



From care to nowhere

LAST summer Nina, a 26-year-old prostitute and drug user, made it into the local papers after being handed the London Borough of Camden's 30th anti-social behaviour order. She was given the dubious honour for 'engaging in sex acts in public, soliciting and taking drugs', and ceremoniously banned from entering a list of known 'drug hotspots' and from committing any anti-social act anywhere in England and Wales. In an appeal to the voting public of north London, Councillor Barbara Hughes said: "There is no reason why people who live and work in Camden should have to put up with the actions of an irresponsible minority."

VULNERABLE

Like most of the girls who go through the care home system, Nina emerged aged 16, lonely, vulnerable and impressionable. She had little self-esteem and a bleak future. But to a pimp with a pocketful of drugs, she was a glittering prospect.

Nina was put in a children's home in Hertfordshire aged 14 when she was found living in a caravan by social workers after her mother's new boyfriend moved in. Although she says the two years she spent in care were the best in her life, she came out with no qualifications and was soon living on a £35 a week budget in Watford. A factory job packing boxes for the minimum wage didn't last long.

"One day this bloke, Mike, came along. He was not exactly good looking but he had a car and he liked chatting to me," remembers Nina. Within one month, under the guise of being her boyfriend, Mike had taken her virginity and got her addicted to crack cocaine.

Why do so many girls brought up in children's homes end up trapped in a gruesome cycle of drugs and prostitution? **Max Daly** investigates

"We'd be sitting there and run out of crack and need some more and he'd say, 'I can't afford this'. He suggested I went on the game. Her first punter was fat, bald and old. Mike took the £20 for himself. She would be paid in crack.

PASSAGE TO SEX WORK

Nina's path into drug and sex abuse, from family to care home and into the hands of a pimp, is a well-worn one. A survey among 55 teenage girls at risk of or involved in prostitution by the NSPCC published last year found 39 had been in council care, 54 had run away from home or care and 39 were in relationships with violent men who were a lot older than them. A study of 31 young prostitutes aged 12-17 in Middlesbrough carried out by Barnardo's in 2002 found all but one had run away from local authority care or home. All had a drug misuse problem.

West Midlands police statistics reveal up to 80 per cent of prostitutes in the area come from care homes. *Street Business*, a Home Office study into sex and drugs markets in three cities, found over half of sex workers graduated to prostitution from being 'looked after' by the local authority in children's homes or foster care.



LACK OF WARNING

In 2000, the government issued guidelines to police and local authorities to treat under-18s exploited through the sex industry as abuse victims, not criminals. And under new sex offence laws to be introduced later this year, it will become an offence to 'groom' vulnerable girls. Yet despite the wealth of evidence and new legislation, experts say not enough is being done to warn the estimated 2,600 girls now in children's homes about the dangers of drug-related prostitution. In most cases, care homes are the last point of contact and therefore, the last chance skilled youth workers have to stem the large-scale migration of young girls from care homes into prostitution.

"Time and again we see this happening," says Sue Blackwood, manager of the Southampton Working Women's Project. "By the time they are on the streets, there have already been masses of missed opportunities for intervention. Girls who end up on the streets have demonstrated a problem, somewhere along the line, that people have missed or failed to act upon."

Blackwood says girls should be educated about abusive relationships at a pre-teen age, while care homes should alert children to the mechanisms of sexual exploitation and to tell staff if a friend is in trouble.

"SEXUAL FAGIN"

"All the women we see were shown a way in to the work by men who paid them a lot of attention when they were vulnerable and young," says Blackwood. "Men who seek to exploit and manipulate girls will pick the ones who are constantly on the run from home or carer. When girls meet these men they present as friendly and helpful. They drive nice cars, have plenty of cash and they make them feel important and valued in the initial stages of the grooming process."

In 2001 Martin Malone, described by police as a "sexual fagin" for the way he ran a ring of young prostitutes recruited from children's homes, was jailed for four years. Malone, 22, earned up to £6,000 a month

from what he called his "sexy young divas", some as young as 14, from homes in south east London.

Children, who are put into care homes – often following abuse, neglect or parental inability to cope – rarely leave prepared for a life outside care. Many end up in poverty. Those who stay in care are four times as likely to be jobless, 60 times as likely to be homeless, and go on to make up a quarter of the adult prison population. Three quarters leave care with no qualifications. According to the latest Department of Health figures, of the 2,200 girls who left care aged 16 in 2000, 52 per cent were neither in education, training or work by 2003.

ONE THAT GOT AWAY

Ex-sex worker and crack user Claire, 21, is one of the lucky ones. Now living in Hampshire with her three young children, she was put in the first of 16 children's homes and secure units when she was 11 because her mother couldn't look after her. "The children's home was ok and the staff paid more attention to me than my mum did. I ended up being moved a lot because I was always naughty. When I was 13, I met a bloke who was a drug dealer and we became friends. One day I smoked £350 of his crack and the next day he said I had to pay it back.

"The only way I was going to get the money was by having sex with a punter. After the first time I cried my eyes out. I got £80 and in two hours I had the money to pay him back. That was the beginning. I hardly spent any time at the children's homes, it was always round crack houses. I told the staff about what I was doing but they were powerless because they couldn't stop me leaving." It was, according to Claire, the birth of her daughter, that led her to give up drugs and sex work.

"I know so many prostitutes from children's homes, but unlike me they don't get out of the cycle," says Claire. "Everyone knows this is happening but no-one is doing anything to stop it. When are people going to wake up?" ■