

SPECIAL
REPORT

LOST GIRL

A split-second decision catapulted a 12-year-old schoolgirl into a nightmare of sex and violence endured by hundreds of thousands of children across the country. JEANNINE AMBER investigates how very young girls are being brainwashed and sold for sex by pimps, and how difficult it is for trafficked children to finally break free

Nikki* was a good girl, a mama's girl, quick to laugh and eager to please. At school she was on the debate team, the swim team and the track team, and she even learned how to ride a unicycle. "Nikki was special," her mother says. "We did everything together. Her father wasn't around, and her older brothers were out of the house. It was just us." But Nikki was also impulsive and headstrong. And one afternoon she and her mother had a fight. Nikki had been late for school, and when she got home, her mother let her have it. Then Nikki's mother, who'd never before laid a hand on her daughter, pushed her.

Furious, Nikki stormed out of their Harlem apartment. She walked to the end of the block and got on the subway. An hour later, she got off in a Brooklyn neighborhood she had never visited before. It was the middle of December and getting dark. She figured she'd walk around a little and then go home. But as she made her way back to the subway, a man approached her. He was tall and thin, in his late twenties. He told her how sexy she looked in her light blue Baby Phat jacket and laced-up Timbs. Nikki giggled. She was 12 years old.

Nobody had ever talked to Nikki like he did. "You're so pretty and mature," the man cooed. When he invited her to a party, Nikki thought for a moment and then said yes. It was the rebellious act of a disgruntled child. But Nikki, whose mother barely let her out of her sight, had no idea of the danger she was walking into.

"Parents typically think their child will follow the rules they set for them," says Chad Dion Lassiter, M.S.W., a Philadelphia-based social worker who counsels >

On the streets
of major cities,
sexually exploited
girls hide in
plain sight.

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at-risk youth. “But predators are all smooth talk and charisma. When confronted by these men, a child thinks, *What is being said to me makes me feel good. If I go with this person, there will be more of this good feeling.* A 12-year-old is not going to consider the potentially tragic end. That’s not where they are developmentally.”

The party turned out to be Nikki and just one other person hanging out in the man’s basement. The man offered her some weed and, not wanting to seem childish, Nikki agreed to smoke with him. Soon after, she passed out on the stranger’s bed. She woke to the man rubbing on her leg and telling her how turned on he was. She pushed his hand away and told him she was a virgin. But he wouldn’t stop. She panicked. “I didn’t know what to do,” she says now. She thought, *If I just lie still, it will be over soon.*

Today Nikki is sitting in a Harlem restaurant. She’s dressed in a dark blue skirt and sweater, her hair in a tidy ponytail. As she tells her story, she’s poised and thoughtful with an easy smile and a warm demeanor. But the details she shares are impossibly grim. She remembers how the man kept her in bed with him for three days, getting high, watching TV and laughing. All the while he lavished attention on her. It was relentless and, Nikki admits, intoxicating. “No man had ever taken an interest in me like he did,” she reflects. Nikki’s father had left the family early on, and she had never really known him. Nor was she close to her older brothers. One was in jail and the other had left home to become a Jehovah’s Witness.

“Sometimes a girl is not necessarily running away from something terrible at home,” says Richard Estes, Ph.D., a professor at the University of Pennsylvania who, in 2001, helped conduct a national study of sexually exploited children. “Sometimes the child is running *toward* something. In this case, you have a girl with no father in the house. That can create a profound longing for a male to make her the center of attention, to praise her and take care of her. The sexual component is not something a 12-year-old would anticipate.” But then suddenly, there she is, “spiraling into darkness,” adds Lassiter, “with drugs masking the pain.”

Back home in Harlem, Nikki’s mother was shell-shocked by her daughter’s angry departure. “It was inconceivable that she’d run away,” she says, her voice barely a whisper. At first she thought Nikki had gone to a friend’s house. When she didn’t come home the next morning, her mother started calling Nikki’s friends. “One of them said she had seen her at 119th Street, so I took a cab there and waited on the corner for hours,” her mother says. “Finally I went home and called the police.” The officers admonished Nikki’s mother for not calling sooner. “They yelled at me, and I just felt awful,” she says. “Now I think if I’d called sooner they might have found her. I’ll blame myself for that for the rest of my life.”

