

# BLACK GIRLS FOR SALE

Pretty Young Thing.  
Petite Chocolate Treat.  
Exotic Ebony Cutie.

Every day on city street corners and on sites like Craigslist, African-American girls are being sold for sex. For part two of a series on child sex trafficking,

**JEANNINE AMBER**

spent a year investigating how police and prosecutors in Oakland, a city notorious for its sex trade, are waging a war to stop pimps and rescue their young victims

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATTHIAS CLAMER



The pimp told Jane Doe One that he liked his girls young so he could "raise them."

**S**he was snatched in broad daylight. The 15-year-old girl, who would later be referred to in court records as Jane Doe One, was sitting alone at a taco truck on the corner of International Boulevard and 22nd Street in East Oakland eating potato chips and drinking a strawberry-kiwi Snapple. A man walked over and put his hand on the girl's right shoulder. "You can do this the hard way or the easy way," he said under his breath.

The girl had seen this man before, harassing one of her friends. When he touched her, she had one thought: *Run!* She jumped to her feet and bolted toward the nearest doorway, a liquor store,

dropping her Snapple. The man picked up the bottle and whipped it after her. Later she would testify that it slammed into her back, knocking her to her knees. She got up and staggered into the store. Crouching behind the counter, she pleaded with the clerk to call 911. The shopkeeper looked down at the child and didn't move. The man entered, reached over the counter, and grabbed the girl roughly by her left arm. He dragged her out to the street and toward a gray car parked at the curb. Gesturing to a teenager sitting in the passenger seat, he told Jane Doe One that the girl had a gun. He pointed to two other girls in the backseat and said if she didn't get in the car they were going to jump her. Then he

opened the door and pushed a trembling Jane Doe One inside.

The man drove the girls to a two-bedroom apartment in Stockton, 50 miles east of Oakland. One bedroom was outfitted with a bunk bed and girls' clothing. The other bedroom was his. At the house, one of the girls from the car pulled Jane Doe One aside and told her to play it cool and maybe the man would let her go. She sat on the edge of his bed, nervously watching as the other girls left the room. The man stroked her legs, grabbed at her breasts, and pulled off her pants. "I didn't know what to say," she would tell the court. "I didn't know what to do." As she fought back tears, he raped her. ▸

PRODUCTION: BROOKE LUDI

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Jane Doe One was picked up on an infamous prostitution track in Oakland.

The girl would describe to the police how the man kept her in the apartment for two days, set a pit bull on her, threatened and barely fed her. And she would testify in court that on the second day of captivity he took her to a corner in Oakland known for prostitution and ordered her to get to work.

What happened to Jane Doe One—the abduction, the rape, the sexual exploitation—is a scenario so horrendous that most of us refuse to believe it could happen to a child we know. Yet law enforcement officials report that in cities across America, pimps are selling children for sex. And experts say that the ones most often targeted are poor African-American girls.

Pimps operate in a shadowy underworld, making it almost impossible to obtain exact numbers of the girls they victimize. However, the U.S. Department of Justice estimates that some 300,000 American children are at risk of being forced into prostitution. Oakland has been especially hard hit. Its high incidence of poverty and crime destabilizes families, making girls more vulnerable to exploitation and some men more prone to engage in illegal activities for money. A 2007 report by the Oakland Police Department notes that the city's reputation as a provider of young prostitutes is even being marketed to would-be johns via the Internet.

Not that long ago, these girls would have been picked up, charged with solicitation, and sent to juvenile jails. Their pimps might have received a slap on the wrist. Indeed, in many parts of the country, this brand of justice is still being meted out. But not in Oakland. Here both the police department and the district attorney's office have launched aggressive campaigns against child sex trafficking. From conducting weekly undercover sweeps of prostitution tracks looking for underage girls to seeking the most severe penalties for convicted traffickers, law enforcement is determined to get pimps off the streets. But what makes the job so difficult is the same thing that makes many pimps so rich—the power they wield over their victims.

## “Drug traffickers realize that exploiting children is more profitable and less risky than selling drugs.”

Pimps systematically intimidate, lie to, starve, beat and sleep-deprive their victims, some as young as 11 years old. The goal is to keep them too terrified to talk to the police. “I remember a girl telling me her pimp had her hold his gun,” recounts Officer Jim Beere, a seven-year veteran of the Oakland PD's Vice and Child Exploitation Unit. “Then he told her the gun was used in a murder and if she went to the police he would turn her in.”

