

Last year, Cook County charged nine defendants in the Little Girl Lost investigation in which authorities, armed with wiretaps, listened as girls were beaten and sometimes thrown into a car trunk and driven around as a form of punishment. One 13-year-old was sold from one pimp to another for \$100.

Law enforcement in Chicago scored its most significant win last month. A 21/2-year investigation that started in part when a family reported its daughter missing to Chicago police concluded with a stunning 50-year sentence for her pimp. Prosecutors say Datquinn Sawyer spent much of his adult life coercing or forcing young women and girls, some just 12, into having sex with customers numerous times a night. He used extreme violence — both emotional and physical — against his victims.

Six of the young women testified against Sawyer at his trial. At a tense sentencing hearing, three of them endured taunts and insults from Sawyer's family to tell the judge what happened to them.

The Chicago FBI office and Chicago police, stunned by the extent of Sawyer's crimes and number of victims, formed the Crimes Against Children task force.

"It was almost like an onion when you started peeling away," said FBI Special Agent Gregory Wing, who oversees the task force. "When you started interviewing the victims, you got more victims."

The new task force brings federal resources to bear on investigations that typically start with Chicago police intelligence from street sources, beat cops who notice young girls coming in and out of one house, or, as in the case with Sawyer, distraught parents who call police for help with their teen daughter.

Nick Roti, chief of the organized crime division for the Chicago police, said his department and its federal counterparts have perfected joint investigations of high-level gang members and drug dealers. Now they are targeting pimps, and the consequences can be staggering for wrongdoers, he said.

"When you take a girl at that age, you change their life in ways that are very hard to overcome," said Roti, who indicated that Sawyer's hefty sentence drew attention on the



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PHOTO GALLERIES



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street. "Hopefully guys will start staying away from these young girls. I don't have high hopes. They think they are smarter than everybody. But the way we are doing these cases ... if we set our sights on them, they are going to jail."

So far the task force has made six arrests and recovered 14 juveniles who were involved in prostitution.

While advocates credit law enforcement with being more aggressive, they also want to see as much effort put toward arresting and punishing the customers who are driving the sex trade.

"Until we address the demand, we are not getting to the heart of the issue," said Kristin Claes of the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation. "There will always be vulnerable people who pimps and traffickers can sell."

At a known West Side "stroll" on a recent Friday night, the streets seemed quieted by the unseasonably chilly winds. But if you looked hard enough, they were there.

One teen, maybe 15, stood alone in the middle of a short, quiet block, wearing oversize hoop earrings and skinny jeans, the sequin designs on the back pockets sparkling under the street lamp. When a car slowed, her gaze turned upward. A sad-looking young woman tucked her chin into her oversize coat collar as if to keep the wind away. She leaned on a chain-link fence. And waited.

A pair emerged from the dark. She, 15 or 16 with her hair pulled back in a ponytail, walked just a pace behind him. He noticed a car passing twice and leaned with a menacing glare.

"This could be very, very big," said DePaul's Raphael of the new FBI-Chicago police task force. "We don't know enough about the industry. A lot of it is indoors. You really can't get at (pimps) easily."

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