

**"PEOPLE THINK IT'S ALL HAPPENING IN RUSSIA AND THAILAND. IT'S NOT. SEX TRAFFICKING DOESN'T MEAN THEY'RE LOCKED WITH HANDCUFFS AND CHAINS. THEY'RE DETAINED BY MANIPULATION."**

— DETECTIVE MARK CONWAY, WATERTOWN POLICE DEPARTMENT

**Sex trafficking: A case study**

The U.S. Attorney's office said Bridgeport resident Brandon "Boots" Williams allegedly injected a 17-year-old girl with heroin, tattooed her face with a dollar sign and "14K," took her to strip clubs, pistol-whipped her and forced her to have sex with numerous men.

Williams, 34, who ran the Beauty Boots Modeling Agency, was charged with human trafficking, first-degree reckless endangerment, promoting prostitution and second degree assault in 2015.

Police reports said that as the victim was talking to Bridgeport detectives, she began to sob, "He just gave me drugs and drugs and drugs and I had to (expletive) an ugly dude, he was so ugly ... I feel so ugly, I don't feel beautiful anymore, I feel so nasty."

Williams pleaded not guilty to all charges and remains in custody, unable to post bond, according to state court records.

**Backpage CEO under scrutiny**

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — A California judge tentatively rejected pimping charges Wednesday against the operators of a major international website that advertises escort services and was called the "world's top online brothel" by the state attorney general. But he gave both sides more time to submit briefs before issuing a final ruling next month.

Sacramento County Superior Court Judge Michael Bowman cited a federal law involving freedom of speech while ruling that the state attorney general's office cannot continue prosecuting Backpage.com's CEO Carl Ferrer and former owners Michael Lacey and James Larkin.

At a hearing later Wednesday, the judge declined to make his ruling final, instead giving both parties more time to argue their positions. Bowman said he would issue a ruling by Dec. 9.

The men were charged by California Attorney General Kamala Harris, who referred to Backpage.com as an online brothel.

The judge, however, said Harris lacked authority to bring the charges because the federal Communications Decency Act, as a way of promoting free speech, grants immunity to operators for content posted by users.

**SEX: Fastest growing crime**

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to the teenager, police said. She overdosed in the motel room and died.

Gomez will be sentenced in February.

Sex trafficking, or forcing minors to have sex with strangers, is a relatively new concern in law enforcement, about a decade old. Even with last week's cases, convictions on the specific charge are still few. In Connecticut, newly focused laws went into effect Oct. 1 to target the crime and protect its victims from criminal charges.

A year ago this fall, Connecticut U.S. Attorney Deirdre Daly created a Connecticut Human Trafficking Task Force, with officials from service providers, federal agencies, state police and 16 local police departments.

Police and victim advocates say it is a crime of mind games, drug addiction and intimidation that differs from prostitution in that it targets underage victims who are often convinced their abusers care for them, or who so fear the consequences of seeking help that they choose abuse over freedom.

**SEX TRAFFICKING FALLS UNDER A BROADER** "human trafficking" charge in state and federal statutes. State law now says a person must be 18 or older to be found guilty of prostitution, and "in any prosecution of a person 16 or 17 years of age, there shall be a presumption that the actor was coerced into committing such offense." Under 18, and a girl or boy selling sex is considered a victim.

The FBI reports sex trafficking, now both a state and federal felony, is the fastest-growing business of organized crime and the third-largest criminal enterprise in the world. The term initially drew associations with other countries or illegal immigrants, but state and federal officials say sex trafficking is so widespread that it occurs in a dark web, in patches of hell nationwide, in urban and rural areas.

"People think it's all happening in Russia and Thailand," said Detective Mark Conway of the Watertown Police Department. "It's not. Sex trafficking doesn't mean they're locked with handcuffs and chains. They're detained by manipulation."

In the last two years, more than 400 children believed to be victims of sex trafficking have been referred to the Connecticut Department of Children and Families.

In the 10 years since sex trafficking was made a felony, there have been only two convictions under Connecticut state law. In the same decade, there have



PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER MASSA REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN  
**William Rivera, director of Multicultural Affairs for the state Department of Children and Families, gives a lecture to Waterbury police cadets on human trafficking at their training academy in Waterbury in October 2015.**



**U.S. Attorney Deirdre M. Daly formed a sex trafficking task force in October 2015. A year later, the group credits two convictions to its efforts and other cases under active investigation.**

**COMING MONDAY**

- A woman, sex trafficked by her mother, breaks out of "The Life."
- One activist's story in the fight against sex trafficking and efforts to heal victims.
- Within 24 hours, 75 percent of juvenile run-aways are approached by pimps.

been 32 federal prosecutions in Connecticut for sex trafficking. Whether a charge is state or federal is decided on a case-by-case basis with the investigators involved.

