

They are being beaten, branded, bought and sold along our highways and in our hotels. A **Toronto Star** investigation into human sex trafficking in Ontario



MELISSA RENWICK/TORONTO STAR



Inside
An accused pimp on how women are lured into the sex trade, **A16**
The traffickers' domain, **A17**

OLIVIA CARVILLE
STAFF REPORTER

The girls are as young as 12, tricked into the sex trade by "Romeo" pimps who sell a dream of money, love and security. Every day, an increasing number of teenagers and young women are being trafficked across Ontario and forced to work as prostitutes in what has become one of the fastest growing crimes in the

province, a Star investigation found. Seasoned detectives and social workers estimate the number of girls being trafficked in Ontario today to be in the thousands. On the streets, it's known as "The Game." Some of the girls are beaten by pimp whipped with coat hangers heated up on a stove, punched, choked, burned an

forced to sleep naked at the foot of the bed, like dogs. Some are branded, often with their pimp's street name. Earlier this year, a 21-year-old woman was held down in Toronto while a pimp carved his initials into her hand with a razor and then poured pen ink into the wound. **TRAFFICKING** continued on **A16**

Human traffickers "get inside your head," says Natalie, 27. "I felt like they had a hold of me from the inside, from my mind."

TRAFFICKING from **A1**

They are bought and sold. In 2013, police rescued a 17-year-old girl who was traded to a pimp by her own mother for a drug debt. They are locked in hotel rooms and forced to have sex for money, sometimes up to 15 times a day, then forced to hand over all their cash to a pimp they are brainwashed into believing is their boyfriend. Sexual human trafficking is the forced confinement or transportation of a person for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Contrary to popular belief, almost all of the victims in Canada are Canadian born. The Star's investigation is based on multiple sources: information from criminal trafficking cases; federal government documents detailing the problem; interviews with victims, parents, social workers and police officers from four major regions across the GTA; and an in-depth interview with an accused pimp who is behind bars awaiting trial. Detectives say the crime is growing because trafficking is so lucrative — a

'Everyone thinks it's not happening here. But it is'

pimp can earn \$280,000 a year from one sex-trade worker, according to the RCMP. The Internet has also changed The Game by taking these girls off the streets and hiding them behind closed doors. The girls are typically sold on the website backpage.com, which police say is notorious for running sex trafficking advertisements across North America. Over the past month, the Star has interviewed six victims who were lured into The Game and trafficked throughout the GTA, moved every few days between four-star downtown hotels to cheap motels and strip clubs along Hwy. 401 and the QEW.

Their stories have similar traits. What lured the girls into The Game was the illusion of love and a secure future. What made them stay was the fear of being beaten, burned, "outed as whores" or left for dead, and sometimes threats to their families. Some of these girls are runaways, abandoned by their parents, or foster kids lured straight out of group homes; others grew up in middle-income households and are recruited from high schools or house parties. The six victims the Star interviewed said those buying sex were from all walks of life, including businessmen, doctors, lawyers, police of-

icers, labourers, drug dealers, college students, teachers, judges, accountants and soldiers. Occasionally, the clients were women. Since 2013, Toronto police have intervened in 359 trafficking incidents, arresting 114 pimps, where victims have told police stories of being deprived of food until they serviced a certain number of men or being forced to call their pimps "Daddy." "I've met girls who have been assaulted so badly they've ingested their own teeth," Toronto Det. David Correa said. "I've met girls who were forced to put sponge pads inside their private area so they don't bleed while they work. This is barbaric and horrific." Just last month, police rescued a 13-year-old girl who was sold for sex in hotels across Brampton, Niagara and Toronto. Two men and a 17-year-old girl have been charged with trafficking. Toronto police say a previous case includes a victim as young as 12. Inspector Joanna Beaven-Desjardins, commander of the Toronto police sex crimes unit, said pimps "brand them like cattle and move

