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Teen suicide spurs war on child prostitution

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By Mickey Goodman

ATLANTA (Reuters) - At the age of 15, Samantha Walker was lured into prostitution on the streets of Toledo, Ohio, then taken against her will to Atlanta.

What makes her story different from thousands of others is that she testified against one of the men who paid for sex with her, helping to send him to prison.

But just weeks after the trial she took an overdose of drugs she was taking for depression and died at the age of 18.

More than 300,000 children are being sexually exploited in the United States, according to a study by the University of Pennsylvania.

Many of them end up in Atlanta, which authorities say has become a hub for prostitution in part because its busy airport makes it a destination for men seeking sex.

Where in the past pimps advertised the girls who worked for them on the walls of men's rest rooms or on street corners, these days they use online bulletin boards like craigslist (<http://www.craigslist.org/>).

Customers set up liaisons after seeing girls on the sites, and then pay the girl or the pimp directly on the street, according to the Atlanta Police Vice Department.

Solomon Gort, a married man with two children, a white-collar job and a home in Atlanta's suburbs, offered Walker's pimp \$50 for oral sex with her in June 2004.

He forced her to have intercourse at a highway rest stop, then took her against her will to a motel, from which she escaped and called the police. Gort was convicted of false imprisonment and soliciting sex with a minor and sentenced to six years in prison.

NO SPACE AT SHELTER

After the trial, Walker wanted to stay in Atlanta, but returned to Toledo partly because the only facility in the southeastern United States for former child prostitutes, Angela's House outside Atlanta, had no space.

Confronting a hometown where she first worked as a prostitute, she committed suicide.

"The courts don't have the resources for kids like Samantha," said Debra Espy, the deputy district attorney who worked with Walker. "It's a national disgrace."

Walker is just one of many who have been lured into prostitution by pimps who exploit the fears and low self esteem of young girls who often come from

dysfunctional families.

Nykita Hurt, a middle-class professional with a gentle voice, is still in turmoil after her daughter, Brandi, ran away from home in 1998 at the age of 14 to become a prostitute in Atlanta.

"I spend a lot of sleepless nights and a lot of unproductive days," Hurt said. "You just think, 'Where is my child?'"

Brandi grew up with a slight disability and low self-esteem. In 1998, she met a man on a telephone chat line. One day, when Hurt was at work, he came to their house and had sex with Brandi.

"Shortly after that, whoever this guy was pretty much talked her into it. He saw how immature she was and that there was conflict between us and he took advantage of that," Hurt said.

Now Brandi only calls when she needs money.

NOT IN MY CITY

For law enforcement authorities in Atlanta, Walker's courage and suicide have made her a heroine, and they are using her story to spur new efforts to crack down on child predators.

Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin is leading a drive against child prostitution under the banner of a "No more, not in my city."

Prosecutors have started to bring felony rather than misdemeanor charges against men who use child prostitutes.

"When a child is involved, we can no longer politely call these men 'johns.' They are panderers, child molesters and felons," said Paul Howard, district attorney of Fulton County, which includes downtown Atlanta.

Franklin wrote to craigslist founder Craig Newmark and Chief Executive Jim Buckmaster in August, urging them to remove postings of women engaged in activity that broke Georgia law and called on other mayors to file similar protests.

Buckmaster said the company "shares Mayor Franklin's concerns and are evaluating her suggestions."

The site warns its users that it prohibits illegal activity but he added: "We do not monitor the content of more than 25 million free postings craigslist users self-publish each month."

Since Walker's death, Georgia's human resources department has announced it will open a 52-bed center for sexually-exploited girls in Dekalb County, east of Atlanta, this year to help girls emerging from prostitution.

Facing such problems such as sexually-transmitted diseases, drug and alcohol addiction, low self esteem and lack of education, few former child prostitutes lead productive lives and many go back on the streets or wind up in prison.

One exception is "Anna" who testified against her pimp Andrew Moore in Atlanta in 2002 in a federal trial.

Anna, whose real name has not been released, told a court another pimp sold her to Moore when she was 12 years old. He tied her spread-eagled to a bed in his home for two weeks before she was rescued by an aunt.

Moore was convicted under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt

Organizations Act and sentenced to 40 years in prison.

For Espy, the deputy district attorney who worked with Walker and grew to care about her, the focus is now on trying to get other girls off the streets.

"She died a sudden death. Other vulnerable young girls are dying inch by inch," Espy said.

(Editing by Matthew Bigg and Eddie Evans)

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