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Broken: How New York Systems Fail Vulnerable Youth and Send Them to Sex Work

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Broken: How New York Systems Fail Vulnerable Youth and Send Them to Sex Work

The first time Alicia had sex for money, she was 15. By then, she said had lived among six different homes, including residential facilities for foster youth and in group housing, which she eventually ran away from. She said that she never felt safe.

For young adults like Alicia, who is not using her real name for personal safety reasons, experts say that remaining in the foster care system until the age of 21 is beneficial because it makes the transition to independent living easier. Advocates encourage young people to take advantage of the resources it offers, including college support, and housing, for as long as they can.

But Alicia, like many other New York youth, decided that “the system” wasn’t for her.

She wandered Queens, where she grew up, and met a man who became her boyfriend, until he began forcing her to have sex for money -- which he pocketed. Alicia -- and other youth like her -- walked right into a pimp’s trap.

“In foster care, everyone was fighting and the staff didn’t give a s**t about us,” she said. “And if I didn’t tolerate abuse at home, I wasn’t going to tolerate it from strangers.”

Alicia is one of many disadvantaged New York youth who have entered into sex-work for a lack of viable alternatives. Between 2000 and 2010, New York City’s shelters took in more than 11,000 victims of human trafficking, according to a 2011 [Hofstra University study](#).

Covenant House, a non-profit organization serving homeless youth in New York, services up to 700 youth annually who have been trafficked, or engaged in “survival sex” -- the exchange of sex for a commodity -- most often shelter, according to a Fordham University and Covenant House-led [study](#). Forty-eight percent of youth surveyed said they had engaged in commercial sex activity because they did not have a place to stay.

The very places where homeless youth seek refuge have become breeding grounds for those who sell sex to bait young people into what they refer to as “the life.” Homeless youth, particularly those who have already been sexually abused, by family members or neighbors, or in the foster care system, make vulnerable prey for exploiters, who loiter outside of shelters, and other organizations providing services to the disadvantaged population. Unwitting youth who are broke and homeless and former foster care kids often turn to pimps for food, clothes, shelter -- and affection.

“We work with young people who get to the age of 19 and who have never been hugged,” said Jayne Bigelsen, director of anti-trafficking initiatives for Covenant House. “They have never felt love and affection before, and they have someone who really knows that,” she said. “These pimps are smart, sophisticated and savvy.”

Under federal law, “sex trafficking” is defined as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act, in which the commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age.”

New York State’s law differs from the federal law in that it fails to distinguish between victims who are under the age of 18, and those who are 18 or older.

In 2008, after anti-sex trafficking advocates lobbied for its passage, the New York State Assembly passed the Safe Harbor for Exploited Youth Act to protect, not prosecute sexually exploited children. It defines children involved in sex-trafficking crimes as victims, not hardened criminals.

The Safe Harbor Act protects children, but the New York State law hamstring prosecutors unless force, fraud or coercion are present, even when the victim is under the age of 18.

New York State’s law on sex-trafficking lags behind most other states. Forty-six states have criminalized the trafficking of children.

Chief of the Manhattan District Attorney’s Human Trafficking Response Unit John Temple said the law is a relic that harks back to the days when a 12-year-old in the prostitution industry was considered a juvenile delinquent. “Now we should be recognizing that they are commercially, sexually exploited children,” he said.

“What hasn’t the media gotten wrong?”

Anti-sex trafficking experts argue that exploitation among homeless youth is a phenomenon that is underreported, and widely misconceived by the public. Many cases are unaccounted for because youth are often reluctant to speak about their experiences.

Popular culture propagates imagery of sex-trafficking victims, shackled in chains and held captive by their exploiters often abroad. “I cannot think of someone I have worked with who has been literally chained up,” said Rachel Lloyd, an anti-trafficking advocate and founder of Girls Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS).

“The media loves that sensational story of an upper middle class person with two parents who are going to come looking for them,” Bigelsen said. “TV shows and media portray human trafficking as someone kidnapped, put in a cage. There is a very specific narrative,” she said.

This false perception sometimes helps fundraising efforts, according to Bigelsen. “It helps get people interested in the issue and it helps bring money in which is nice,” she said. “But people don’t really understand what sex-trafficking is.”

