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Sex trafficking: The new American slavery

By Leif Coorlim and [Dana Ford](#), CNN

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Story highlights

- Former teen prostitute recalls being forced to have sex with dozens of men per day
- Atlanta's illegal sex industry generates around \$290 million a year, according to study
- Georgia law gives authorities the opportunity to grant leniency if a girl is willing to go to a safe home

Watch "[Children for Sale: The Fight to End Human Trafficking](#)," July 21 at 9 p.m. ET/PT.

*Atlanta (CNN)*The pathway leading to the dark corners of human trafficking began in the fluorescent-flooded hallways of a Florida middle school.

Sacharay, which is how she wants to be known, was 14 years old and looking for a friend.

"I used to get picked on a lot about being dark-skinned. I started wearing glasses and was called 'four-eyes.' And then they knew because I was so sensitive, they knew it was getting to me," she said.

But when an older classmate approached her and offered to be her friend, Sacharay thought maybe her fortunes had finally started to turn.

"I thought she was like my best friend because I could tell her everything. One day she asked if I wanted to skip school and have fun, you know, so we went to the barber shop. When I was there, she introduced me to these guys," said Sacharay, now 19.

One of the men, in his mid-30s, immediately took notice of Sacharay. He soon began courting her with gifts, paying her compliments and offering advice on the daily dramatics of adolescent life.

"If me and my sister would be arguing, he'd be like, 'You can't get into an argument with your sister like that.' He was more like a dad, but then again we had sex, so it wasn't. It was just in the communication and how he talked to me," she recalled.

It was child rape.

But this subtle, subversive mix of romantic love and parental care can create havoc in the mind of an adolescent, said Anique Whitmore, a forensic psychologist in Atlanta.

[How to help sex trafficking victims](#)

"What we know about sex crimes is that it's not about sexual pleasure. It's about control," said Whitmore. "What is similar to some of those girls that I work with is their self-esteem or lack thereof. You either become vulnerable to a man on the street or a man you meet in school. You become vulnerable because you're looking for attention."



The human traffickers you never even notice 01:00
PLAY VIDEO

Soon, Sacharay's trafficker began asking for "favors" -- asking her to help make some money for him, by sleeping with another man.

"He was like, 'I love you for that, I love you so much,'" said Sacharay. "Then he would slowly put two, three more guys. I got upset when I first realized what he was doing, but I kept doing it because he made me feel like I was special."

The exploitation continued to escalate. Sacharay soon was being sold to dozens of men a day. She would meet these sex buyers in motel rooms near a freeway, or even sometimes in the back of the barbershop.

"One day I was like, I can't do this no more. I was in pain. I had sex with almost 40 guys in one day, and I was so tired, and I said, 'I can't do this no more.'"

Her trafficker didn't care. He made sure she knew leaving was not an option.

"He went into the other room, came back with a gun, and he was like: 'If you go somewhere, we'll see.'"

Why Atlanta is a 'hub' for human trafficking



More than 3,500 sex trafficking cases were reported to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center last year alone.

Under federal law, anyone under 18 years of age induced into commercial sex is a victim of sex trafficking -- regardless of whether the trafficker uses force, fraud, or coercion.

Sacharay's exploiter eventually brought her and another teen to Atlanta, because he could command higher prices.

According to a 2014 study by the Urban Institute, some traffickers in Atlanta make more than \$32,000 a week.



The study also cited research findings from 2007 that Atlanta's illegal sex industry generates around \$290 million a year.

"It's a big city. There's a lot to do in Atlanta. A lot of conventions, a lot of hotels, a lot of parties going on, a lot of events," said Sgt. Torrey Kennedy with the DeKalb County Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Unit. "So just like any businessmen, these traffickers know that."

A big part of Atlanta's draw is the airport, which is the busiest in the world.

"(A) man could get on that computer, anonymously, say, 'I'm coming in to go have sex with this child.' He'll fly in on a 3:00 flight, meet the child at 6:00, and be gone on the 8:00," said Dalia Racine, assistant district attorney for DeKalb County, which includes part of Atlanta. "How are we to ever find them? How are we to ever know who they are?"