Meanwhile, in Brooklyn, Nikki was sinking deeper. On the fourth day the man told her, “You gotta get some money.” He explained there was a guy he knew who would pay to have sex with her. “I’m not a ho!” Nikki said, recoiling. “That don’t make you a ho,” the man insisted. “That just makes you someone who wants money.” He played on her guilt, reminding her of the two times he’d taken her to eat at the Jamaican spot on the corner. He said, “I can’t keep paying for everything. You need to chip in.” She felt so stupid and useless that finally she agreed. Later that day he pimped her out to a man who paid \$50 to touch her while he masturbated. For Nikki, that was how it began.



Predators know which girls are vulnerable.

TAKING CHILDREN HOSTAGE

To date, only one national study gives any indication of the number of children who are in danger of being commercially sexually exploited. That 2001 University of Pennsylvania report reveals that the average age a girl enters the life is between 12 and 14, and that nearly 300,000 children are at risk. Rachel Lloyd, executive director of Girls Educational & Mentoring Services (GEMS), a nonprofit in New York that provides extensive therapy, peer support and social services for girls exiting the life, points out that getting an accurate figure is nearly impossible. “Many service providers who deal with young girls are too underfunded to track the numbers,” she says. And, once they enter the life, the girls are transient; often transported from state to state. If they are picked up by the police, the first thing they do—under orders of their pimp—is lie about their age, as police are more likely to seek out and arrest a pimp who is trafficking underage girls.

In 2003 the FBI and Department of Justice, in conjunction with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), launched the Innocence Lost National Initiative to address the crisis. Since then, 32 task forces across the country have recovered almost 700 children and convicted more than 300 pimps. But this is just a drop in the bucket. Experts estimate that every month tens

of thousands of girls in the United States are sold for sex. “Trafficking of children is a hidden problem,” says Ernie Allen, president of NCMEC. “This is happening right under our noses, and America has missed it.”

While girls from all backgrounds are being exploited, poverty and family instability increase

“A runaway will do anything for a bed and a value meal.”

—SPLIFFY DON, A PIMP

a child’s risk. In cities with high poverty rates, like Detroit, Oakland and Washington, D.C., the victims are overwhelmingly African-American: A 2005 study by the Atlanta Women’s Agenda found that 90 percent of cases referred to the city’s Center to End Abuse and Sexual Exploitation were Black girls.

Pimps know exactly which children to approach. They can recognize the desperate runaway fleeing abuse, the preteen looking for validation, the girl whose parents aren’t paying attention. They court the girls with affection and gifts, coax them into their first trick, then terrorize them. The youngest girls, especially those already broken by trauma at home, are easy to turn. A meal, a new dress, a promise of love and protection. Then an insult, a threat, a slap or a gun to the head. Sometimes it doesn’t even take that much. As happened with Nikki, a very young girl can be turned out with a few well-chosen words. Soon she’s at the mercy of her pimp, a commodity, his slave.

Now 21, Nikki unravels her past in conversations that span several months. Her memories come to her in vivid snapshots, and she lingers over the details as if staring at old photographs. There she is in an underground strip club, a bunch of \$20s stuffed in her bra. There she is in Vegas, sidling up to a man at a bar, whispering nasty things in his ear. There she is in Texas, in a big house with a trick who wanted to do it in the bed he shared with his wife, pictures of his children hanging on the walls. There she is getting gang-raped by six men in the back of a van. And there she is on a street corner in Brooklyn, watching a girl stumble around after a bad date, bleeding from her rectum.

CRIMINALIZING THE VICTIM

With few exceptions, underage girls recruited into the sex trade have traditionally been treated by law enforcement as criminals, arrested and thrown into juvenile prisons. The assumption was they were bad kids instead of children being victimized by adults. Nikki knows this firsthand. She rattles off

the facilities where she’s been incarcerated in New York, Maryland, Texas and Nevada. The first time Nikki was arrested, she was 12. Sentenced to a year in detention, she was led out of the courtroom in shackles, while her mother looked on in a daze. “I remember feeling so overwhelmed,” her mother says. “I kept telling the judge Nikki needed counseling. I just wanted someone to tell me why she had run away. I wasn’t even looking at the fact that she had been picked up for prostitution. At the time her running away seemed like the most horrible part. That’s all I could deal with.”

