

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white lace-trimmed dress, stands in the rain holding a large green umbrella. The background is a blurred green landscape. The text is overlaid on the image.

The Girl NEXT Door

*How children are
sexually exploited
in your backyard*

By Margaret Byron

Though you may not realize it, the girls you pass every day could be victims of commercial sexual exploitation—children as young as ten or eleven years old, forced to sell their bodies for the financial gain of others. They are tricked, kidnapped, bullied, coerced into “the life,” and are held physically and emotionally captive.

You scan the streets through the fog, watching the headlights pass—one after another after another, craning your neck to see if any of them will slow. Your heart starts beating just a little faster as a shadowy car approaches in the distance; it's the right size and shape for a Crown Vic, and you've had enough encounters with cops to know what to expect.

False alarm. The car passes, just like the others. Your anxiety is masked by a well-practiced exterior that is confident, coy, and even flirtations as you strut a bit in your six-inch platforms. They make you wobble a bit, but damn, do they make you look sexy—especially when paired with the red vinyl miniskirt he picked out for you to wear. Thinking about him immediately starts you worrying a little—is he thinking about you? Is he with someone else? Is he going to beat you when you come back with the night's take and it's

not enough, again, and he screams and rages and pulls out the curling iron to add another scar to the row on your belly?

But these are familiar worries, almost comforting. You remember how much you love him, and how much you hate to disappoint him. So you set your jaw and adjust your skirt and wobbly ankles and resume your strut, walking not on the sidewalk but in the gutter because that's where he tells you that you belong. But you don't care, because he's your man and you love him, and at the end of the day he loves you too. At least, that's what he says, and that's what you tell yourself. That's what you have to tell yourself when you're servicing your seventh or tenth or fifteenth customer in a single night, just to make it through the pain and the disgust and the dead feeling you get inside.

Artist: Staff

Things YOU can do:

- 1. TELL SOMEONE** about the problem of the sexual exploitation of children.
- 2. TAKE A STAND** against the sickeningly common practice of buying sex from children.
- 3. SUPPORT AND DONATE** to an organization that helps trafficked children.

A car slows down, stops next to you. The window rolls down and you put on your sexiest pout, letting him take a good look at the goods he'll be purchasing—or not. He is balding, middle-aged, suited and furtive as he glances nervously down International Boulevard. He asks how old you are, notes of condescension and skepticism in his voice. Nineteen, you tell him. It's a lie; you will be fourteen in two weeks. The reminder sends your mind back to your man, wondering what he'll get you for your birthday. Last year, he took you out for dinner, just the two of you sitting in the corner booth at Mickey D's, because he knows it's your favorite—he's so sweet. In the meantime, the prospective customer's eyes crawl over every inch of your body. A set of headlights appears behind him and he gets scared and speeds off. Shit. You sigh and resume walking, waiting for the next set of headlights to slow.



It's not just a story; children are bought and sold

This is the reality of life for hundreds of girls in the San Francisco Bay Area, and tens of thousands across the U.S.A.: tricked, trapped, and trafficked, they are everywhere. Cases of Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC) have been documented in almost every major and minor city, from Albuquerque to Ypsilati. They are on your streets, in your neighborhoods, being sold like so much used furniture over Internet classifieds. They are held

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substance abuse problem. She has three little brothers, all of whom look up to her, but she's fourteen—all she wants is to hang out with her friends, flirt

captive alternatively with brutal force and honeyed promises of love, ensnared in a culture that glorifies pimps and utterly demeans the people they oppress.

Though it doesn't attract the same amount of press as lurid accounts of overseas brothels, sex trafficking is alive and well in the Land of the Free. An estimated 285,000 children were at risk for sexual exploitation as of December 2000; accurate counts of children who are currently being exploited are impossible to obtain, but estimates range from 100,000 to 300,000¹. Of these, most are U.S. citizens, just like your sisters and daughters (and brothers and sons). Many are trafficked across state lines. The average age of entry into the sex trade in the U.S. is 12-14¹; the overwhelming majority of adult sex workers entered the market as children.