When questioned, many girls do as they've been told: They cover for their pimp, refuse to give his real name, insist he's a boyfriend, not a trafficker. “They're victims,” says Officer Holly Joshi, who used to work with Beere in the Vice and Child Exploitation Unit and is now an official spokesperson for the department. “But they don't always act like it.” This reluctance by victims to reveal the men who are exploiting them is a constant challenge faced by Oakland law enforcement. The day the cops pick up Jane Doe One will be no different.

### MEAN STREETS

On a warm April afternoon in 2009, a little more than a week after Jane Doe One was abducted, Officer Joshi is at her desk on the fourth floor of the Oakland PD headquarters. In the past, Joshi, the daughter of a retired police lieutenant, worked undercover posing as a prostitute to lure johns. Today she's fielding calls from officers on the street who are performing a sweep of prostitution tracks, looking for young girls.

These girls don't look like stereotypical prostitutes, dressed in skimpy outfits and towering heels. Rather, they are almost indistinguishable from middle-school students, wearing jeans and T-shirts, with backpacks over their shoulders. “They call them undercover hos,” explains Beere, detailing how pimps have responded to the police crackdown by having the girls dress as inconspicuously as possible. They'll hang out at a bus stop around the time school gets out. “But then two buses will go by and at no time do the girls get on the bus,” he says. “Instead, you'll see them start waving at male drivers to pull over.”

It's 5:15 P.M. and still daylight when the cops start bringing the girls into the station. There are 15 of them, almost all are African-American. “Since 2006, we've seen a rise in domestic sex trafficking of nearly 100 percent,” says Sharmin Bock, deputy district attorney for Alameda County, which includes Oakland. Bock, who heads the DA's Human Exploitation and Trafficking Unit, attributes the spike in part to free Internet sites like Craigslist, where traffickers are able to sell sex online with very little risk of getting caught. According to the Advanced Interactive Media Group, this year alone Craigslist will earn up to \$36 million from its Adult Services postings. The ads feature barely dressed females squeezing their naked breasts, bending over a bed, standing soaking wet in a shower.

Despite policy changes enacted by Craigslist last year to crack down on prostitution, the ads remain. Advocates at A Future Not a Past, a Georgia-based project to combat domestic trafficking of children, assert that a substantial number of postings actually feature underage girls. While the number of girls being sold varies from month to month, Kaffie McCullough, AFNAP's campaign director, says studies conducted quarterly by the Governor's Office for Children and Families show a steady increase in minors peddled online since 2007. “The Internet is a runaway train when it comes to trafficking minors,” she says.

Also contributing to the rise, says Bock, are the ruthless economics of crime. “We're seeing drug traffickers migrating to pimping because they've realized that exploiting children is more profitable and less risky than selling drugs.” The Polaris Project, a national agency dedicated to ending human trafficking, calculates that a pimp who demands his girls bring in the standard quota of \$500 nightly will earn half a million dollars a year if he prostitutes three girls.

“That's tax-free,” points out Bock. “Where else can you make that kind of money so easily?” She adds that drug dealers face the constant threat of being killed by rivals, turned on by associates, or apprehended during drug busts. They also have to come up with an outlay of cash up front. “You've got to buy the dope, cut the dope, package the dope, then you've got to get people to help you sell it,” Bock notes. In contrast, pimps stay out of sight of law enforcement, sitting in their cars while their girls work the corner. And a pimp's product can be sold over and over. “You take all the girls' money and what do you do at the end of the day?” continues Bock. “Maybe buy them a McDonald's Happy Meal for a buck thirty-nine? Sadly, there is no better investment for your money than selling a child for sex.”

### GOOD COP, BAD COP

It's 5:48 P.M. when Holly Joshi and her partner Jim Saleda begin interviewing the girls one at a time in a small room at the ▸

## THE PREDATOR IN YOUR DAUGHTER'S BEDROOM

There is no better tool for predators than the Internet, says Nola Brantly, executive director of the Oakland-based Motivating Inspiring Serving and Supporting Sexually Exploited Youth, Inc. (missey.org), an organization providing counseling to trafficked children. Here she describes how pimps use the Web to groom and sell young girls and offers ways you can help in your community:

When we were growing up, parents felt children were vulnerable when they were in the streets. You didn't worry about them so much when they were at home. But the computer has changed all that. Now the predator is in your child's bedroom, talking to her for hours, getting inside her head, all while you're asleep.

