

## MODERN-DAY SEX SLAVERY

### What is sex trafficking?

It's when someone is forced, coerced or tricked into the underground commercial sex trade against her or his will. It's a form of human trafficking, a general category of modern-day slavery that can include forced labor. In its five-year study of hotline calls, the Polaris Project, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, determined most human trafficking cases involved sex trafficking.

### Is it the same as prostitution?

Yes, when the prostitution is forced. Authorities say that not all prostitutes are sex trafficking victims and that some independent sex workers are in the market by choice.

### How is sex trafficking related to the 2008 law that some are linking to the influx of unaccompanied children from Central America?

Seen as a way to combat sex trafficking, the 2008 law was a reauthorization of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. The 2008 change provided more protections to children entering the United States alone who were not from Mexico or Canada.

### Who traffics in prostitutes?

Typically it's male pimps; male and female recruiters and enforcers; and male reporters.

### How do pimps do it?

- ▶ They target vulnerable people who have histories of abuse.
- ▶ They use violence, threats, lies, debt bondage or other forms of control and manipulation.
- ▶ They travel in circuits.
- ▶ They operate generally as small-time, independent dealers, though they are highly networked with one another about police, prostitutes and places to go.

### What connections are there to other crimes?

There are no connections to weapons trafficking; some connections to drug trafficking, depending on the city; and growing connections to gang activity, according to a recent national report by the Urban Institute. Some places have established trafficking pipelines that move sex workers from other countries to brothels and massage parlors in the United States.

### Who are trafficking victims?

Typically females — though there are male and transgender victims, too. The average age of recruitment is 12 to 14.

### Where does sex trafficking occur?

Hotels, residential brothels, strip clubs, massage parlors, truck stops, private parties and residences.

### Who are the johns?

Men, typically, of all backgrounds. Local law enforcement said a typical john's concern at arrest is not the court penalty but whether his wife or co-workers will find out.

### Is sex trafficking on the rise locally?

Few reliable numbers help to measure the scope over time. What we know:

- ▶ Last year, various federal agencies opened 1,768 investigations of human trafficking, up 7 percent from 2012. It is unknown how many victims are in Nebraska or Iowa.
- ▶ An FBI Child Exploitation Task Force has rescued more than 3,400 children and convicted more than 1,500 traffickers since 2003.
- ▶ A national hotline for human trafficking victims drew more than 72,000 phone calls, emails, text messages and other contacts over a five-year period. Those contacts resulted in 9,298 individual cases of human trafficking. Of those, an estimated 43 were in Iowa and 32 in Nebraska. Last year the hotline fielded 118 calls from Iowa and 110 from Nebraska.
- ▶ Omaha police made 137 prostitution-related arrests last year, down from 2012.
- ▶ Nine traffickers have been sentenced in federal court in Nebraska since 2012.
- ▶ Of the 8,070 victims served in 2013 by the Women's Center for Advancement, 14 said they were trafficked. The WCA believes 30 were.
- ▶ The Omaha Salvation Army served 31 identified trafficking victims in 2013; 65 more were served by the organization's Wellspring program for people wishing to exit prostitution.

Source: Polaris Project; Urban Institute; the New York Times

### Are you a victim of sex trafficking? Do you know someone who is?

In Omaha, call the FBI at 402-463-8688, and press zero. Or call or text the National Human Trafficking Resource Center at 888-373-7888; text HELP or INFO BeFree (233733).



Dawn was forced into prostitution at the age of 15. She escaped, and her cooperation with law enforcement helped clinch a federal case against the traffickers. Now 19, Dawn stands outside the apartment where she was held captive near 31st Street and Poppleton Avenue in Omaha.

REBECCA S. GRATZ/THE WORLD-HERALD

## SEX TRAFFICKING: CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1A

# DAWN DID NOT PLAN TO BECOME A PROSTITUTE. SHE HAD WHAT SHE SAID WAS A NORMAL CHILDHOOD:

SHE PLAYED BASKETBALL, WENT TO CHURCH, HUNG OUT WITH FRIENDS.

THE TROUBLE STARTED WHEN DAWN — HER MIDDLE NAME — EXPERIMENTED WITH ALCOHOL AS AN EIGHTH-GRADER. SHE BROKE CURFEW AND BUTTED HEADS WITH HER MOTHER AND STEPFATHER SO MUCH THAT THE COURTS INTERVENED AND CALLED HER UNGOVERNABLE.

She drove a car without a license and was charged with a misdemeanor. When she didn't appear for a hearing, a warrant was issued for her arrest.

Dawn was made to wear an ankle bracelet for monitoring. She was under house arrest, which meant she couldn't go anywhere but school at Bellevue East and home.

