

# In Los Angeles, sex trafficking doesn't look like it does in the movies

By [Lane Anderson](#), Deseret News **National Edition**

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In this April 25, 2014, file picture, California Attorney General Kamala Harris, who as a prosecutor once specialized in child sexual assault cases, addresses the Domestic Human Trafficking symposium in Los Angeles. Trafficking, forced labor and modern slavery are a big business generating profits estimated at \$150 billion a year, the U.N. labor agency said.

Damian Dovarganes, AP

Sex trafficking in the US is nothing like the movies. Look no further than the streets of Los Angeles to find America's sexually exploited kids. Over 70 percent of children under 18 rescued here are "domestic cases," meaning they grew up in the US.

Just a few blocks east of the gleaming glass office buildings and new lofts of downtown Los Angeles, the streets make an abrupt change from vegan bakeries and Starbucks to sidewalks lined with trash, shopping carts stuffed with belongings and people sleeping in tents. This is Skid Row, where 2,000 homeless take up a 54-block radius, forming what is the largest homeless encampment in the United States.

It's a warm summer evening in July, and Lt. Andre Dawson of the Los Angeles Police Department is steering his blacked-out SUV across South Los Angeles Street. Skid Row is an emblem of L.A.'s notorious designation as the nation's unsheltered homeless capital: the city has 82,000 homeless on any given night, and most people don't realize that up to one in eight of the homeless are unaccompanied minors, according to the Institute for the Study of Homelessness and Poverty at the Weingart Center.

Dawson, 56, is stylish and well-spoken. He's wearing a pink button-down shirt with dark jeans, reflective sunglasses and a mustache that he is in the habit of smoothing with one hand. Dawson has been a detective with the Los Angeles Police Department for 32 years, and since 2010, he's run the LAPD team dedicated to stopping child sex exploitation.

While headlines tout stories of women and children trafficked from overseas, Dawson says you need look no further than the streets of Los Angeles to find America's sexually exploited kids. Over 70 percent of children under 18 rescued by his team are "domestic cases," he says. Meaning, they are kids born and raised in America. And they have not been kidnapped and stuffed into the back of a van, the Hollywood version of sex trafficking.

"It's not what everybody thinks; it's not what the movies tell you it is," says Dawson. "What we see are — what's the term to refer to girls that nobody cares about? Throwaway kids."

It's a term used to describe the thousands of children in America who are abandoned, abused, neglected and often in and out of foster care. Although "orphan" isn't a term we use anymore in the United States, Dawson sees sexually exploited kids who are essentially without families, or without reliable, safe homes, day in and day out.

There are between 4,800 and 10,000 homeless minors in Los Angeles on any given night, most of them concentrated around downtown L.A. and Hollywood, and many find themselves in a Dickensian scramble to survive. Some come from out of state, in search of warm weather and a better life, but most are local kids from Southern California's poor neighborhoods. Many will fall into, or be pressed into, sex work.

One in three teens will be recruited into sex work the first 48 hours on the street according to stats from the National Runaway Switchboard, and most kids, boys and girls, are introduced to sex work at age 13.

The federal definition for what constitutes trafficking is broader than most people realize. While "trafficked" implies transportation of victims across borders, anyone compelled to perform commercial sex acts by force, fraud or coercion is legally defined as a trafficking victim. Therefore, anyone under age 18 performing commercial sex acts is considered a trafficking victim because they aren't old enough to give consent—whether or not there is evidence of force or coercion.

Rather than treated as victims that need help, most sexually exploited children have been arrested on prostitution charges and put behind bars while their adult johns usually get off scot-free. Dawson's CSEC (Commercially Sexually Exploited Children) unit is one of the first in the country to adopt a "first responders" protocol that searches out child victims and treats them like victims of abuse instead of criminals. Officers are trained to recognize exploited minors and how to talk to them, and bring them into the station to put them in touch with social services instead of juvenile court.

Dawson knows there's no silver bullet solution to stopping sex trafficking. But it's a start, and a model for cities across the country.

The tracks

It's just after 5 p.m., and the sun is still high in Southern California's hazy sky. Dawson heads toward "the tracks" in Compton, or what locals call "the Blade," stretches of city streets where sex is sold. This is the time of day when women will hit the sidewalks looking to pick up guys who are just getting off work, Dawson says. They will walk up and down streets like Figueroa Avenue, which is lined with strip malls, liquor stores and cheap hotels, while working cellphones, talking to their pimps and looking out for regulars and new customers.

The sidewalks in South Central are thick with foot traffic, from kids who are out of school to shift workers waiting for buses. As we crawl up Figueroa Avenue in rush-hour traffic, Dawson calls out the action on the street.

“She’s working,” he nods toward a woman strolling casually in spandex leggings and a not-especially revealing striped top. “Those two are working.” He points out two young women, one black and one Latina, walking past a McDonald’s, who appear to be in their late teens or early twenties. They’re wearing stretchy jeans and crop tops and talking on their cellphones through their earbuds.