Bigelson described victims as being psychologically, rather than physically bound to their exploiters.

“So yes, human trafficking could be that scenario where someone is just kidnapped and taken, but I have not seen that frequently in my office. Usually, I see much more of the trauma bond, where a trafficker preys off of someone who is really vulnerable,” she said.

Experts say that sex-trafficking is widely misconceived as solely an international problem. “There is this perception that victims of child sex trafficking are not ours, that they are from other countries, that they are young people that we can’t relate to and therefore it’s not our problem,” said Debra Schilling Wolfe, executive director of the Field Center for Children’s Policy, Practice & Research at the University of Pennsylvania.

In the United States, in 2015, 71 percent of youth - 47,500 kids - in the foster care system had been removed from their homes for reasons of abuse - they’d been either physically or sexually abused, or neglected, according to the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect. In New York, 62 percent - or about 18,000 youth, were removed from their homes for the same reasons.

Tumult and turmoil are common in victims’ pasts; 60-90% of sex-trafficking victims have experienced the child welfare system, according to Wolfe.

The foster care system can be a grooming ground for pimps -- who seek out youth who have already been “broken in” to a life of abuse and exploitation. “Pimps are going after vulnerabilities, and homelessness is probably the number one vulnerability,” Bigelsen said.

Sam, who didn’t want her last name used for safety reasons, is among them. She was 11 when she ran away from foster care. She had been placed in a group home after she’d been abused by a string of men, both from within and outside her own family.

She said that she didn’t get along with her peers in the group home, and staff decided to transfer her to a restrictive living facility in upstate New York, where she would have had to remain until she turned 21. Sam ran away from the group home, and said she met a man who offered her a place to stay. She described getting picked up by him as she wandered the streets of Queens, with nowhere to go. “It’s late, do you want a ride?” he asked her. She declined, and then “all of a sudden, I felt my body being lifted in the air and then I was thrown in the car,” she said.

He brought her back to his house, offered her a meal, and explained that he had a stable of women working for him - whose bodies he sold to men looking to purchase sex. He offered Sam a job. She was scared, but determined to remain out of foster care. “If my options are staying with this guy or going to the facility, then I would rather stay with this guy,” she said.

She is aware of the link between the sexual abuse that took place during childhood -- her brother sexually abused her when she was nine, her experience in the foster care system, and her decision to seek refuge with a pimp. "It's not a coincidence that this happened," she said.

She credits her upbringing with having groomed her for "the life." "I had a lot of things that happened to me prior to this guy, and it just so happened that I met this guy instead of a different guy," she said.

Instead of using violence, exploiters employ more discreet techniques to compel girls into submission. "You do better when you use fear and violence, mixed with small acts of kindness. She [the victim] likes the times when he's not violent, and she is rationalizing the times when he is," Lloyd said.

Temple said, "a youth is sitting outside Penn Station and a pimp approaches and says, 'what's a beautiful kid like you doing here?' and buys her a dress and bag of McDonald's, and that's really the most kindness she has ever had."

Sam said Black Entertainment Television and other media were responsible for glamorizing exploitation. "It was just this idea that women were sexualized and had to be sexy. So I thought I was going to work at a club and I was going to be sexy and all these guys were going to want me," she said.

According to the International Labor Organization, a U.N. agency that sets labor standards, human trafficking is the third largest international crime industry, behind only the illegal drugs and arms trafficking industries. Experts are wary even of the highest estimates, and say they inaccurately define the problem. "My personal opinion is none of the numbers encapsulate what is really going on," Temple said.

"There is temptation."

Extricating oneself from "the life" is usually a drawn out process and relapse is common. Even after victims withdraw from their pimps, they face hurdles.

Kenzii Vernon, a 22-year-old survivor of sex-trafficking and a GEMS member, said that she's often tempted by money. She still calls out her rates as if she were speaking to a client. "\$80 for a short stay. \$100 for a half. \$150 for the full hour. Two girl special, \$200," she said.

Vernon compares these rates to salaries offered by traditional employers, with whom she's currently seeking work as a security guard. When asked if her prospects excite her, and if the jobs she's seeking pay well, she tilts her head and says, "pays alright."