them like cattle." "This is a Toronto problem, an Ontario problem and a Canada problem. Everyone thinks it's not happening here, but it is," she said. On a Thursday night in late November, the Star booked a room at the Mississauga Gates Inn, a motel nestled off Hwy. 427 that has been named by police and victims as a hot spot for human trafficking. The two-floor motel, which touts \$60 rooms online, was a late-night hive of activity, with flashy cars running laps of the parking lot and men dressed in hoodies and baggy jeans killing time watching movies on iPads in high-end SUVs and Cadillacs. Star reporters observed a young woman, likely in her late teens with a face full of makeup, walk into a room around 9:30 p.m. Shortly after, a middle-aged man, who appeared to be an airport limousine driver, pulled into the car park and scanned the motel as he took off his suit jacket, neatly folded it and

Continued on next page

Continued from previous page

placed it on his back seat. He then walked to the woman's door, knocked and was quickly let inside. Exactly half an hour later the man left, looking towards the ground as he walked the dimly lit motel corridor. Ten minutes later another man, who arrived in a minivan, knocked at her door. A cleaner moved in and out of the rooms, changing sheets until the early hours of the morning. The owner of the Mississauga Gates Inn, who identified himself as Suni, told the Star young girls are trafficked out of high-end hotels and small motels like his every day. "We are kicking these people out like f---ing crazy. We are battling the struggle every day," Suni said. Human trafficking, for forced sex and farm and other labour, was written into the Criminal Code of Canada in 2005, but it was only last year that the first pimp in Toronto was convicted. Tyrone Burton, 31, was found guilty of holding two teenag-

ers against their will, confiscating their identity documents and forcing them to work in the sex trade. The Crown is seeking to declare him a dangerous offender to keep him locked up indefinitely. Natalie, a 27-year-old victim who was confined to a hotel room and forced to have sex with strangers day and night, said she earned \$30,000 in one month — but handed every cent over to her pimp. "I never really knew what trafficking was. To me, it was always a relationship," she told the Star. "I felt like he really loved me." Physically, Natalie (her real name is not being used to protect her safety) admits she could have run, but mentally, she says, she was trapped. "They get inside your head. I felt like they had a hold of me from the inside, from my mind." The mental manipulation and control these traffickers have over women is the most challenging aspect for police and welfare agencies. The pimps control the victims' cell phones, delete their messages, isolate them from their families and

steal their identification documents. They force them to offer "special sexual services" such as anal or unprotected sex to make extra money and then manipulate them through guilt and shame by threatening to "out" them to their families and friends. Det. Martin Dick, a veteran homicide detective from the U.K. who now heads up the vice unit for Halton Regional Police, said sex trafficking was the only crime that has left him in tears. Last year, Dick entered the hotel room of a teenager whose online escorting ad "ticked all the right boxes" for a potential trafficked victim, such as a photo that doesn't show her face, the offer to do "fetishes" and the request that clients text only (pimps often control the phone and pose as girls using flirtatious text messages). "She was very aggressive with us at first and I remember being in the room and thinking, 'There's something not right here, you are too defensive,'" Dick said, his voice break-

ing. "There were suitcases on the floor and you could just tell that this was her life. Eventually, I said to her — with tears welling in my eyes — I said, 'Just let us help you, please.'" The teenager, wearing only lingerie, collapsed onto the floor. "This girl was crying her eyes out, but she just wouldn't come because she was so downtrodden and beaten and broken. It's so hard to walk out that door, because you don't know what you're leaving her to." When the pimp returned to the hotel a few hours later, police arrested him for breaching bail and the teenage girl ran away. The next day, Dick went to court on the off-chance that she was going to be there. The teenage girl was sitting in the courtroom alongside her pimp's parents, he said. In May, MPP Laurie Scott put forward a motion in the legislature calling for the creation of a provincial task force to combat homegrown human trafficking and increase funding. Her motion passed, but the government has taken no action since.

"I've met girls who have been assaulted so badly they've ingested their own teeth."
DET. DAVID CORREA
TORONTO POLICE
In Sunday's Star
The victims.
The escape.
The warning signs.

Olivia Carville can be reached at ocarville@thestar.ca or 416-814-2765