When Dawson’s team does recon on the street, they’re scanning young women and looking for underage girls. It takes a trained eye to tell the difference between a sixteen-year old and an eighteen-year old, but sometimes it’s painfully obvious that a child is on the street—the youngest girl Dawson has rescued from the street was ten years old. Dawson’s team also pose as johns on social media to bust pimps that are trafficking children online.

When Dawson suspects someone on the street is underage, he approaches her and introduces himself as an officer from the trafficking unit, and notes that her behavior has been consistent with commercial sex activity in the neighborhood. Then, instead of arresting her, he takes her into custody to put her in touch with social services.

Until recently, “child prostitutes,” a term that Dawson, and anti-trafficking advocates recoil at, were seen as willful criminals instead of victims.

It’s estimated that one in four homeless minors have been involved in sex work, but advocates say the numbers may be higher, because a teenager coming to a shelter or nonprofit won’t usually say they need help because they’re being trafficked.

“They say, ‘I need food, or I need a place to sleep.’ They may report sexual exploitation later, or they may not report it at all,” says Johanna Westmacott of Safe Horizon, an anti-trafficking and homeless youth outreach center.

Dawson’s perspective has changed over the years; he has brought in girls, sometimes as young as 12 and 13, who were abused and exploited by pimps but faced worse trauma in foster care, or homes plagued by abuse, drugs and poverty.

And many of the young women and girls “in the life,” the insider term for sex work, have a history of abuse at home or in the foster care system before they ever end up on the tracks. Forty-six percent of runaway and homeless youths report having being physically abused, and 17 percent report being forced into unwanted sexual activity by a family or household member, according to a study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

This is part of what advocates call the “foster care to prostitution pipeline” that sets kids up from a childhood of abuse into a future in sex work.

Most of the legal-age women on the tracks come from a similarly traumatic background; Dawson estimates that most adult sex workers started when they were children themselves: “There’s a conversation to be had that a lot of these adult women were just kids that never got rescued,” he says. “Now it’s all they know.”

First responders

When Dawson’s unit picks up a minor, they call someone from Amber Davies’ team. Davies works for Saving Innocence, a Los Angeles advocacy and outreach nonprofit founded in 2009 by Kim Biddle, who is herself a

survivor of sex trafficking. Within 90 minutes, one of the nine caseworkers— all women — will be on the scene to meet with the child.

The last time Davies was called in, it was a 14-year-old girl, African-American, who had been in foster care since age 9 and had a history of sexual abuse. But girls like this aren't usually rejoicing to be "rescued." In fact, they are usually afraid of the cops and attached to their pimp, who often plays simultaneous roles of exploiter and boyfriend/father figure.

"What we hear from youths is that they've had bad experiences with cops before, and it's hard to talk about what they've been through," says Davies. And sometimes cops themselves are "tricks," or trade sexual favors in exchange for not arresting a prostitute. "Cops know that, too. So if they bring us in and say these cops are the good guys, it helps immensely."

Davies tries to create a safe relationship with teenagers using "their language." "I'll say, 'I'm just a square, but I want to understand what you've been through.'"

Davies is part of an innovative initiative called First Responders Protocol for CSEC. Initiated by the Long Beach Police Department, it's the first of its kind. Just a few years ago, Long Beach, home of the notorious Long Beach Boulevard track, had the highest number of minors in the sex trade in Los Angeles. Last year, it had zero.

Now, underage prostitutes detained by police are connected to services like Davies' instead of put behind bars. While Long Beach has been praised for this progressive protocol that is the first of its kind, all 50 states, including California, have sentencing laws that criminalize minors for "juvenile prostitution" rather than treating them as child-abuse victims.

Malika Saada Saar is executive director of advocacy group Rights4Girls, which launched the No Such Thing campaign earlier this year to end arrests for so-called "child prostitution."

"In California and almost every other state, trafficked kids — the majority of them black and brown — are contemplated and treated as criminals," Saada Saar said in a press conference, "when in fact they have been subjected to repeated commercial rape."

"There is no such thing as a child prostitute, there are only victims and survivors of child rape."

A clean, well-lighted place

The image of the teen girl who gets kidnapped and sold into sex trafficking does exist—but it's a very small percentage of cases. What advocates call the "kidnapped innocent girl narrative" makes up about 10 percent of cases according to Alexandra Lutnick, a researcher at RTI San Francisco who specializes in young people and the sex trade. The rest of sex trafficking cases are "more complicated."

"To only focus on the one narrative pulls heartstrings, but it does a disservice to other youth who can benefit from resources and support," says Lutnick.

Lutnick says that most of these kids aren't like Elizabeth Smart—the Salt Lake City girl whose 2002 kidnapping from her home set off a national search. They can't simply be "rescued" and returned to loving families. Most of them don't have safe homes to go to, or they wouldn't be in this situation in the first place.

The 14-year-old that Davies met with, for example, came from a family where she was already being sexually abused. "A child is already being molested or raped by a stepfather or abused in foster care, and then an older

guy comes along and pays to get their nails done, hair done, takes them to McDonald's. Nobody has treated them that well," says Davies.

