
Originally published Thursday, January 13, 2011 at 10:02 PM

Nicole Brodeur

A shameful side of the city

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Seattle Times staff columnist

Just weeks ago, we were rushing through the streets and malls, caught in the holiday hustle.

It's likely we walked right past teenaged girls being hustled into a life that is anything but a holiday.

Teen sex-trafficking is alive and booming all over the region — and hiding in plain sight.

Girls as young as 14 are scooped up and groomed by pimps at the same places where we shop for shoes.

On the streets where we run errands, you might spot a girl waiting for a ride. She just doesn't know from whom.

"It's all over the place," said Jason Pamer, whose Redmond production company, Mew Films, is working on "Rape for Profit," a feature documentary chronicling teen sex-trafficking in Seattle and its suburbs. (www.mewfilms.com)

We might brag about our literacy and livability, but the more shameful Seattle fact is that we lead the rest of the country when it comes to sex-trafficking — at least by one measure. Last November, the FBI conducted its annual national operation to recover juvenile prostitutes and arrest their pimps. One-third of the 69 children rescued in 40 cities were in the Seattle-Everett-Tacoma area.

Last fall, the Seattle Police Department dressed two undercover cops as teen girls, complete with backpacks and phones for texting at Westlake Center. Within 45 minutes, two pimps approached.

Pamer told me of filming along the so-called "track," where Denny Way meets Aurora Avenue.

"If you just parked and watched, you'd see the same car go around five, six, eight, 10 times," Pamer said. "They're looking for girls."

For the pimps, it's a business that is more lucrative than drugs. A dose is sold just once, while a teen can be sold to many people, many times in one day.

"It's a perfect crime," said Steve Gutzler, of Compassion2One, an Issaquah-based nonprofit that targets teen sex-trafficking.

On Tuesday, Washington state received a "C" grade from Shared Hope International, a nonprofit founded by former GOP Congresswoman Linda Smith that is leading a worldwide effort to eradicate sex-trafficking.

State Attorney General Rob McKenna called the grade "not satisfactory," and vowed to continue the legislative steps started in July 2003, when Washington became the first state to criminalize sex-trafficking and extend protections to mail-order brides.

Next Thursday, the Women's Funding Alliance, along with the Seattle City Council, Youth Care and the Women's Funding Network will host a Town Hall forum about the sex-trafficking of local girls.

(Tickets are \$5 through www.brownpapertickets.com. All profits will go to The Bridge, the state's only residential recovery program designed to serve these children).

It's all intended to open our eyes to what is happening around all us, and to the teens who belong to all of us.

These teens — and some are boys — are hungry for the attention of men who lull them into something they think is love, and find is a pimp-run prison instead, said Gutzler, who hopes to open a drop-in center where teens forced into prostitution can find refuge from their pimps and, ultimately, "another path."

"Anyone who has children or is involved with kids should care about these girls," he said.

Pamer said his work has been like filming the darkest corner of his own backyard.

"We want to illuminate that reality," he said. "No girl wants to do this, to have unprotected, violent sex 15 times a day.

"We are seeing the innocence, the life taken from our kids. It's modern-day slavery."

Put that way, it's something we can't miss anymore.

Nicole Brodeur's column appears Tuesday and Friday. Reach her at 206-464-2334 or nbrodeur@seattletimes.com.

She's out there with new eyes.