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By Verna Gates and Mickey Goodman

ATLANTA, April 4 (Reuters) - In a sleazy hotel room, "Brittany," then aged 16 and drugged into oblivion, waited for the men to arrive. Her pimps sent as many as 17 clients an evening through the door.

A "john" could even pre-book the pretty young blonde for \$1,000 a night, sometimes flying in and then flying out from a nearby airport.

None of this happened in Bangkok or Costa Rica, places that have become synonymous with sex tourism and underage sex.

It took place in Atlanta, the buckle of the U.S. Bible Belt, where the world's busiest passenger airport provides a cheaper, more convenient and safer underage sex destination for men seeking girls as young as 10.

"Men fly in, are met by pimps, have sex with a 14-year-old for lunch, and get home in time for dinner with the family," said Sanford Jones, the chief juvenile judge of Fulton County, Georgia.

A new federal law passed in 2003 ensures that American sex tourists landing on foreign soil and hiring prostitutes under the age of 18 can get 30 years in prison.

But in Georgia, punishment for pimping or soliciting sex with a girl under 18 is only five to 20 years, according to Deborah Espy, the Deputy District Attorney of Fulton County.

"Men are coming to Atlanta to have sex with a child," said LaKendra Baker, project manager for the Center to End Adolescent Sexual Exploitation (CEASE).

Half of the street-level prostitutes in Atlanta are believed to be under 18, according to experts.

Others are booked through Internet sex sites and from social sites like Black Planet, where girls innocently post profiles, said Baker.

Just in March, police arrested a Canadian man meeting a 14-year-old girl he found through the Internet, said Cathey Steinberg, executive director of the Juvenile Justice Fund, which funds treatment for abused girls and prevention.

Another man drove from North Georgia, with a bag containing a teddy bear, a love note and condoms, snorting methamphetamine on the way.

He expected a 13-year-old girl, but instead found Heather Lackey, a corporal with the Peachtree City Police Department.

"People are stunned that Atlanta's the No. 1 sex center in the country," said Steinberg.

The FBI has identified 14 U.S. cities as centers for the sexual exploitation of children. In addition to Atlanta, they are Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Miami, Minneapolis, New York, San Diego, San Francisco, St. Louis, Tampa, and Washington, D.C.

RUNAWAYS AT MOST RISK

In all, an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 underage girls are prostituted in the United States, according to a University of Pennsylvania study.

Most youths caught up in the sex trade are runaways, like Brittany, whose 19-year-old "rescuers" soon demanded a return on their investment.

"I didn't have any place to go. My mom hated me for what I was doing to the family," said Brittany, who did not want to be identified by her real name.

Up to 90 percent of runaways are believed to end up as prostitutes, with a third lured into prostitution within 48 hours. Some are sold into sexual slavery by their parents, according to a 2005 study by the Atlanta Women's Agenda.

Some get seduced by recruiters. Pimps use handsome young men and sometimes girls as fronts.

"A 16-year-old controlling a group of girls will not face the same penalties an adult would receive," said Patricia Crone, director of the Office of Juvenile Justice Demonstration Project.

Once snagged, the grooming process begins. Typically, the pimp's friends sleep with her, then come threats, beatings and gang rapes. Caresses and gifts, including drugs and alcohol, follow abuse, the Atlanta Women's Agenda study found.

Brittany said she was showered with fancy dinners, clothes and methamphetamine. But she also describes horror. "It made me feel dirty. It was demeaning," said Brittany.

The sex slaves are trafficked in and out of cities to supply sporting events, conventions or rap concerts.

During the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, one man kept boys and hosted sex parties nightly, said Baker of the group CEASE.

The pimps even held an annual "Player's Ball" in Atlanta in 2003, openly buying and selling women and naming a "Player of the Year," according to the Atlanta Women's Agenda study.

The risks are worth it. While there are few reliable statistics, child sexual exploitation is believed to be the world's third-biggest money maker for organized crime, said Stephanie Davis, policy adviser to Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin.

One reason for the demand is the false assumption that youths are disease-free.

On the contrary, with tissues not fully developed, they are more prone to lacerations. HIV infections among females aged 16 to 21 are 50 percent higher than for men, a 1998 study in the Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes reported.

Atlanta has won two new federal grants to establish units to fight the trafficking of underage sex slaves and to hire more undercover detectives, said Carole Morgan, director of the North Central Georgia Law Enforcement Academy.

But the experts fear that may not be enough.

"It won't stop until people say, 'My city isn't safe for kids anymore,'" said Crone.

"This is a place where you can buy, sell or rent kids. It must be stopped."

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