**WATERTOWN POLICE SAY SEX TRAFFICKING** happened in their town, although the perpetrators pleaded guilty to related but lesser charges.

Police reports say the girls who ran away from their foster homes arrived at the Oakville house occupied by Mike Smith, formerly of Waterbury and a felon, and Jason Gibbs, who had been

arrested in 2008 for narcotic sale and possession.

After a few days of supplying the girls cocaine and pot, Smith and Gibbs began to pamper them. The men bought them dresses and high heels. Manicures. Pedicures. They brought them to seedy Waterbury nightclubs, police allege. One night, Smith took the girls to a bar in Waterbury's gritty North End, where he had them sit on his lap and kiss one another, police reports say. Later, the men returned to Arcadia Avenue where Gibbs had sex with both girls at once, police said. That same night, according

to police, Smith forced the crystal-like drug known as molly on one of the girls.

It was how the girls were poised to have their bodies sold for sex.

One night, one of the teens told Conway, the Watertown detective, she could hear her friend in the adjacent room with two men. "She was screaming all night," she said. "She screamed all night while they were having sex with her. I was so scared for her. It sounded like someone was murdering her."

"There were times that I wanted to leave," one girl told police, but she did not want to leave her friend behind. "There were times when she was unconscious and I checked her pulse. I felt that if I didn't go along with it I was going to get raped."

The girls left after a week, and one of them reported the men to Watertown police. That they fled, and that they reported the crime, is rare, victim advocates say.

Both defendants pleaded to lesser charges in a deal announced in June. Smith will serve seven-and-half years in prison. Gibbs was sentenced to five-and-half years in prison.

Don Therkindensen, prosecutor, said "I think we did pretty good given the case that we had."

He chose not to pursue trafficking charges and preferred a deal to a trial. "These girls would have had to come into court, in front of a jury, and explain in detail what had been done to them," he said. "Being able to avoid that, for them, there is a value to us and to them for it."

**IT CAN HAPPEN TO ANYONE**

➤ The FBI, which arrested 153 pimps in a nationwide trafficking operation last year, calls sex trafficking a problem "of epidemic proportion."

➤ The FBI estimates nearly 300,000 teenagers are victims of sex trafficking. In Connecticut, U.S. Attorney Deirdre M. Daly says it is "hidden in plain sight."

➤ So lucrative has sex trafficking become that criminals looking for steady cash flow from their illegal enterprises have shifted from arms and drug sales to trafficking, where the return is higher and the risks are lower. "You sell drugs, you sell guns, it's a one-time sale," said Krishna Patel, former deputy chief of the National Security and Major Crimes Unit in the U.S. attorney's office in the state. "You can sell a girl over and over again. It's a constant stream of revenue."

➤ The FBI says on average, girls first become victims between ages 12 to 14. Boys, who comprise an estimated 30 percent of those trafficked and are far less likely to come forward, become victims between the ages of 11 and 13.

**HUMAN TRAFFICKING: WHAT STATE LAW SAYS**

➤ Connecticut state law says "'trafficking' means all acts involved in the recruitment, abduction, transport, harboring, transfer, sale or receipt of persons, within national or across international borders, through force, coercion, fraud or deception, to place persons in situations of slavery or slavery-like conditions, forced labor or services, such as forced prostitution or sexual services, domestic servitude, bonded sweatshop labor or other debt bondage."

➤ As of Oct. 1, "a person must be 18 years of age or older to be guilty of prostitution, and in any prosecution of a person 16 or 17 years of age, there shall be a presumption that the actor was coerced into committing such offense by another person."

**OTHER REQUIREMENTS OF STATE LAW:**

➤ Hotels and motels must maintain guest transactions and receipts for at least six months. Law enforcement hopes the records will help trafficking investigations.

➤ The Department of Children and Families, the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection, and the CT Lodging Association must consult and select an educational training program on trafficking to be used with all new hires of hotels and motels in Connecticut;

➤ Signs regarding trafficking and hotline numbers must be posted at all rest stops and adult entertainment facilities;

➤ Mandatory financial penalties were added to the crimes of promoting prostitution and permitting prostitution.

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