Picture this scenario: a fourteen-year-old girl is walking home from school, on her way back to her crime-ridden, ramshackle neighborhood. She's not doing well in her classes, ostensibly due to her "attitude problems," but in reality it's because she's not getting proper nutrition, emotional and physical security, or anything that remotely resembles a healthy home life. Her father is absent; her mother means well but can't kick her

with boys, and maybe succeed in school for a change (though she'd never admit it). She likes science, and sometimes dreams about becoming a marine biologist. But her fate is sealed when a twenty-nine-year-old Romeo approaches her and says he couldn't help but notice how beautiful she is... can he take her out for ice cream? Flattered, she accepts, and spends the next three hours pouring out her life story to the only person who's ever listened to her. Solemnly, he tells her he loves her and wants to be her boyfriend, and how can she refuse? She's hooked. Two weeks later, she's dropped out of school, moved into his place, utterly enamored with her man. So when he



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begs her to turn a trick just this once, just so he can make ends meet, she swallows her fear and obeys. Soon she’s just another one of a stable of girls, walking “the track”—or being peddled online, as is increasingly common.

Stories like the one above are heart-breakingly common, as are stories of kidnap, gang-rape, imprisonment, beatings, and worse.

Girls are subjected daily to violent physical and mental abuse, with a generous measure of Stockholm Syndrome² thrown into the mix. All this confusion and cruelty does not make for poster-worthy “rescue children”, and victims of this particular breed of exploitation often do not seem like they even want to be liberated. Pimps rely on strong emotional bonds to prevent their girls from turning them over to law enforcement; in some cases, law enforcement officers are complicit in the trafficking itself. Even if a victim is successfully removed from a dangerous situation, even if she is given counseling and legal aid, chances are high that she will return to “the life” because it is the only thing she knows. Cases are com-



plicated, requiring individual attention and tailored solutions.

Simple things you can do to help trafficked children

Enter MISSEY. Motivating, Inspiring, Supporting and Serving Sexually Exploited Youth is an organization that tries to provide these necessary services to the CSEC of Alameda County, CA. Headquartered in downtown Oakland, MISSEY sees clients from ages 11 to 18, providing a safe place for them to be what they are: children. In a survey of over 200 MISSEY clients between

2006 and 2008, 92% self-reported as minorities (including 68% African-American or mixed African-American). 53% had lived in group homes at some point. 64% had been raped.

In addition its Safe Place Alternative (SPA), MISSEY also provides individual case management and other resources for its clients and their needs: finding a place to live, getting back in school, and helping with resume-building skills. MISSEY also has a public policy arm, which advocates for changes in state and federal laws to decriminalize so-called “teen prostitution”—legally, minors cannot consent to sex with anyone who is more than three years older, but young girls are still routinely incarcerated on prosti-

tution charges. MISSEY also collects data on the underserved and understudied demographic of these children, helping to paint a clearer picture of what is truly going on right under our noses.

To help lift up their rightful cries for justice, there are a number of things you can do. The first and most important is to (1) **Tell someone** about the problem of the sexual exploitation of children. Child sex trafficking, though it is gaining more national attention, is still not the first thing on most people's minds. At best, they conceptualize it as a distant problem, happening somewhere else to someone else. Share this article, or any number of good and reputable sources listed below, to demonstrate the scale and scope of the problem. You can also (2) **Take a stand** against the sickeningly common practice of buying sex from children. Tell your sons and brothers and fathers and uncles and friends that "real men don't buy girls," as stated bluntly by the Demi and Ashton Foundation. Lastly, if you feel so compelled, (3) **Support and donate** to an organization like MISSEY, or one of the others listed below. Funding remains a continuous need for such non-profits, both to maintain and expand current programs & services. In-kind donations of goods and services are also helpful; MISSEY keeps a [wish list](#) of items that are currently needed.

At MISSEY, girls bond over shared experiences that to anyone else would be horrific trauma, but for them was (or is) everyday life. They talk with MISSEY's staff, half of whom are themselves survivors of sexual exploitation, about what it means to be a victim of human trafficking, and how it doesn't define who they are. They create art and music and poetry, inspiring many of us with their strength and courage. Through MISSEY, these invisible children find powerful voices to express themselves—and they will not be silenced.

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References & Footnotes

1. Estes, R.J. and N.A. Weiner. Estes, R. J., & Weiner, N. A. (2001). The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children In the U.S., Canada and Mexico: Executive Summary. *University of Pennsylvania School of Social work*.
2. Stockholm Syndrome refers to the psychological phenomenon where captives begin to feel positive emotions (love, gratitude, affection) for their captors, equating any absence of abuse with kindness. It is often observed in hostage situations, or cases of domestic abuse.

Additional Resources:

- The Polaris Project
- GEMS (Girls Education and Mentoring Services)
- Californians Against Slavery
- Safer California Foundation
- H.E.A.T. Watch, Alameda County