At the end of her detention, during which Nikki says she received no therapy, she returned home to her mother, who enrolled her in a nearby middle school. But a few months later, distraught over a boy in her class who had stopped speaking to her, Nikki ran away again. She went back to the streets and a man who said he’d always take care of her. This is no surprise to Lloyd, who explains that children under the control of a pimp often suffer from Stockholm syndrome, a well-documented psychological response in which the abducted person, isolated from the rest of the world, begins to feel intense loyalty to her captor. “Pimps’ sole purpose is to manipulate the girls,” says Lloyd, herself a survivor of sexual exploitation. “They spend a lot of time making sure the girls are brainwashed into believing that the pimp is the only one who will ever love them and accept them.”

Lloyd points out that pimps employ techniques that have been used to control battered wives and even prisoners of war. “Pimps will show the girls kindness and affection and give them rewards, then alternate that with violence and threats,” she says. “And they’ll tell the girl, ‘No matter where you go I will find you.’ So now you have a girl who has been released from detention, where she received no therapy to help her understand her attachment to her pimp, and furthermore she has been told that she was a bad or dirty girl for what she was doing. Of course she’s going to walk right back to the pimp. He told her she was family.”

While this all-too-common scenario plays out around the country, recently a handful of states have begun to view exploited girls not as criminals but as what they really are: victims of coercion, brutality, brainwashing and rape. The problem is there still aren’t nearly enough resources to help the girls get away from their pimps. And the recession has only made the situation more dire, with funding for many agencies drying up. Lloyd ticks off the facilities in the country that provide services for trafficked children and counts fewer than 50 beds. “So if we went out and got 500 girls off the street,” she says, “where would we put them?”

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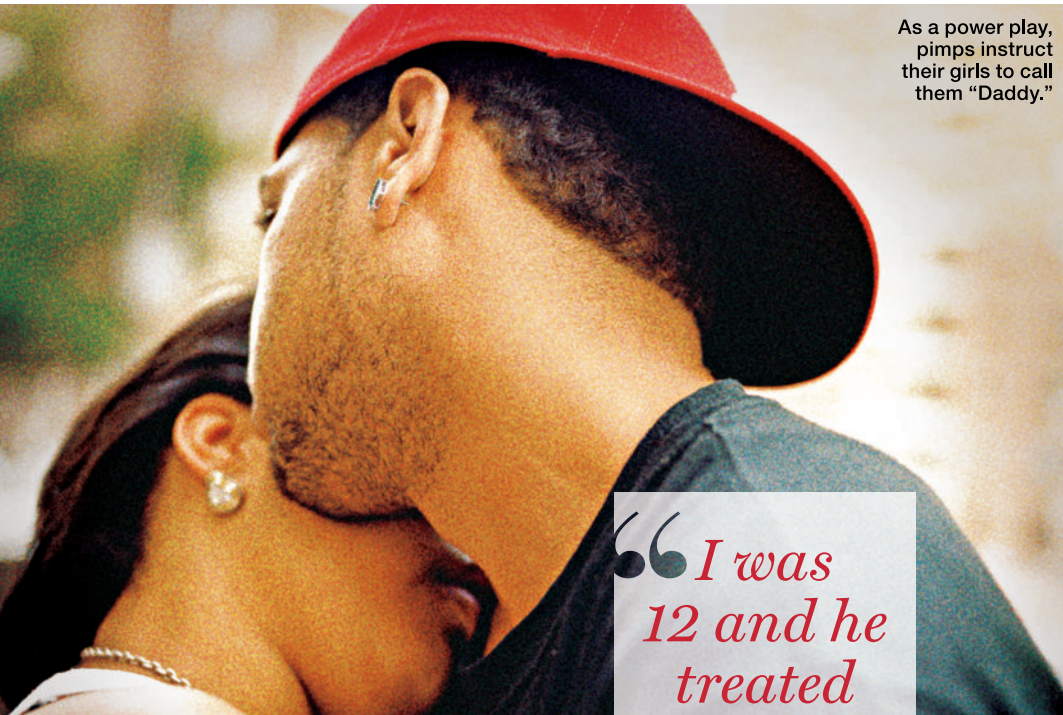
DADDY’S GIRLS

Nikki remembers how quickly she went numb. After that first time with a trick, she was just glad it was over. The next day the man she was staying with went to work, leaving Nikki hanging out on the stoop with the neighbors. That’s when another man approached her. He introduced himself as Magic and told Nikki she was beautiful. “I was just amazed that men were suddenly paying me so >

much attention,” she says. “And this one really had the gift of gab.” Magic told her he was going to take care of her. “Do you know what a pimp is?” he asked. “Someone who has a lot of girlfriends?” Nikki offered. “Yeah,” he said with a laugh. “Something like that.”

