

## **Prosecutors Focus on Pimps and Clients, Instead of Women**

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By Russ Buettner



Photo credit: Michael Appleton for the New York Times. Men accused of soliciting prostitutes were taken to be arraigned in Manhattan on Monday. A law has increased penalties for convicted clients: one year in jail, instead of 90 days.

It was not exactly a run-of-the-mill prostitution case: the men accused as ringleaders were a father and his son, a pimp team coercing women to push their trade like traveling sex saleswomen, handing out business cards at hotels and strip clubs.

The women were branded, tattooed with the pimps' monikers, Mr. Vee for the father and King Koby for the son, Manhattan prosecutors said. One woman was even tattooed with a bar code.

But what makes the case noteworthy is not how the operation was run, but how the men are being prosecuted. The Manhattan district attorney's office is employing a sex trafficking charge, added to the New York State penal code five years ago, that is helping to redefine how law enforcement agencies approach organized prostitution.

In a stark departure from decades of such prosecutions, the women who were working as prostitutes are not facing criminal charges but are instead being treated as their pimps' victims, and offered services to help them build new lives.

Under the old charges, pimps typically faced up to 15 years in prison for promoting prostitution with an adult. The newer sex trafficking charge carries a maximum sentence

of 25 years. Also under the new law, the customers who pay adult prostitutes for sex face up to one year in jail, up from 90 days.

On Monday, 14 men, including a physician, an owner of an online ticket sales company and a concierge for a film-production company, were arraigned on charges of patronizing a prostitute. Most were offered a chance to plead guilty to disorderly conduct, a violation; two accepted the plea offer.

Cyrus R. Vance Jr., the Manhattan district attorney, said his office had embraced the new approach, long advocated by those who see brutal oppression of women as the defining component of the commercial sex trade.

"They basically live as slaves of the pimps," Mr. Vance said. "These are sad cases. These are women who need help."

A federal law that went into effect in 2000 cracked down on sex trafficking. But in general, someone must be moved across state borders for the purpose of prostitution before federal prosecutors have jurisdiction.

The law that Albany passed in 2007 has no such limitation. It broadly defines sex trafficking by the methods a pimp uses to control a prostitute. The threshold can be met if the pimp instills fear of a beating, but also by more subtle intimidation, like spreading a secret that might subject the person to ridicule, or doing anything "calculated to harm" the health, safety or immigration status of the prostitute.

"One thing we've learned from women who have been prostituted is that it is very easy to get into, but very difficult to get out of," said Norma Ramos, executive director of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women.

Statewide, there have been 150 arrests on the new sex trafficking charge since the law took effect on Nov. 1, 2007, according to the State Division of Criminal Justice Services; all but 13 were in New York City. Seventy of the 150 cases remain open. Of the 80 that have been completed, there have been 13 convictions on the sex trafficking charge; other outcomes include 33 convictions on charges other than sex trafficking, and the dismissal of charges against 21 defendants.

The office of the Brooklyn district attorney, Charles J. Hynes, has brought 52 sex trafficking cases, the most of any district attorney in the state in that period. (One of those cases was recently thrown into uncertainty when questions were raised about the credibility of the accuser, a woman who said she had been raped and forced into prostitution at age 13.)

Mr. Hynes said the law and the changed approach were having important effects. "It has enabled us to rescue young women, girls really, from the grip of traffickers, who in the past have been able to avoid prosecution," he said.

Police Commissioner Raymond W. Kelly has also begun to shift his department's enforcement efforts from prostitutes to their customers in a crackdown called Operation Losing Proposition.

The effects of the changes can be seen in arrest numbers in Manhattan. Arrests for prostitution fell by about a quarter from 2010 to 2011, while arrests of their customers jumped by about a third. And in the first three months of this year, there were 90 arrests in Manhattan on charges of patronizing a prostitute, nearly the total of 107 in all of 2011. Bridgette Carr, director of the Human Trafficking Clinic at the University of Michigan Law School, said the trafficking law was part of a "paradigm shift" slowly taking hold across the country -- one that will require a lot of training and planning by law enforcement agencies.

"We know what to do with criminals at 2 a.m. on a Friday night if we pick them up for selling sex. We have places to put them," she said. "But what do you do at 2 a.m. if they are not a criminal? Where do you house them? How do you keep them safe? This is not easy stuff."

The case brought last month by Mr. Vance's office is different from many others brought under the new law in that the women working as prostitutes were not children and did not identify themselves as victims of sex trafficking.

Mr. Vance's office determined, by listening to telephone conversations between the pimps and the prostitutes, that the women had been coerced into working for them. According to Mr. Vance's office, the father and son team found customers through livery drivers acting as middlemen: Vincent George Sr., 55, had run a prostitution ring for at least two decades and brought his 33-year-old son, Vincent George Jr., into the business.

The Georges required the women to meet a quota each night or face harsh consequences, and took most of the money the women were paid -- \$200 to \$500 for each customer, prosecutors said.

They brought women into Manhattan from Queens and Allentown, Pa., where the Georges had homes. A ledger recovered from the son's home showed that one woman had generated about \$500,000 in 2011, prosecutors said.

The father and son pleaded not guilty and have been held without bail since they were arrested in Pennsylvania with a woman they were said to have recruited in Buffalo.

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