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# Behind closed doors: A look at sexual exploitation

By [Robin Baumgarn](#) July 3, 2015 at 4:43 p.m.

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WORTHINGTON — It's not all "Pretty Woman."

Last week, the Daily Globe reported on a prostitution sting that netted the arrest of six men, conducted by the Nobles County Sheriff's Office and other law enforcement agencies. One often-overlooked aspect of this story — and similar stories — is the lives of women, children and even men who are trapped in the world of human trafficking. Although prostitution is often glamorized on television and in films (like Julia Roberts' famed performance), fact is a far cry from fiction.

The average age of juveniles entering the world of prostitution is between 12 and 14 years old. Sexual exploitation goes beyond solely prostitution. Youths are often forced to work in strip clubs, perform sexual acts on videotape and more.

When all of these acts are taken into consideration, it makes the issue of exploitation more prevalent than many may think.

"I think it's more prevalent than what people want to admit or see," said Juli Fast, regional navigator for the Safe Harbor program. "I think it looks really different and sometimes unrecognizable because it is masked as domestic violence, because it is masked as a sexual assault, because it is masked as survival or a troubled youth or drugs.

"It's used in exchange for drugs; it's used in exchange for rent; it's used in exchange for all of these things that don't take place at a hotel," Fast added. "If that's the case, we don't call it trafficking or exploitation — it's survival.

"When we ... take all of these pieces and put them all together in one, and we can totally shift our mindset and say that all of these things are encompassed in sexual exploitation, we get a totally different picture."

Sara Wahl, executive director of the Southwest Crisis Center, confirmed that youth sexual exploitation has occurred in southwest Minnesota in the past year, including Nobles County.

"We've worked with youths in the last year throughout our service area of 18 counties," Wahl said. "We've identified youths ... as being sexually exploited and trafficked."

One of the myths of the sex trade is that the majority of women who are prostitutes choose it as a profession. Wahl and Fast say less than two percent of women who sell themselves do so of their own accord.

However, Wahl and Fast contend it is that two percent that society is inundated with in movies, television and other forms of media. The glamorization of the lifestyle depicts a high level of profitability by engaging in prostitution.

“Perhaps it is (profitable) for them,” Wahl said. “They have a level of power and control over their situation that most women and girls (who are prostituted) don’t have.”

Prostitution stings are one tool law enforcement officials use to combat sexual exploitation. As johns are caught, the goal is to lower the demand for sexually exploited women and children. What local law enforcement has learned from the recent sting is the demand for commercial sex is not something only found in urban areas.

“What prompted it more than anything was the training we had with Juli (Fast) last October. ... That’s what prompted it to see what kind of demand we have here,” Nobles County Sheriff’s Deputy Lonnie Roloff said. “These girls that are victims (are) telling us it’s everywhere. You may not think it is, but it is.

“It’s out in the rural areas just as much as it is in Minneapolis/St. Paul,” Roloff continued. “There is a demand.”

Roloff pointed out that some people have the misconception that prostitution is a victimless crime. With misconceptions portrayed in media of prostitution being a choice, it’s not uncommon for it to be seen as a contract between consenting adults.

“It’s not,” Roloff said bluntly. “The problem is these girls end up in it at a very young age. They might be 25, 26, 27 when we catch up with them or when they finally want to get out, but they’ve been in it for 10 years already. They’ve been in it from the age of 15 and 14 and younger, maybe. So that’s where it isn’t a victimless crime.

“Once they are in, we are finding out talking to these girls it is really hard for them to get out,” he added. “They are being controlled, number one. Their money is usually being controlled by somebody else, so they can’t just get up and decide, ‘I’m done with this. I’m going to go.’”

“It’s not the glamour shot of ‘Pretty Woman.’”

Victims of exploitation -- or people who suspect they know a victim -- are encouraged to contact the Southwest Crisis Center at 1-800-376-4311 FREE. The phone line is available 24/7 and is confidential and anonymous. The SWCC can also be contacted through Facebook by searching SWCC Youth Outreach.

**Minnesota’s Safe Harbor Law**

In 2014, Minnesota's Safe Harbor law went into effect. The law clearly identifies that youth who engage in prostitution are no longer criminals, but rather victims and survivors of sexual exploitation. Specifically, the law:

- Excludes sexually exploited youth under 18 from the definition of "delinquent child."
- Adds the definition of sexually exploited youth to Minnesota's child protection codes.
- Increases the penalties against commercial sex abusers or purchasers of trafficking victims.
- Directs the Commissioner of Public Safety to devise a victim-centered, statewide response for sexually exploited youth and youth at risk of sexual exploitation.
- Directs implementation of statewide service model called No Wrong Door, ensuring that victims are identified and services are available throughout Minnesota including regional navigators, shelter and housing, protocol development and training.

### **Who are the victims?**

- Anyone can become a victim of sex trafficking. Women and girls are the primary victims of sex trafficking, however, victims and survivors come from every background, race, gender, sexual orientation and economic status.
- Factors that increase a victim's vulnerability include, but are not limited to:
  - Homelessness or status as a runaway
  - Lack of involvement in school — truancy
  - Childhood abuse, trauma or neglect
  - Chemical addiction
  - Mental or behavioral health disorders
  - Family or friends involved in prostitution
  - Unstable family environment or little or no social support
  - Poverty or lack of resources
  - Young age
  - Racial or ethnic marginalization
  - LGBTQ identity
  - Gang affiliation
  - Employment in strip clubs
  - Engagement in "survival sex" — exchanging sex for basic needs