

## Child sex trafficking: It's probably not what you think it is

By Theresa Waldrop, CNN

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COURTESY THE WELLHOUSE

A survivor of sex trafficking at The WellHouse in Alabama, which helps young girls and women get their lives back on track.

**(CNN)** — "You just have to dance, we can make a little money like that."

That's what Shandel, then 13, said her boyfriend told her at a party he had taken her to some 12 years ago.

And that's how it all began, Shandel, now 25, recalled. Gradually, the man she thought of as the only person who loved her or even cared for her, demanded more. Much more -- and she said he would physically abuse her if she refused.

Even now, it is difficult for Shandel -- who requested CNN use only her first name due to privacy concerns -- to talk to strangers about what she was forced to do with men.

She had left an abusive situation at home -- her dad was on drugs, and her mother had "her own issues," Shandel said. The man she left home for "was the first person that felt like who loved me."

"In hindsight, it wasn't love, but it felt like love," she said. "It was like, if I didn't do these things, then he wouldn't love me."



Shandel is among the many victims of [child sex trafficking](#), the commercial sexual exploitation of children. While the term trafficking evokes for many images of children kidnapped off the street, smuggled across borders and moved from place to place, that's rarely the case, social workers and researchers say.

Many who work with the children or who study the problem prefer the the term commercial sexual exploitation of children to trafficking, as it offers a much clearer picture of what's happening.

terms

The children most vulnerable are those living in poverty, often known to child protection services, in foster care, in generally unstable conditions, social workers and researchers say. Many have been sexually abused as children before they become victims.

"As much as stories might come out about [conspiracies](#) to target people who are relatively safe, relatively less vulnerable, the truth is on the hotline," said Robert Beiser, the strategic initiatives director for sex trafficking at [Polaris](#), which runs the [National Human Trafficking Hotline](#).

"Our data shows that people are exploited because traffickers know that there are certain groups of people that don't have the support, that don't have the ability to get accountability, or justice for themselves," Beiser said. "And those people who, if you exploit them, it's much less likely that any problems will come your way as a trafficker or as a sex buyer."

And the children are far more likely to know, and even be related to their exploiters, than to be grabbed by a stranger, the experts say.

"Hollywood loves a very dramatic abduction and similar stories, but that is not what typically happens in trafficking cases," said Jonathan Todres, a law professor at Georgia State University who focuses on child trafficking.

"It is usually someone they know or someone that an acquaintance knows. So it may be that a peer introduces them to someone who ends up recruiting for a trafficking ring."

Focusing on kids being nabbed by strangers or a child trafficking cabal leads people to miss the point, said [Rachel Lloyd](#), who was trafficked as a teenager and later founded GEMS, a non-profit in New York that helps survivors get their life back on track.

"There are girls who are kidnapped and forced into the life, it's just not the most common," Lloyd, whose organization helps hundreds of girls and young women survivors every year, said.



"It's not stranger danger in the way that we like to think about it. It's about vulnerability and risk meeting the billion-dollar industry, filled with exploitative predators who are, whether they are johns or pimps, looking to continually fill the need to supply."

Rachel Lloyd, a sex trafficking survivor, founded GEMS to help other young survivors.

## There are no reliable estimates of the number of victims

It's impossible to put a number on how many children are being commercially sexually exploited, researchers say, because there's just no system in place to track it.

Depending on how they're identified by authorities, the children might be labeled juvenile delinquent, a child welfare case, a runaway, according to Samantha Vardaman at Shared Hope International, whose mission is to end sex trafficking.

The US National Human Trafficking Hotline identified 22,326 trafficking victims and survivors last year. Of those, 14,597 were cases of sex trafficking and 1,048 were sex and labor trafficking, or forcing someone to work by fraud or coercion. Farm and domestic work are common avenues of labor trafficking, according to the hotline.

The average age of those trafficked was 17, and the numbers sharply decline of those older that were identified by the hotline. The sum of younger victims was about the same as the number of 17 year olds.

## Many victims are running away from harm

The exploiters are almost always men, the experts say, and the victims are usually female, although boys are trafficked, too. In the beginning, some girls think the man is going to help them into a better life.

"Maybe they've been dating them a couple of weeks. Maybe they think he's a manager who's going to set up their dance careers," Lloyd said. "I've seen girls who were thinking they were going to have a career in the entertainment industry."

Others have thought the man was a landlord who was offering them an apartment, she said, a strong lure for a homeless girl or one looking to escape an abusive situation at home.