The teen bristled at all the restrictions. Dawn wanted out of school and out of the house. She and a 13-year-old friend decided to run away. They didn't flesh out much of a plan beyond stopping first at a house Dawn had partied at before with a man named Ramon Heredia.

Ramon was 20. He was married to a woman named Kat. They lived with Ramon's aunt Merrideth and uncle Nate at 30th Street and Poppleton Avenue.

Dawn had seen drugs there. She knew the family had multiple properties. She figured there would be room for two girls. She also figured these were people who knew how to get around the law.

She called Ramon. His aunt told her how to slip off the ankle bracelet using butter. That didn't work, so Dawn cut it off with a knife. Then she shoved clothes, shoes and her flat iron into three bags and called for a ride.

She was going to be free.

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It was after 1 a.m. on New Year's Day 2010 when Friends dropped off Dawn and her friend in the alley behind a house belonging to Merrideth Crane-Horton and her husband, Nate Horton.

Merrideth, then 31, stood 6-foot-2 and

weighed more than 200 pounds. Dawn described her as a hard-core chick. Nate was strong — Dawn had watched him lift alleyway dumpsters.

Merrideth and Ramon welcomed Dawn and her friend.

They all went to the supermarket to get hair dye, then to Walmart for frozen pizza. Back at the house, they ate and did makeovers. Dawn's light-brown hair became red. Her friend's black hair was bleached blond. Both got haircuts. They figured this was part of their runway disguises.

What happened next in those early morning hours was fast and surreal.

The girls were taken to a studio apartment a few blocks away. It had a couch, an old TV and a twin-size bed.

"You know what you have to do," Merrideth said. "Right?"

Dawn figured Merrideth meant sell drugs — something Dawn was OK with if it meant she could stay. She said yes.

Then Dawn realized Merrideth wanted the girls to sell something else: themselves.

She showed the girls red lacy lingerie and a nurse's costume. She told them to change for a photo shoot.

Dawn said no and started bawling. The girls begged to go home.

No, Merrideth told them. You're staying here. "We'll dress you if we have to."

The girls reluctantly complied, and their pictures were taken. Within minutes the photos Merrideth had emailed were drawing replies.

"Are you excited?" Merrideth asked.

"You got your first date."

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Over the next several hours Dawn felt as if she were watching a really horrible movie. Back at the house, people came and went. Children were around. Other prostitutes tried to soft-sell sex work: You make \$200 an hour! This john is real sweet! This one likes to talk.

Dawn followed a prostitute named Montana down the block to another apartment and listened to her chat up a john before going into a room.

Then came the threat of what might happen if she refused to prostitute herself. Dawn watched as Ramon, Merrideth and even some of the children hit the prostitutes and called them names. She knew they had guns and knives.

When Dawn and her friend were finally left alone in the studio apartment later that morning, they huddled together and cried. They were locked in.

Ramon returned and took Dawn's friend away.

A john named John showed up. He looked like Santa Claus. A big guy with a scruffy beard and gray hair.

Dawn tried to talk with him, hoping that's all he'd want.

"Are we going to do this or not?" he asked. Dawn excused herself to the bathroom. She didn't see any way around it, so she stole herself to go forward.

Once he left, she cried for an hour. That night, she had a date with john No. 2. He was younger, but meaner.

He had cold hands and told Dawn he wanted to warm them.

"C'mere," he said. Dawn again ran to the bathroom.

When she came out, the man was naked, sitting on the couch.

He forced himself on her, a newly turned 15-year-old. She began to gag, but he kept his hand on her head like he knew she was going to run.

She was humiliated. She was angry. And she decided she couldn't do it again.

After the man left, Dawn's friend returned to the apartment and was supposed to be up next. John No. 1 had requested her for the following day. The next morning, Ramon and his wife, Kat, visited. They left the apartment door unlocked when they

went to get food for the girls.

Dawn ran outside and saw a car that had been left running, with no one in it. She told the younger girl to grab her things.

"We're leaving."

Dawn drove east on Interstate 80 and saw a sign for Des Moines. OK, she thought, Des Moines! Then she saw a sign for Kansas City. OK, Kansas City!

Their drive ended about 50 miles later, near Hamburg, Iowa, when Dawn hit black ice and flipped the car. The impact caused the teens to lose their shoes. Though injured, they climbed out and started running barefoot through the snow.

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Their first rescuer was a good Samaritan who stopped his car and offered a blanket while he called the cops.

Their second rescuer was an Omaha police officer who followed up with a criminal report that led to the arrests, weeks later, of the first john. The second john was arrested the following year.

