

US asks, prostitution or human sex trafficking?

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CICERO, Illinois - Experts in the U.S. increasingly are applying the label "human trafficking" to homegrown prostitution. Lawmakers, police and prosecutors are starting to shift their view on this, too.

They are focusing more on arresting traffickers and customers (or pimps and johns) and on getting help for prostitutes.

"It's almost similar to a domestic violence issue," says Michael Anton, commander of the Cook County Sheriff's vice unit, which includes Chicago. "A lot of (people) say, 'Well, they can just get out.'

"Well, it's not that easy."

As of this year, Illinois became one of several states where prostitution is no longer a felony. It's also one of a growing number where a minor cannot be charged with prostitution. Meanwhile, prosecutors in Cook County have set up a human trafficking unit and use new state laws to put more traffickers in jail.

Elsewhere, a law passed in New York state in 2010 allows women who can prove they were coerced to have prostitution convictions wiped from their records. Advocates say that allows them more options for housing and employment.

And in California, voters recently passed Proposition 35, which increases prison terms for human traffickers.

"We've got this idea of an ideal victim -- someone who is physically locked in a room, chained up . and who makes no money," says Catherine Longkumer, a Chicago attorney who works with victims of trafficking.

But others are forced into prostitution with coercion that is more subtle, yet equally paralyzing, she said. Intimidation and drug addiction become tools for control.

"The reality is that traffickers are very smart," Longkumer says. "You can use a lot of psychological coercion to keep a person bonded, things like threats, or `If you try to leave, you'll be deported, or your family will be harmed.'"

One recent Friday morning at the Cook County jail in Chicago, a few women shared stories at a meeting of a group called Prostitution Anonymous. If they agree to get help, the women usually are not charged with prostitution in Cook County, though they may face other charges, from drug use to disorderly conduct.

Sheila Johnson, a 33-year-old inmate, told her peers how she had a difficult time breaking free from a boyfriend who was also her pimp, even though she feared him. She was addicted to drugs -- and, she admitted, "the money."

"As a regular person, I wouldn't dare do the things that I did because I was on drugs," Johnson said after the meeting, as tears streamed down her face. "Being sober, I wouldn't DARE prostitute."

These are the sorts of stories Sgt. Craig Friesen, head of the vice unit for the police department in Anaheim, California, hears often.

"I never met any prostitute who said, `This was my ultimate goal in life,'" Friesen says. "They've all been brought into this life by someone. They've been exploited by someone."

Department statistics show that from August 2011 through October 2012, Anaheim police arrested and charged 38 pimps. In that time, the department also got help for 52 women who were determined to be victims of human trafficking -- and were not charged. Of those, four are known to have returned to prostitution.

Bridget Carr, a trafficking expert and clinical professor of law at the University of Michigan, says she hopes more departments will focus on screening prostitutes, female and male, and training officers to recognize the signs of trafficking.

But even when officers determine that help is needed, there's often not much they can do.

"Victims assistance is the weakest link in the chain," says Mark Ensalaco, a trafficking expert who's director of the human rights studies program at the University of Dayton.

Even in states such as Illinois, long-term help -- housing, mental health counseling and trauma services that are survivor-led -- are lacking, says Lynne Johnson, the policy and advocacy director for the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation.

The Salvation Army, as it does in other cities, also helps for victims of human trafficking through its STOP-IT initiative. Those services might include giving victims cellphones, clothing and food, items traffickers may have provided to keep them dependent.

Brenda Myers-Powell -- a former prostitute who now works as a peer specialist and counselor at the Cook County jail -- says independence should be the goal.

"You can't stay a victim forever," she says. "At some point, you become a survivor."

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