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How Pimps Use the Web to Sell Girls

By Nicholas D. Kristoff

In November, a terrified 13-year-old girl pounded on an apartment door in Brooklyn. When a surprised woman answered, the girl pleaded for a phone. She called her mother, and then dialed 911.

The girl, whom I'll call Baby Face because of her looks, frantically told police that a violent pimp was selling her for sex. He had taken her to the building and ordered her to go to an apartment where a customer was waiting, she said, and now he was waiting downstairs to make sure she did not escape. She had followed the pimp's directions and gone upstairs, but then had pounded randomly on this door in hopes of getting help.

Baby Face said she hurt too much to endure yet another rape by a john. She told prosecutors later that she was bleeding vaginally and that her pimp had recently kicked her down a stairwell for trying to flee.

That 911 call set in motion the arrest of Kendale Judge, then 21. Judge has pleaded not guilty to charges of sex trafficking, kidnapping, rape and compelling prostitution. He is in jail, and we haven't heard his side of the events yet.

The episode also shines a spotlight on how the girl was marketed — in ads on Backpage.com, a major national Web site where people place ads to sell all kinds of things, including sex. It is a godsend to pimps, allowing customers to order a girl online as if she were a pizza.

Lauren Hersh, the ace prosecutor in Brooklyn who leads the sex-trafficking unit there, says that of the 32 people she and her team have prosecuted in the last year and a half — typically involving victims aged 12 to 25 — a vast majority of the cases included girls marketed through Backpage ads.

“Pimps are turning to the Internet,” said Hersh. “They're not putting the girls on the street so much. Backpage is a great vehicle for pimps trying to sell girls.”

Craigslist backed out of this sector after public protests. Pimps then moved to Backpage.com, which is owned by Village Voice Media, owners of The Village Voice weekly newspaper.

Attorneys general from 48 states wrote a joint letter to Backpage, warning that it had become “a hub” for sex trafficking and calling on it to stop running adult services ads. The attorneys general said that they had identified cases in 22 different states in which pimps peddled underage girls through Backpage.

The attorneys general cited a 15-year-old girl who was being forced to have sex with men last year in Dorchester, Mass. The pimp marketed the girl through Backpage.

But Backpage isn't budging. Indeed, it has fought back with personal attacks on those, such as Ashton Kutcher, who have linked it to human trafficking.

Steve Suskin, legal counsel to Village Voice Media, gave me a lengthy statement in which he argued that the company is already cooperating closely with law-enforcement authorities. He cited a 16-year-old girl in Seattle who was rescued as a result of a tip the company had made.

"Censorship will not rid the world of exploitation," Suskin asserted.

It's true that there's some risk that pimps will migrate to new Web sites, possibly based overseas, that are less cooperative. But, on balance, that's a risk worth taking. The present system is failing. Pimps aren't the shrewdest marketers, and eliminating a hub for trafficking should at least chip away at the problem.

Backpage suggests that it is battling censors and prudes. In fact, what drives it seems to be greed. In their letter, the attorneys general said that Backpage earns more than \$22 million annually from prostitution advertising.

On Backpage, the pimps claim adult ages for the girls they market, but Hersch scoffs. "I see 19," she said, "and I immediately think 13."

"I'm not seeing a lot of cases where there's not coercion," she added. "The average age where a girl is forced into prostitution is 12 to 14. And most of these 16- or 17 year-olds are being run by pretty vicious pimps."

While there are no reliable figures for human trafficking, the more we look, the more we find. The Brooklyn district attorney, Charles J. Hynes, says that in the year before he set up a sex-trafficking unit in June 2010, his office prosecuted no trafficking cases. Since then, the office has become a national model, indicting 32 people, with 10 convictions and no acquittals so far.

Among those rescued was Baby Face, who had run away from home in September. Judge allegedly found her on the street, bought food for her and told her that she was beautiful. Within a few days, he had posted her photo on Backpage and was selling her five to nine times a day, prosecutors say. When she didn't earn enough money, he beat her with a belt, they add.

When Baby Face ran away from her pimp and desperately knocked on that apartment door in Brooklyn, she was also in effect pounding on the door of the executive suites of Backpage and Village Voice Media. Those executives should listen to her pleas.

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