Their third rescuer was FBI Special Agent Anna Brewer, who eventually brought down the trafficking ring.

Brewer works for the task force that pairs FBI resources with local police to bust sex traffickers and help victims.

It was just getting underway in 2010, and this became the group's first case.

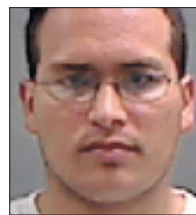
Three weeks after Dawn and her friend had fled the midtown Omaha sex-trafficking ring, Brewer had randomly targeted an escort online and set up a date, and when the prostitute showed up with her 9-week-old baby, Brewer investigated further.

Turns out this prostitute, who was 18, worked for Ramon and Merrideth.

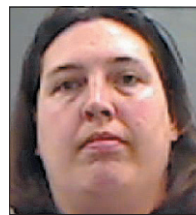
On Feb. 4, Brewer went to the Poppleton Avenue apartment with a search warrant. An Omaha police officer happened by, and told Brewer about the report he'd taken of two juveniles held captive there. That gave Brewer's case more weight.

Dawn and her friend cooperated with authorities.

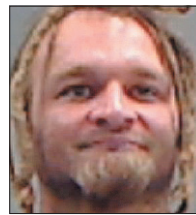
By June of that year, Ramon, his wife, Merrideth Crane-Horton and Nate Horton were arrested under federal sex-trafficking laws that carry stiffer penalties than state pandering charges. In October 2010 they pleaded guilty to conspiring to commit or financially benefiting from sex



Ramon Heredia



Merrideth Crane-Horton



Nate Horton

The Hortons and Heredia ran a sex-trafficking ring in Nebraska and Iowa that had ensnared Dawn and others.

trafficking. Their sentences ranged from three to 17½ years, with Crane-Horton receiving the longest sentence.

As for the johns, the one who looked like Santa Claus was a 57-year-old Papillon man and Air Force retiree who said he didn't know Dawn was underage. Prosecutors said it didn't matter. He was sentenced in Douglas County District Court to two to five years. The younger john, who was at one time the nation's top short-track car racer, was sentenced to eight to 16 years.

But that didn't solve the girls' problems. The 13-year-old wound up in foster care, where she remains. She is now 18.

Dawn spent that first week after the car crash at a Council Bluffs detention center before being returned to her Bellevue home. She continued to drink and use drugs.

She bounced around schools and dropped out, eventually earning her GED. She spent nine months in a group home. She spent three months in Geneva, Nebraska, at a youth detention facility for girls. She dropped out of community college.

Things started to change when Dawn, now 19, bumped into a former algebra classmate from middle school. A year older, he urged her to quit partying. She did. He urged her to get a job. She did, and now works at a fast-food restaurant.

The two are engaged and has a baby girl. Dawn's parents are supportive.

Despite all she's been through, Dawn considers herself lucky.

She got out after three days.

Dawn knows she could have been captive a lot longer.

What spurred her to act was guilt and horror about her younger friend facing the same fate.

"I think if I was there by myself ... I wouldn't have gotten the courage to get out of there," she said. "It takes a lot of courage. And I was scared."

She's still scared. It's why she doesn't want to give her full name.

Dawn figures the people she helped put behind bars have connections. She also figures outing herself as a prostitute, no matter how short-lived, no matter how coerced, means that people will judge her. In that regard, she got the stiffest sentence.

She will carry this for the rest of her life.

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# New tack to fight age-old problem

Authorities now view prostitute as victim of an abusive boss: her pimp

By ERIN GRACE  
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

An old problem has a new name.

Prostitution is now called sex trafficking. Pimps are called traffickers. Prostitutes are called victims.

The change isn't just semantics. The labels reflect an evolution in how authorities and now communities view the underground commercial sex market and the bleak reality for prostitutes, who often are forced, coerced or tricked into the work.

Prostitutes now are seen less as criminals and more, as an Omaha FBI agent put it, victims "being forced to be raped."

But the degree of the problem is hard to measure. There are few reliable numbers to describe the scope. Those working on the issue disagree on whether or not the crime is on the rise.

Certainly awareness has grown since 2000, when a federal law called the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act was passed. Among the law's provisions were more ways to go after pimps beyond an existing law called the Mann Act, which prohibits harboring or trafficking prostitutes.

The new law gave prosecutors additional ways to nab pimps by proving nonphysical force was involved. Under the law, coercion or fraud could be enough to get an indictment. So could the victim's age. Penalties were toughened when minors were prostituted.

Stephen Patrick O'Meara, a recently retired assistant U.S. attorney in Iowa, said it has taken time for this 14-year-old sex trafficking law to be understood and used. He said momentum against sex trafficking is growing.