She admits that the high rates she commanded selling sex still entice her. "There is temptation," she said.

Ongoing violence and abuse from her pimp, and the death of fellow victims made Sam want to leave trafficking. Eventually she was referred to GEMS, where a caseworker suggested she re-enter the foster care system. "My options were either to stay in the life or go back home and I just couldn't do either," Sam said. "So ACS seemed like a good idea."

She described her re-entry into the foster care system as "horrible, of course," but not as bad as the alternative. "Nothing can be worse than being in 'the life,' getting beat up, getting raped, getting kidnapped, getting your money taken back after you've done something, getting arrested and going to jail," she said.

Michelle Brown, another survivor of sex-trafficking, who is presently homeless, also acknowledges the possibility of a relapse. She now works with children with disabilities, and as a house cleaner. "I literally have to break my neck to make the same amount of money as I would in a couple of hours," she said. "My body hurts, I am tired, I am stressed," she said.

She once went as far as "posting up" on backpage.com, but rebuffed a "John" - a purchaser of sex. "I was about to be over and on my way and then something just told me, don't do it, and I never did it. I never actually went to the date," she said.

Brown says she'd rather not enter back into the life. "I am still working on coming up with an alternative to doing that," she said.

"No young person aspires to grow up and sell sex."

Alicia said that her stepfather sexually abused her at age 12. Exploitation -- to which her own mother turned a blind eye -- became commonplace in her home, she said. When Alicia resolved never to return home, and to leave the child welfare system for good, at age 15, her options were limited. She had no family to rely on, no friends, and nowhere to live, but the streets of New York City.

When her boyfriend invited her to live in his mother's basement with him, it was as much as she said she could have hoped for, even though she described it as a "half-assed place to live." She didn't have keys to the basement apartment, and had to climb through a window that was left open to gain entry. After they started dating, though, she was forced to have sex with one of his friends. "He was like, 'Yo, just do it one time, because we are going to come up off of him,' she said. He said he owned all these houses and cars, and we needed a car," Flowers said. Flowers obliged. "He made me have sex with him, and he got paid off of that. The guy gave my boyfriend the money," she said.

Like Alicia, many victims are youth who have aged out – or dropped out – of the foster care system, without an income, housing, or support system, making them vulnerable to the advances of sophisticated predators who pose as affectionate lovers before revealing themselves to be businessmen who profit from selling others' bodies.

At the GEMS offices on a recent afternoon, Alicia, now 23, nursed her one-year-old son, shifting her suckling child's mouth from one breast to the other. She wore a pair of pinstriped trousers and a dark red sweater with three-quarter length sleeves. Her arms and chest were covered in script tattoos.

She left her boyfriend after he pocketed the money she had made having sex with an older stranger. "I left because I started to feel like it was going to get worse," she said.

Alicia first learned about "the life" when she was in the foster care system, through her peers. "I already knew a little bit about the game, being around the group homes and stuff. "Honestly I was uneasy, but I was like, alright, as long as I don't have to go back home to my mom and her husband, or I don't have to go back into the system, I'll try it out," she said.

Her second pimp never displayed a pretext of affection, she said. "I knew at this point what was going to be expected of me, I just wasn't prepared for the crazy abuse that started right away," she said. "Right away, it was nothing sweet. It wasn't like, ok, we got to go on this date, it was more like guns getting pulled out, like really scaring me into never leaving," Alicia said.

After a series of arrests for prostitution - Alicia estimates she was arrested about 10 times between the ages of 15 and 17 - a judge mandated her to mentoring sessions at Lloyd's organization, GEMS. She remembers not wanting to attend, and only showing up to the required sessions to satisfy her pimp, who insisted that she complete the mandate in order to continue working. "They are fucking up our money," she remembers him telling her. "If you keep getting locked up, you are not going to get money," he said.

Once she started attending mentoring sessions at GEMS, Alicia gave up the life. She's now pursuing a degree in social work. "I know that my story and what I went through is going to help a young girl," she said. She's come to terms with her own past, too. "I appreciate it, and I embrace it because I feel like my story is going to set a bunch of other women free."