He said he wanted Nikki to see where he lived. It wasn't far,

all seemed like a crazy game—until she caught her first date. A short, overweight man opened his car door, and Nikki slid inside as she'd seen the other girls do. She didn't really know what was expected of her. The man pulled under an overpass, and told her to put his penis in her mouth. Shaken, but relieved he wasn't asking for intercourse, Nikki bent toward him.



As a power play, pimps instruct their girls to call them “Daddy.”

“I was 12 and he treated me like I was 22.”

—NIKKI

he promised, leading the way. The first thing Nikki noticed when she got to the house was a puppy tied to the railing. Her mother wouldn't let her get a dog. She scooped up the animal, who licked her face. “This is Lil' Nikki,” the pimp announced as he entered the living room, which was filled with young women in their teens and twenties, and a few men. A chubby Puerto Rican girl approached Nikki. “Do you want to be down with our family?” she asked. The girl explained that everyone was going down to the track to make some money, and she should come, too. Nikki pictured an athletic track. *I used to run track at school*, she thought. *This can't be that hard*. “Yes,” she said, “I'll go.”

That evening Magic took everyone shopping at a store filled with sparkly dresses and stacked-heeled shoes. “Daddy, I want this! Daddy, buy me that!” the girls clamored. Magic told Nikki to pick out anything she wanted; he was paying. She chose a short denim skirt, the type of thing her mother would never allow her to wear. She added white stockings and brown platform heels.

The track turned out to be a few deserted blocks surrounding Queensboro Plaza, in Queens, New York, right under the 59th Street Bridge. In the daytime it was a bustling thoroughfare, with retail stores and people going about their business. But at night it became a circus. Hundreds of cars, music blaring, snaked around the block. There were the girls, sucking on lollipops, dressed in fur coats, naked underneath. To Nikki, it

she feels like she's nothing. But when I meet a girl, I show her the good life. I help her put her look together. Now she's family. She feels loved, and everybody wants to feel loved.”

Spliffy Don, who works mostly strip clubs and private parties, maintains that girls benefit from his guidance, but Lloyd insists the reality of pimp culture is ruthless. “Some pimps kidnap girls at gunpoint,” she says. “I've seen an 11-year-old who was trafficked up and down the East Coast with whip marks on her back. There is no such thing as a benign pimp.”

Lloyd's agency, which last year served 279 young girls and women, offers an array of psychological, social and vocational services to help exploited children reclaim their lives. “Some girls come to GEMS, and they're working on 17 different issues,” explains Lloyd. “Maybe she's homeless and pregnant. Maybe her pimp is her baby's father. Maybe he beats her. She thinks she wants an order of protection, but she isn't sure. Her mother is getting high right now, and she just went back home. If she stays, Child Welfare will take her baby away. She hasn't been to school in three years, and they said she was learning disabled. She's not, but she

GETTING OUT OF THE GAME

By far the girls most vulnerable to being lured into the trade are runaways, says Ronald Weitzer, Ph.D., a sociologist at George Washington University who has studied prostitution. “These children end up on the streets where they can be duped, deceived, or forced into selling sex.” The National Runaway Switchboard estimates that as many as 2.8 million children flee their homes each year. And while many experts argue that previous sexual abuse primes a girl for sexual exploitation, other studies suggest that the more significant correlation between sexual abuse and prostitution is that it increases the chance of a child running away.

Spliffy Don, 29, has been working in New York as a pimp for more than a decade. He says he doesn't deal with juveniles, but he can still pinpoint the vulnerability that makes a young runaway easy prey. “A runaway will do anything for a bed and a value meal,” he notes. “She might be uneducated, poor, maybe her father touched her,

feels like she is. I mean, it's just issue after issue after issue.”

For too many girls, help simply isn't there. Richard Estes, the University of Pennsylvania professor who coauthored the national study of sexually exploited children, says during his research he encountered a girl who'd been lured into prostitution at age 9. The memory haunts him to this day. “We met her when she was 12 and staying at a psychiatric facility,” he remembers. “And I can tell you that looking in her eyes, her soul was gone. She was alive physically, but there was nothing left of her emotionally.”