In 2003 the FBI helped start a national anti-trafficking initiative that teams federal and local resources to arrest pimps and rescue prostitutes, especially minors. In 2010 the effort expanded to Omaha. In 2012 the Nebraska Legislature created a task force to study the issue. This past year social service agencies and churches have added the fight against sex trafficking to their causes.

A recently released federal report shows that more cases of sex trafficking are being opened, investigated and prosecuted. Calls to a national hotline are up.

But no one really knows whether this is the result of increased sex trafficking or increased awareness of sex trafficking as a crime. A separate study by the Urban Institute, an independent, nonpartisan, Washington, D.C.-based research group, said that no reliable figures exist for a variety of reasons: the reluctance of victims to come forward, the lack of uniform reporting of sex trafficking crimes and the difficulty of prosecuting those cases in federal court.

Locally, there is little data. The Nebraska Human Trafficking Task Force, created by state law, has been meeting for two years. This group has tapped a pair of University of Nebraska-Lincoln professors to attempt to get a statewide measure of sex trafficking.

But the state task force has no funding. There's been little intersection with the FBI task force, which is the primary law-enforcement arm looking into sex trafficking.

Special Agent Kevin Hytrek leads the FBI task force. It includes Special Agent Anna Brewer, who has been the public face on this issue, appearing at churches and service clubs. Behind the scenes, Brewer assists local prostitution sting operations for payment to local law enforcement for their overtime on these stings, investigates cases and helps, where possible, bring federal cases to court.

How many stings? How many cases? How many indictments? How many victims?

The FBI won't say much. The local office did say it is currently investigating about five dozen cases involving child exploitation, cyber child pornography and sex trafficking.

One of its three victim specialists has seen her prostitution caseload increase from 169

sex trafficking victims in 2011 to 382 so far this fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30. Since 2011, this specialist has served 1,342 victims.

And the FBI provided figures from three years of targeted, multiple-day national busts called Operation Cross Country. Since 2012 the Omaha-based FBI district, which includes Nebraska and Iowa, has arrested five pimps and made contact with 15 more; arrested 42 johns; and arrested 68 prostitutes and made contact with 80 more in Omaha.

Operation Cross Country happened to coincide this year with the College World Series, when churches and advocacy groups said sex trafficking would be flourishing outside TD Ameritrade Park. There were prayer vigils and demonstrations.

How many pimps locally were busted? Two. One minor was rescued.

A Carter Lake man, arrested in 2010 for running a two-state prostitution ring, promoted his business during the CWS. In 2011, police broke up a multi-state prostitution ring during the CWS. But arrest figures did not appear to spike during the series in the past two years, and the head of the FBI's anti-trafficking task force said recently he didn't think there was a big connection.

Omaha police arrests for prostitution are down — something that Detective Amber Schlote said could account for how the market has shifted from the streets to the Internet, where interrupting the sex trade is harder. Although it's easy to find prostitutes online through websites such as backpage.com, pimps have gotten tech-savvy and formed their own online networks that warn about police presence and screen for cops.

The lower number of arrests, Schlote said, also signifies a changing mindset about how to deal with prostitutes.

"Instead of throwing them in jail," she said, "let's ask them a few questions."

This approach attempts to drill down to one of the roots of the crime: a controlling, abusive boss. This pimp-trafficker preys on the vulnerable: runaways, abused, lonely and addicted women, the jobless and homeless and those who see sex work as their only money-making prospect.

Prostitutes stay in the business out of shame, addiction, fear and a belief there is no way out.

These dynamics have probably always been at play.

The local cases that did lead to federal indictments included chilling details about how pimps controlled their prostitutes. They used brute force, threatened the lives of prostitutes' children or parents and grandparents and lied with them with drugs. They isolated them by moving them from city to city.

One 6-foot-4, 250-pound pimp whipped prostitutes with a belt, choked them and performed strip searches to control them.

A 33-year-old pimp told a 17-year-old with emphysema and mental health problems that he loved her. Then he beat her alcohol and drugs, beat her and took her earnings.

A third pimp drove an 18-year-old runaway who had been expelled from high school to her "date," then kept her 9-week-old infant in the car while she met with the john.

It's hard to know how many victims there are. For each pimp Brewer investigated and O'Meara tried in the U.S. District Court of Southern Iowa, there were at least four to five victims who would testify and a handful more who couldn't.

Authorities have to weigh each case individually. Ultimately, he said, sex trafficking is not a crime that communities can expect the courts to handle alone.

Communities need to shore up programs that help the poor, runaways and struggling families.

Not saying you can eradicate this — it's billion," he said. "But if you want to reduce the victim population, you have to work on these things."

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