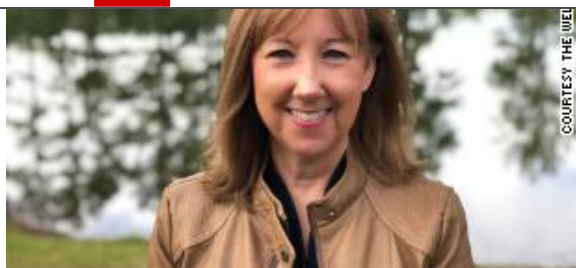
Most kids "do not go out into the street, they're running away from some harm," Todres, the law professor, said. "And they feel in that moment that the street is a better option. And that's a really profound statement."

One observation that staff members at The WellHouse in Odenville, Alabama, a recovery facility for survivors, have made is that many of the girls and women were sexually abused as children.



The WellHouse in Alabama helps survivors heal and thrive.

An adult woman living there now was trafficked as a child by her father, according to The WellHouse director, Carolyn Potter.



Carolyn Potter has been chief executive officer of The WellHouse for six years.

... she ended up being trafficked as an adult and then right back into it."

The WellHouse houses adult survivors of commercial sex exploitation on its peaceful, 63-acre campus, and many are young women who were trafficked for years, starting in their teens, Potter said.

The organization also has children as clients, and is working on opening a housing facility for children in the spring of 2021. The average age of children they are seeing right now is 14, according to Potter.

The commercial sexual exploitation of children is "really everywhere," Beiser said. "People ask us a lot for what hot spots might be, and I think that implies that there are a set of people doing bad things in one location. (But) it's a system that is really set up for people with money to exploit people who are vulnerable. What we

see is that it's almost exactly proportional to population in the country."

While it's more prevalent in urban areas, rural areas aren't spared, and the internet has widened the net for exploiters, experts say.

It's also driven a lot of the activity out of sight, Lloyd said, making it harder to identify victims.

## Sex trafficking victims are often criminalized

If the girls are picked up by the police, they are often charged with a crime.

Prostitution and buying sex, in most states, are "relatively equivalent crimes," Beiser said, "even though a person in prostitution may be doing it so that they're not homeless, or so that they can feed themselves. But no one is buying sex out of some sort of basic need for survival."

An underage girl who is arrested for prostitution can be "charged with prostitution and adjudicated delinquent as a result" in 19 US states, according to Vardaman.

The issue is one that Shared Hope International has been working on for many years, she said.

When Lloyd came to the US more than 20 years ago, she was working as a missionary focused on women in the sex industry, and was constantly running into teenagers and preteens on the streets and even in prison. Soon after, she founded GEMS from her kitchen table.

Progress has been made in some cities and states. Minnesota has removed criminal liability for minors for prostitution, according to Christine Raino at Shared Hope International.

Seattle and King County, Washington, have almost no arrests of people in prostitution, but "there's significant accountability for sex buyers, especially people trying to buy sex from children," according to Beiser.

The hundreds of thousands of dollars generated there in such fines go directly into immediate services for survivors of commercial sexual exploitation, Beiser said.

New York no longer charges minors for prostitution, Lloyd said. While that is progress, it's also cut off a point of intervention for social workers like Lloyd, she said.

"Over the past 18 years, we've seen tremendous advances in the ability to serve survivors, coming out of situations like that," said Beiser. "And much more awareness of how social inequality, and even the criminal justice systems, focuses on criminalizing victims of trafficking for crimes like prostitution, rather than rather than sex buyers who have full decision making over who they exploit."

And these places offer the truly invaluable to survivors: Being able to share their stories with other people who have been through the same life-shattering experience.

Today, Shandel is thriving. She is working on a college degree in marketing, has a family and helps mentor other survivors at GEMS.

## The Covid-19 effect

While it's difficult to know the effect right now that the Covid-19 pandemic is having on the commercial sexual exploitation of children, what's clear is that it is putting more children at risk, Beiser said.

People who might be escaping trafficking situations by finding a place to work or shelter are finding that shelters have reduced capacity or are closed because of the pandemic, according to Beiser, and "many nonprofits have had to close because they're not getting the resources that they need."

"Since the Covid pandemic, we've seen a significant increase in calls for emergency shelter," he said.

"We're going to see the echoes of what Covid has done to make people more economically vulnerable, unfortunately for years to come, if we don't put the right policies in place to help people."

The pandemic has also made it harder to help survivors. At GEMS in New York, everything but the housing for survivors has gone virtual, Lloyd said.

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