Nikki admits she's suppressed a lot. She recalls talking to a friend she met when she was with her last pimp, Big Black, whom she stayed with for five years. Nikki said he never beat her. Her friend Jazmin replied, “What are you talking about? I saw him punch you in your face.” The more Nikki talks now, the more she remembers. Black didn't just punch her. He kicked her in the stomach and whipped her with an electric cord. Sometimes he hit her just to teach her not to flinch. “The pimps who say they don't hit a girl, that's just bull---,” she says. She remembers one pimp whose game was “very dark.” One of his girls tried to leave and he tied her to a radiator and stuck a hot curling iron inside her.

Nikki says despite the abuse she stayed with Black because she thought she was in love. “He told me we were going to get married and have children,” she says. “I truly believed him.” For two years Nikki and Black lived in Las Vegas. She made the money—sometimes thousands of dollars in a week—and it went into his pocket. All she wanted was to keep Black happy. But then Nikki got arrested and locked up for three weeks. When she came home, the apartment was a mess, the cupboards bare. It dawned on her that Black wasn't willing to lift a finger to take care of the two of them. She told him she wanted to quit the life, go back to school, maybe become a lawyer. Black looked her in the eye and said “No.”

That was the moment Nikki realized that he'd sold her a lie. She told him she was leaving, a move that would have gotten most girls beaten. But true to form, Black was too lazy to go after her.

In December 2008, after eight years on the streets, Nikki moved back to New York. Her first stop was GEMS. She had been introduced to the agency years before, when she was court-ordered there for care at age 12. “At GEMS they tried to teach us how pimps manipulate us,” she recalls, “but back then, I refused to see how bad things really were.” Now, Nikki was ready. “I always knew I could go back to GEMS,” she says. “They've given me a lot of counseling and support.” For months Nikki has been working hard to get her life in order. But it's been a struggle. “When I was with my pimp, it was like signing my life over,” she reflects. “Then suddenly I had all this freedom. I didn't have the best decision-making skills. I just wanted to go out and have fun. I kind of went overboard.”

Nikki did find a job in an office, but was fired after missing work for two weeks. She got a new boyfriend, became pregnant, broke up with the boyfriend, got back with him, and then had a miscarriage. These days, she's back home with her mother and making minimum wage as a supermarket cashier. “It's so hard,” she says. But she's got a plan. On a warm July afternoon, she announces she's going to get her GED. “I'm enrolling in classes this week!” she declares with a grin. Her big dream is to study law or advertising; she hasn't made up her mind. All she knows is that she's determined to be one of the girls who made it out. “I refuse to believe there is no other way for me to get money than by selling my body,” she insists. “I survived eight years in the life without getting killed. I know I can do the impossible.” □

Jeannine Amber is the senior writer for ESSENCE.
*Some subjects' names have been changed.

3 WAYS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

1 In 2008 New York passed a law making it one of the few states to treat children involved in the sex trade as victims, requiring crisis intervention for minors arrested for a first offense. “We'd never criminalize a girl if she was sexually abused by her stepfather,” says Carol Smolenski, executive director of End Child Prostitution and Trafficking (ECPAT). “Yet in most of the country, if there is an exchange of money, the girl is treated as a criminal. We need to change that and make sure these children are provided with services.” Here's how you can help:

1 RAISE AWARENESS. Public outrage gets the attention of legislators. That's how laws get changed.

Host a viewing of the critically acclaimed documentary *Very Young Girls*, coproduced by Rachel Lloyd (available from Netflix or gems-girls.org). To find out your state's policy on trafficked children, visit Polarisproject.org. If more needs to be done, contact your elected official.

2 SUPPORT A LOCAL AGENCY. For a list of agencies that assist commercially sexually exploited children in your area, log on to Gems-girls.org/serviceproviders.html.

3 HELP A CHILD. Contact the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children at 800-THE-LOST, or the National Runaway Switchboard at 800-RUNAWAY or 1800runaway.org.



GEMS Rachel Lloyd (right) helps girls leave their pimps.

WAYNE LAWRENCE. PHOTOGRAPH USED FOR ILLUSTRATIVE PURPOSES ONLY.

LLOYD, WAYNE LAWRENCE.