This might go on for months. By the time parents catch wind of it, they can't tell that child, “You don't know this person.” As far as that child is concerned she has a full relationship and the parent is the one who doesn't get it. About a quarter of the girls we see at MISSEY were groomed online. Some met their predators on a social network site like MySpace; others first met him in a public space, like a mall, and then the relationship developed online.

People look to law enforcement to catch predators, but the underground nature of the sex industry makes it near impossible for police to combat this on their own. Consider: You have a white van parked in a lot. Inside is a trafficker, a 12-year-old girl, a laptop computer, a digital camera and a cell phone. The trafficker takes nude pictures of the girl, puts them on Craigslist, and within hours men are turning up to that van to have sex with that girl. The girl has never left the van and the van never left the parking lot. This crime exists in the shadows.

We can't monitor our children 24 hours a day. The best thing you can do is to make sure they are aware of the dangers. They need to know that the 16-year-old boy they met online may in fact be a 40-year-old man. Remind them never to give out their address or the name of their school or agree to meet anyone in person, even in a public space. Parents should be aware of who is calling their child's cell phone. They also need to remind children and teens never to take rides from strangers. A common thread with many girls who've been exploited is that at some point they got into a car with someone they didn't know.

People can get involved with their faith-based organizations to help increase sensitivity toward children who've been trafficked. We need to support agencies that provide services for exploited children and to advocate for legislative change to ensure stiffer penalties for predators. Most of all, we need to make sure the children are treated as victims, free of criminalization. —J.A.

## BLACK GIRLS FOR SALE

station. The two make an odd couple. Joshi, dressed in Converse low-tops, jeans and her hair in a ponytail, is all kinetic energy. Saleda, with his hunched shoulders, shaggy gray hair and three days worth of stubble, has the worn look of a man who's just about had enough. Together, in the interview room, the two are masterful at getting the information they need to make an arrest.

The first girl is brought in. She's petite, dressed in baggy jeans held up by a fat shoelace and a sweatshirt. Her hair is tied in a messy ponytail and her teeth are a jumble of braces. The girl sits down in a metal chair. Joshi and Saleda follow her in.

"We're here to help you, sweetie," says Joshi, "not hurt you." Joshi asks the girl about her family, school, boys and finally inquires what she's doing on the street. The girl, who's 15, speaks in a baby voice. She says she has never done this before. It's just that her boyfriend needed \$60 to pay the phone bill. Selling herself was her idea, she insists. Joshi asks for the name of the boyfriend. "I don't like to talk about him," says the girl.

Joshi pushes. "What I don't get is, what's the point of having a grown-ass boyfriend if he doesn't have \$60 for the phone bill?"

The girl giggles nervously.

"Is he hella fine?" asks Joshi. The girl shrugs.

Joshi says, "I'm not trying to lecture you, but a grown man? Why isn't he with someone his own age?"

"I don't know," says the girl. "He just likes young girls."

Then Saleda interjects. "Look," he says, "I'm not trying to be mean, but you're just a commodity to this guy. So you want to sit up here while he goes out and looks for the next girl?"

After an hour, the girl finally gives up the name. Joshi recognizes the suspect. He'd been reported by another girl a week earlier. That girl said she'd been kidnapped and raped by a pimp. Joshi clips his photograph to a manila folder. The suspect has an extensive record of drug violations.

Another girl is brought in to be interviewed. This one insists she is not prostituting, but she recognizes the picture clipped to the manila file. She says she saw the man set his pit bull on a girl.

A third girl is brought in—the girl who will later be known as Jane Doe One. Joshi recognizes her as a chronic runaway who has been exploited by pimps before. "I don't usually get emotional," says Joshi as she recounts the interview later that night. "But this is a girl we've been trying to rescue for years. She's lied to officers about her age and wouldn't tell them who was pimping her." On this night, with Joshi's gentle probing, the girl finally decides to tell about the kidnapping, the threats, the rape, everything. Afterward, Joshi and Saleda meet in the hallway. It's clear the girls are all talking about the same man. "We're gonna be on him like vultures," says Joshi.

