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Feds set to crack down on human-trafficking hotspots

By ERIKA PESANTES / Sun Sentinel

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. -- She was a runaway who traveled from Hawaii to work the Super Bowl in Miami.

Her job: having sex for money in South Beach. Her boss: a pimp who sold the girl using online ads on Craigslist and Backpage. Her age: 16.

Pimp Fred Collins coached her with text messages, court records show: "Make him give you more," he texted. "He's a trick, baby girl."

South Florida is a hotspot for human trafficking because of its gateway air and sea ports, and last month was one of six regions picked to launch an anti-trafficking coordination team. Working together, federal prosecutors, the FBI, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Department of Labor will attack the problem.

South Florida's tourism-driven service industry - in restaurants, hotels, trendy nightspots and sporting events such as the Super Bowl - facilitates labor and sex exploitation. The involuntary servitude of maids, butlers, drivers and produce pickers can be found in South Florida's toniest neighborhoods and in agricultural fields ripe for modern-day slavery.

A federal court jury convicted Collins of conspiring to engage in the sex trafficking of a child and other charges. He was sentenced in November to more than 21 years in prison.

Human trafficking is a nationwide problem affecting not only illegal immigrants or foreign-born workers, but also U.S. citizens, primarily vulnerable children who are exploited for sex. According to an April report by the Department of Justice, 80 percent of victims in confirmed sex-trafficking cases were American born.

Katariina, now in her 30s and a Broward County advocate for sexually exploited youth, herself was a victim. The Sun Sentinel is not using her full name because of the experiences in her past.

As a young teen, she lacked a loving father figure, and traffickers capitalized on that, Katariina said.

"What girl grows up and says, 'I want to sell my body on Backpage?'" Katariina asked. "Nobody."

Florida is "ground zero" for human trafficking, says Robin Thompson, senior program director for Florida State University's Center for Advancement of Human Rights.

And there were signs even before a human-trafficking state law was put into place. The FBI in 2003 said Miami, Tampa and Jacksonville are among 13 metropolitan areas that are centers for minor sex trafficking.

"We have a perfect storm here in terms of human trafficking," said Carmen Pino, of ICE. "This is a major, major organized crime."

Human trafficking is a growing criminal enterprise that generates \$32 billion annually and bears far less risk for traffickers, authorities say. Traffickers potentially can exploit a human body endlessly with little consequence or investment.

Still, specific numbers for South Florida are hard to come by. A fragmented system of federal, state and local law enforcement agencies and prosecutors investigate cases and deal with victims in a largely disjointed fashion.

In an Oakland Park case, three trafficking suspects await trial in federal court for selling four girls, ages 14 to 17, for sex at a bordello known as the Boom Boom Room. Men paid a \$5 cover to watch nude underage girls dance, and paid for sex with them while porn played on a big-screen TV and marijuana and alcohol were served.

Last fall, three Broward County men who ran a prostitution ring involving at least three underage girls were sentenced to 8 1/2 to 15 years in prison. A month earlier in Palm Beach County, a woman who prostituted two underage Honduran girls in bars was sentenced to seven years in prison.

Traffickers are known to recruit children near schools, in the malls or at movie theaters - any place they congregate.

Traffickers sometimes entice minors with seemingly glamorous modeling gigs since children are vulnerable to approaches that dangle the lure of luxury before them, said Alan Santiago, an FBI agent who supervises the Crimes Against Children Squad based in Miami.

"Most of these girls are underage. They don't have the mental capacity to deal with adults," he said.

Most trafficked teens have troubled home lives, and frequently are runaways, Santiago said. They are susceptible to pimps' offerings of attention and affection, which they may lack at home.

Katariina was 13 when she met a pimp who "was the nicest guy in the world" and could have been a "pastor in church" at a Sunny Isles Beach hotel.

She was living there with her mother and brother after escaping her abusive father. A 19-year-old woman, part of a prostitution ring, befriended Katariina and became her trafficker. That nice guy was the woman's pimp.

He told Katariina she could call him "Daddy" and gave her a dollar she needed, with the caveat that "one day you'll owe me."

A few days later, her prostitute "friend" told her to wear a white dress and introduced her to a 65-year-old who almost became her first john. He negotiated to pay \$550 for Katariina, who was a virgin, and told her she was beautiful. He touched her shoulders and her hair.

She refused the marijuana offered; the john grew frustrated. The transaction fell through, but Katariina later would be successfully trafficked while in middle school and within her own apartment building.

"At 13, all you think about is love ... you believe in everlasting love," said Katariina, who will teach a human-trafficking course in the spring at Trinity International University in Davie.

Despite the task forces and volunteer coalitions in South Florida, awareness remains low, experts say.

"Trafficking has been around since humanity began," said Thompson, who, along with other FSU researchers, put together a statewide strategic human-trafficking plan last year. "We have no doubt it's out there. ... We're now in the infancy of discovering where it is."

Prostitute sweeps often nab minors who lie about their age, and authorities hope a stay in jail compels them to give up their pimps.

But the tactic is ineffective, advocates say, because the psychological pull is such that victims look to their pimp as a father figure and provider.

"These children are victims. You don't gain their trust if they're treated as a criminal. They've already been misused and mistreated," said Christina Spudeas, executive director of Florida's Children First and a member of the state's ad hoc committee on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking.

"Generally, the victims don't view themselves as victims," said Tyson Elliot, statewide human-trafficking coordinator for the Florida Department of Children & Families, "The pimp psychologically manipulates them where everyone else is the enemy.

"Their version of what is normal is not our version," he said. "Their day-to-day job of being prostituted out is normal and everything we do is not normal."

(Sun Sentinel staff writer Peter Franceschina contributed to this report.)