[Selling Atlanta's children: What has and hasn't changed](#)

Victims, not prostitutes

Racine and Kennedy often work together to identify and then prosecute human trafficking rings.

As part of an investigative series, the [CNN Freedom Project](#) followed Kennedy and his team on raids for more than a year. According to Kennedy, it's not unusual for a teen selling sex to deny that she's working for someone, even if it's against her will.

Watch 'Children for Sale: The Fight to End Human Trafficking'

Tuesday: 9 p.m. ET and PT / 3 a.m. CET Wednesday / 9 a.m. HKT Wednesday

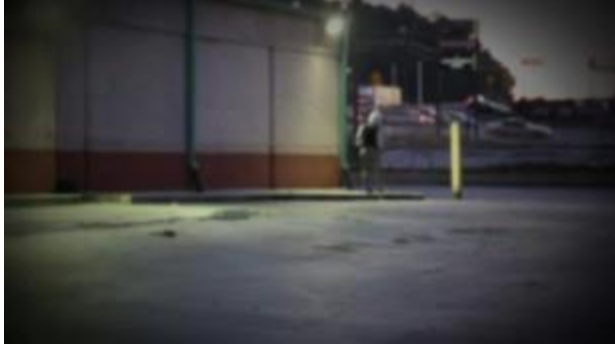
Wednesday: 7 a.m. ET and PT / 1 p.m. CET or 7 p.m. HKT;

11 a.m. ET and PT / 5 p.m. CET / 11 p.m. HKT;

3 p.m. ET and PT / 9 p.m. CET / 3 a.m. HKT Thursday.

Join the conversation at [#endsextrafficking](#).

In June 2014, DeKalb County's ICAC and Vice Unit conducted an operation to find underage victims. The team went exit by exit along I-285, the perimeter highway, to hotels where undercover agents had arranged "dates" through an Internet escort site. In several of those meetings, the escort who showed up turned out to be underage.



Victims, not child prostitutes 01:01

PLAY VIDEO

Georgia law gives authorities the opportunity to grant leniency if a girl is willing to go to a safe home. But if she declines, their hands are somewhat tied.

Kennedy encountered this heartbreaking situation on the raid, when a suspected victim of trafficking didn't want any help.

"We don't want to arrest her. But she would rather go to jail than a treatment facility. She said she's 'happy being miserable.'"

Investigators believe a local trafficker bought the girl in question a bus ticket from Detroit to Atlanta, gave her a puppy and paid for the hotel room where she was found.

"She has one tattoo on her knee, we've seen multiple times in this area, and it's likely it's a brand from a local pimp," said Kennedy. "That's one of the new things from pimps. They put their logo on their girl. ... The tattoo is fresh, which tells me that he just got his hands on her."

Struggling, but stronger

Sacharay has her own tattoos dating back to the time she was being exploited.

Her journey away from exploitation started at the doorstep of a sanctuary run by the nonprofit organization [The Living Water Center](#).

The organization provided her with two things that didn't seem possible just a few years ago: a GED and a job.

"I used to hate looking in the mirror at myself," said Sacharay. "I still struggle, but I can say I'm stronger, I'm wiser and I can honestly say I do love myself. And I have hope for myself."

Sacharay now has a new focus, and a new tattoo on her forearm that says "Free to Be Me."

But for every Sacharay, there are countless young women still trapped in this dangerous and illegal trade.

CNN dives into that world in the documentary "[Children for Sale: The Fight to End Human Trafficking](#)."

It airs July 21 at 9 p.m. ET/PT.

"We're starting the process of getting people aware of what is happening at certain levels, so as the layers of the onion continue to get pulled back, we'll continue to learn and understand how this works," said actress Jada Pinkett Smith, who partnered with CNN for the film.

To find out more, and what you can do to help, visit cnn.com/freedom.