A minor in that situation is choosing between what she sees as the better of two bad options. She may not see her relationship with their pimp, or "Daddy," or "boyfriend" as abusive, or she may not realize it until he threatens her, or threatens to hurt her family.

"We want them to understand that help is out there — their pimp has told them time and again that nobody cares for you or understands you, you're just going to end up in jail," says Davies. "We don't want that to be true. We want to make sure that their pimps are liars."

Unfortunately, it's harder for Davies to help victims than it should be. After she meets with a girl, she will try to find a place for her to stay. There aren't many. Shelters have long waiting lists, and few allow unaccompanied minors. "The Youth Welcome Center [the Los Angeles County youth shelter] is the county equivalent of a flophouse," says Davies. "It's a bunch of mattresses thrown on the floor."

As a result, a lot of kids in shelters run. A 14-year-old is a child, after all, and between sleeping on the floor alone with strangers, and going back to the life she knows — she will often choose the second. Most kids "in the life" will run anywhere from three to seven times before they leave for the streets, says Davies. That might improve if they had a decent place to stay.

Nowhere to call home

Covenant House Los Angeles is in Hollywood, just a few miles from Mann's Chinese Theater and the Walk of Stars, where tourists pose for sidewalk photos next to the name of Taylor Swift or Angelina Jolie.

Covenant House is an outreach and transitional housing center for homeless youth, with 94 beds. The vacancy rate is zero, and last month the waiting list had 120 names on it.

Bill Bedrossian is the executive director at Covenant House in Hollywood, and if you ask him what would abate sex exploitation of young people, one answer is simple: beds.

Covenant House is on a short list of places that LAPD calls when it is trying to place young people living on the street. "They have a scared kid from Idaho who they found in front of a store, or at the train station, or on Skid Row; that's not a safe place for a young person to be," he says.

About 65 to 70 percent of the youths Covenant House serves are locals from L.A. County, about 30 percent are from other states. Nearly all are coming from foster care, or are running from abuse, he says.

Bedrossian says he has trouble placing the youth that walk in his door or are sent to him by police. On average, it will take about six weeks for a bed to open up at Covenant House, or to find a bed in another handful of youth centers like this.

In the meantime, young people are on the street. "I had an 18-year old come in the other day that I had to waitlist, and he said he preferred the stairwell to adult homeless shelters that are not safe, and people are getting raped there."

Almost half of kids on the street will be approached about sex work within the first 48 hours, according to a study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This is what advocates call "survival sex," which refers to youths trading sex for a place to sleep, or money for basics like food.

At the Los Angeles LGBTQ Center in Hollywood, sexual health classes for homeless youths openly address survival sex and “harm reduction.” In Hollywood, many homeless youths include boys and transgender youths who trade sex for money, or for a place to stay.

A 2008 study from John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York found that young people who engaged in survival sex used the money to buy food first. Covenant House did a study with Fordham University in 2013 that interviewed 200 homeless youth, and found that almost half—48 percent—of those that traded sex did so because they didn’t have a place to stay.

What this says is that even those who aren’t pimped depend on sex to survive, says Johannah Westmacott of Safe Horizon. “We’re talking about the basics — food, shelter.”

Money. Food. A place to sleep.

As the sun starts to set over South Central, the sky turns a brilliant pink, and the action on the street picks up as Dawson and I cruise Long Beach Boulevard. He spots two women standing on a corner — one black, wearing a miniskirt, and one white wearing tall boots.

Dawson pulls into a parking lot where we can watch them discreetly with binoculars. A green late-model Lexus pulls up and the black woman walks up to the car. “That’s her pimp,” Dawson announces. How does he know? “She’s not negotiating with him, she’s just getting right into his car.”

Dawson flips around and stomps on the gas to give chase, then, once we catch up, he eases off to act natural. When we pull up to the light we can see that the driver is a woman, which Dawson identifies as the pimp’s “bottom,” or right-hand help. “Or, that’s the pimp,” he says. “Don’t assume a pimp is always a man. Some of the meanest pimps I’ve ever met have been women.”

The woman in the passenger seat looks young, but not under 18. If she did, Dawson could pull them over, citing the burned out left tail light, and ID them both. But this hit-or-miss approach can make for tough work busting pimps and identifying underage victims.

Dawson tells me, not for the first time, a story about a 10-year-old girl he rescued several years ago that really affected him. She was so young, and “a sweet girl,” he says. He rescued a 15-year-old earlier this year — and it was the same girl. She was back in the life. “That one really got to me,” he says.

Even Dawson is aware of the limited role of law enforcement in helping sexually exploited kids. When I asked Westmacott from Safe Horizon what the young people she works with ask for most, a smile almost plays on her lips. “Money. A place to sleep. Food. Better economic opportunities.”

Dawson’s philosophy on long-term solutions to child trafficking is about the same. “Kids need a safe place to be and someone who cares about them. Now why should that be so hard?”

This article was written while reporter Lane Anderson was participating in the National Health Journalism Fellowship, a program of the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School of [Journalism.Email: laneanderson@deseretnews.com](#)