### THE RULE OF FEAR

For officers in the Vice and Child Exploitation Unit, there is an urgency to getting traffickers off the streets that is fueled, at least in part, by the level of brutality they are seeing directed at young girls. "I'm not saying that girls weren't killed or raped by pimps 20 years ago," says Beere, "but it's really bad now." The cop recites atrocities he has witnessed like a grocery list: skull fractures, broken bones, girls who've been stabbed, shot, whipped, chopped into pieces, their bodies stuffed in garbage pails. Beere traces the increase in violence directly to the migration of drug traffickers to pimping. "You look at the arrest records of the pimps involved in these cases, and they'll have like 20 pages of arrests and it'll be all dope, dope, dope," says Beere. "Then all of a sudden you'll see a charge for human trafficking." He notes that these new pimps bring with them the territorial ruthlessness they learned in the drug trade. "The violence is directed toward anyone who is going to stand between them and their money."

On the streets, the most brutal traffickers are called guerrilla pimps. "A guerrilla pimp will grab a girl off the street, maybe throw her in the trunk of a car, take her to a crash pad—an apartment or an abandoned house—and have a 'pimp party,'" says Joshi. "That means he'll bring in his associates to gang-rape her for a few days to show her who's in control. After that, he'll put



Officer Holly Joshi persuaded Jane Doe One to give up her pimp's name.

## “Calling a girl a prostitute implies she chose to work for the pimp, when in fact she isn't old enough to legally consent to sex.”

her on the track. She's so afraid of him that she's not going to flag down the police or do anything that a normal person would do to get away. She's been completely broken down."

But violence isn't the only way pimps exert their intense hold on victims. Consider the tactics of the men known as Romeo pimps: These traffickers prey upon lonely, insecure children, showering them with compliments and promises of love and devotion. Once a girl is hooked, he'll put her on the street, telling her this is her way of contributing to the relationship. Runaways, foster kids and girls with trouble at home are particularly vulnerable, but even girls from stable families are not immune. "I remember the first time I encountered this," says Deputy District Attorney Sharon Carney. "An officer picked up a 12-year-old girl from a very affluent neighborhood soliciting in another part of town." The girl, a good student, with two involved parents, had been crawling out of her bedroom window at night. Her parents had no idea. "These men are master manipulators," adds Joshi. "I've seen pimps who are so well-spoken that if they came to take out your 18-year-old daughter, you'd think, *Oh, he's college-educated*, and you might let her go."

Experts say compounding the problem is the fact that most

girls, and their parents, are totally naive about the dangers of domestic sex trafficking. All they know of pimping is what they see in music videos—flashy men surrounded by pretty girls and fancy cars. "There are young girls who come to Oakland and think hanging out with pimps is going to be like a fun rap video," says Joshi. "People don't like to hear it, but hip-hop culture plays a part in desensitizing these girls to the actual dangers of the game."

Traffickers themselves are such fans of Hollywood's depiction of their vocation that some use pimp-themed films to help indoctrinate their victims. Joshi recalls one girl telling how she was made to watch the Hughes Brothers' 1999 documentary, *American Pimp*, as part of her training. "The pimp used that film to help her understand the rules of the game," says Joshi. "Then he put her on the street and graded her. The girl told me that on her first night she got all A's and her pimp said she was the best."

### TO CATCH A PIMP

The day after the girls were brought into the station, Joshi and Saleda make the 15-minute drive to the Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center to complete their interviews. Again, Joshi plays the big sister, comforting the girls and offering them connections to social service agencies where they can receive counseling and support once they are released. Joshi says sometimes the conversation focuses on the rudimentary task of helping the girls understand that what their pimp did to them was wrong. "You have to start with basics like what is not acceptable in a relationship," she says. "I ask, 'Do you think a man who loves you beats you and wants you to have sex with other men?'"

The officers spend several hours collecting the details they will later pass on to the DA. When they're done, they put out an APB listing Vincent Turner, aka Legs, as a suspect. Six days later, he is picked up by police.

Almost a full year from the day police brought the child now known as Jane Doe One to the station, Officer Holly Joshi, dressed in a gray pantsuit, is in court to testify as an expert witness at the criminal trial of Vincent Turner. He's charged with eight counts, including human trafficking, rape and kidnapping—charges he might not be facing if not for the cops' skilled questioning of the victims and the aggressive tactics of Deputy District Attorney Bock. Her approach, which includes charging pimps with serious felonies such as extortion and kidnapping, has yielded impressive results. Between 2006 and April of this year, her office has charged 156 defendants; 111 of those cases resulted in convictions with some sentences as harsh as life in prison. By comparison, in states such as Kentucky and Utah, pimps can be charged with misdemeanors and serve as little as a few months before returning to the streets and business as usual.

