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## New law to battle Pierce and King County child sex trafficking

**CRIME:** The child sex trade thrives in our area, but that might soon change

**STACIA GLENN; STAFF WRITER**

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The ugly world of child sex trafficking is thriving in the Puget Sound region.

Girls as young as 11 are being prostituted at the hands of men who promised to take care of them. Gangs are switching from selling drugs to selling sex to support their enterprises.

For the last three years, the Everett-Seattle-Tacoma area has led the country in the number of juveniles recovered during the FBI's Operation Cross Country sting, which targets child sex exploitation.

Of 69 girls rescued nationwide last year, 23 were found in the Puget Sound area. Nine of the 99 pimps taken into custody during the annual sweep were local.

Numbers for Pierce County are hard to come by, but officials say there are 300 to 500 prostituted young girls in King County.

"It's very troublesome," said Lakewood police detective Ryan Larson, who works on Innocence Lost, a federal task force focused on saving victims and taking pimps and johns off the streets. "There are more cases than we can work."

As common as human trafficking may be, there has been only one conviction in the state since the practice was outlawed in 2003. Washington was the first state to pass a law criminalizing human trafficking.

Federal and state officials attribute the lack of convictions to ambiguous legal terms in the statute.

Gov. Chris Gregoire signed into law Monday a bill expanding the criminal definition of human trafficking to add forced labor, involuntary servitude, commercial sexual abuse of a minor and criminal sex acts.

"I think this will make it a much more practical statute that police and prosecutors will use," said King County Deputy Prosecuting Attorney Sean O'Donnell, who handled the state's only human trafficking conviction case in 2009 and helped write the legislation.

"The human trafficking statute was too esoteric," he said. "People were scratching their heads wondering what it meant."

O'Donnell and Matthew Thomas, an assistant United States attorney, spoke to the Soroptimist International of Tacoma club Tuesday about the challenges and importance of prosecuting human trafficking cases.

"We're hoping by prosecuting pimps with minors, word will get around town" that punishments are strict, Thomas said, adding that he just finished a case in which a pimp was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

Shared Hope International, a Vancouver, Wash.-based advocacy group, recently began reviewing state laws related to child sex trafficking and issuing grades under its Protected Innocence Initiative.

Washington received a "C" in January because of its confusing definition of human trafficking, a lack of "protective provisions" for the victims and not enough tools for law enforcement officers to build cases.

Attorney General Rob McKenna said the grade was not satisfactory and pledged to do better.

Shared Hope spokesman Loren Wohlgenuth Jr. said state officials have made inroads, but law enforcement officers need investigative resources such as wire tapping and access to cellphone records to build cases against suspected pimps.

He also said victims need financial restitution, shelter, counseling and medical care and deserve to have their records expunged.

"Let's remove the stigma that these girls are criminals," Wohlgenuth said. "They're victims."

Police said it's in the girls' best interest to be arrested for prostituting because it temporarily takes them off the streets and gives officials a chance to offer resources.

Most victims have been manipulated and trained on what to say if caught, and because Washington has no secure shelters to house the victims, officials can't get girls the services they need unless they cooperate.

"Sometimes we arrest a girl three to five times before we finally get through to her," said Larson, the Lakewood police detective. "We need secure housing for these girls."

The Innocence Lost Task Force has plenty to keep them busy. The seven-member team finds most of its cases online but still sees young girls walking the streets.

In the last three years, Larson has built cases against seven pimps just in Lakewood who were each controlling one to five girls, not including grown women.

His focus recently has been on arresting johns, or customers.

In the last month, Larson has arrested two men accused of paying for sex with pre-adolescent girls. A third man fled the country before police could arrest him.

Because the human trafficking statute was undefined, prosecutors typically brought charges of promoting commercial sexual abuse of a minor. The penalties are the same.

A first-time offender pimping a young girl faces 93 to 123 months in prison. A first-time offender pimping an adult faces 21 to 27 months in prison.

Now, in light of the new bill, prosecutors hope to charge them with human trafficking.

"When you sell someone's body, you are trafficking in people," O'Donnell said. "Don't mince words about it."

Stacia Glenn: 253-597-8653 [stacia.glenn@thenewstribune.com](mailto:stacia.glenn@thenewstribune.com)

By the numbers

- 100,000 to 300,000 adolescents are sold for sex each year in the United States.
- The average price tag for an underage girl sold on the streets is \$400 per hour.
- Children are sold an estimated 10 to 15 times a day.

Source: Shared Hope International and the Washington Attorney General's Office



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1950 South State Street, Tacoma, Washington 98405 253-597-8742

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