Federal law enforcement has taken a much stronger approach than many states. In 2000 Congress passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, which stipulates that traffickers who exploit children can be imprisoned for life. Advocates argue that these kinds of penalties should be enacted from state to state, not just at a federal level. "Oakland is really a model for what should be happening everywhere," says Carol Smolenski, executive director of End Child Prostitution and Trafficking, USA. "The children are treated like victims and offered assistance. And the bad guys are strenuously punished."

At Turner's criminal trial, Jane Doe [continued on page 202]

## PROTECT YOUR CHILD

Officer James Beere, who worked with the Oakland Police Department's Vice and Child Exploitation Unit until last March, shares tips for keeping girls safe:

**1 TEACH HER A PIMP CAN BE ANYONE.** We've arrested doctors and government employees. I've also seen a rise in teenage boys pimping out classmates. Let her know that no one should ask her to sell her body.

**2 SHOW HER YOU CARE.** Pimps look for girls who have a weakness they can exploit. Sometimes there are issues at home—the discipline's too

severe or the girl feels neglected. The most important thing you can do to safeguard your girl is to let her know you love and support her.

**3 STAY CONNECTED.** Talk to your child about who she's hanging out with, where she's going and what she's doing on the computer. All types of children are vulnerable to trafficking—rich kids, poor kids, we've seen it all.

**4 PAY ATTENTION TO CHANGES.** If she is dressing differently, becoming secretive, or has changed her group of friends, you need to approach her. Start with something like, "I truly love you and I want to help you. Please tell me what's going on. I'm not going to love you any less."

**5 SEEK ANSWERS.** If a child closes down the lines of communication, then you're going to have to be the parent and start searching. Make sure there are no drugs in her room. Look for strange numbers on her cell phone bill. Is someone buying her revealing clothes? Does she have a boyfriend you've never met? Is she staying out all night? Did someone give her a new phone? These are warning signs that could indicate she's being exploited.

**6 TAKE ACTION.** If you discover someone is sexually exploiting a child, whether it's your daughter, niece or a young neighbor, you need to get the police involved. Preventing that man's access to the child is priority number one. —J.A.

## BLACK GIRLS FOR SALE [continued from page 169]

One and another girl, referred to as Jane Doe Two, have agreed to testify. Prompted by prosecutor Sharon Carney, Jane Doe One recounts how she was kidnapped, raped and put on the street. She recalls that the defendant had a tattoo across his chest: "MOB," which stands for "Money Over Bitches." Jane Doe Two is tiny, not even 5 feet tall. In a small voice she tells the court how the defendant tricked her into getting in his car, then drove her to Stockton, demanding she call her boyfriend and ask him to pay \$2,500 to get her back. She says the defendant gave her a choice: He could kill her, have his friends run a train (gang-rape her) or she could have sex with him—which she did.

On the third day, Joshi takes the stand. As she details the brutality of pimps and the vulnerability of the girls they recruit, the mostly female jurors listen attentively. Sponsor Strellis, Turner's trial attorney, approaches Joshi for his cross-examination. A tall, thin man with white-gray hair, the lawyer refers to young girls being sold on the street as "prostitutes." Joshi bristles. "We don't refer to them as prostitutes," she says in a clear voice. To experts in the fight against child trafficking, calling an underage girl a prostitute implies she chose to work for the pimp, when in fact she isn't old enough to legally consent to having sex, let alone sell her body. "They are victims of child exploitation," Joshi emphasizes.

The trial lasts seven days. Turner does not testify. Instead he stares down witnesses as the prosecutor calls them to the stand.

Then, after a day and a half of deliberation, on April 2, 2010, the jury renders its verdict: Vincent Turner is found guilty on seven charges, including human trafficking, kidnapping and forcible rape. The following July, the man who snatched Jane Doe One off the street is sentenced to three consecutive prison terms totaling 48 years to life. (He plans to appeal.)

Bock maintains that Turner's harsh sentence puts other pimps in Oakland on notice. "They think they're manipulating the system," she says, "but they're playing by our rules now." □

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**Jeannine Amber** is the senior writer for this magazine.

### HOW YOU CAN HELP

For tips on speaking to your child about online safety, visit [netsmartz.org](http://netsmartz.org). To support or volunteer for an agency in your state that provides services for trafficked children, log on to [gems-girls.org](http://gems-girls.org). For information about advocating for stiffer penalties for child traffickers, go to [polarisproject.org](http://polarisproject.org). If you think a child might be in trouble, call the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children at **800-THE-LOST** (800-843-5678). —J.A.