

Teen victims are coming of age in culture steeped in sex

Officer tries to teach girls about dangers of sexual activity

By [author]David Johnson[/author] of the [org]Tribune[/org]
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Chris Middleton, a school resource officer for the Latah County Sheriff's Office, says it comes as no surprise, considering all the circumstances, that younger and younger girls are becoming more sexually aggressive.

"I have girls who are so aggressive at 11 years old that I'm beside myself with the way they dress, the way they talk, the way they act."

What's more, Middleton adds, young men are paying a big price for taking advantage of the girls.

"I explain to them that just because you have a 13-year-old girl trapped in a 28-year-old's body, doesn't alleviate an 18-year-old of the responsibility of finding out how old that girl is."

Amid a rash of rape, lewd conduct and child sexual abuse cases in Latah County, Middleton says he's stepped up his mission.

"When all this first started happening, as far as the charges being filed, and some of the issues started to surface, I had already seen the issue," Middleton says.

Much of the problem, he suggests, stems from a society fueled through the media with sexual images and permissiveness. School social dynamics, he explains, often revolve around sexual innuendos, expectations and eventually actions.

But he also traces the cause to the girls' homes.

"One thing they (the young girls) had in common is they didn't have a positive male role model in their lives." Many girls live in homes, Middleton says, where single mothers are working two or three jobs. Other parents may not work and are simply neglectful.

"So, what happens is, we have these kids who are left unattended after school, before school, whatever. And they're left to make adult decisions," Middleton says. "They're actually being brought into the fold of the financial problems of the home. The food problems of the home. The daily running of the home."

Eventually, he says, the scenario enters the sexual arena.

"These girls are left to grow up and become a woman on their own. And they see men coming and going in their life, even with their mothers. In and out of the home, one boyfriend after the next."

Sooner than later, Middleton says, the girls start to think they need a man and in order to get one they have to be physical. "They don't understand that whole other side of the coin, where we have a relationship outside of the physical relationship."

Enter the young men, Middleton says, who apparently are naive about the law or opt to defy it.

"You've got a 13-year-old girl ... and a guy with hormones raging. She knows exactly what to do and how to do it to get where she wants and how fast she wants to get there."

The Latah County cases involved mostly young men who were out of school. But social ties, Middleton says, remain knotted through the party scene, chance encounters, "sexting" on cell phones, sending provocative photographs over the Internet, and mutual defiance of the law.

"They think they have every right to do it. And they don't care," Middleton says of the attitude some young people share. " 'I'm going to do what makes me feel good and what makes me feel happy.' "

But that attitude, Middleton adds, will continue to result in young girls being sexually exploited and young men being charged with felony sex offenses.

"The girls need to know the boys are going to pay the (criminal) price," Middleton says. "But in the end, an 18-year-old boy knows better than that 13-year-old girl. And that's why he's held responsible. He gets everything he deserves."

Middleton says he remains dedicated to teaching young people about the law. But he recently added a new strategy. It might be time, he says, for some teenagers, especially the sexually active girls, to think about raising their parents.

"I say, you know what? Be an example for your parents. If they can't be an example for you, then be one for them. I tell the kids, it's time for you to raise your parents. And I'm going to help you. You don't have to make the same decisions they are. Let's raise your parents and we'll all change together."

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Sex crimes reveal a disturbing trend

Latah County officials grapple with rash of incidents involving young, seemingly willing victims

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This story includes content that may be offensive to some readers.

MOSCOW - The 12-year-old girl told an investigator that she, another girl and two young men agreed to go by pickup truck to a camper trailer parked near Gold Hill in Latah County.

There, upon a fold-out couch, the four lay naked and had sex - the two males, 17 and 18, having intercourse with a 15-year-old girl and the 12-year-old girl. The younger girl, according to a probable cause affidavit, willingly told of other intimate activity, including oral sex.

In another case, a 20-year-old man said the 13-year-old girl seemed "only knee high to a grasshopper" and reminded him of a little sister. Still, she and he wanted to have sex. So they did.

Another perpetrator, age 19, was charged with five felony counts for, among other things, performing oral sex and having both vaginal and anal sex with a 14-year-old girl who he described as a willing partner.

In yet another case, police came upon an 18-year-old man and a 13-year-old girl parked in a pickup truck. The girl, according to court records, appeared to be performing oral sex, but denied it. The man was charged with sexual abuse of a minor and lewd conduct with a child under age 16.

These and other cases, says Latah County Prosecutor William Thompson Jr., are examples of a disturbing new trend - younger and younger girls seeking and having sex with adult males.

"That certainly is the trend we've been seeing in the past nine to 12 months," Thompson says. "And it's noticeable, the number of younger girls engaging in sexual activity with males who are in their late teens and some that are in their early 20s."

With one exception. The victim in another case was a 13-year-old boy. He told investigators he had sex with an adult several times within one week. The adult was a 31-year-old woman who lived across the street from the boy.

A total of six cases in 2010 involved girl victims between the ages of 12 and 17. Six males ages 18 to 21 faced or are facing charges including rape, lewd and lascivious conduct and sexual abuse of a child.

No trials have been held. All seven defendants (including the woman) have been convicted of varying charges as the result of plea agreements. The cases stemmed from incidents that took place throughout the county, and all of them technically involved consensual relations, even though Idaho law asserts that children aren't capable of consent.

"None of these events involved force, coercion or where the victim is unconscious or intoxicated to the point of being unconscious," Thompson says. "These are all situations that have been criminalized by virtue of age alone."

And while Thompson says the defendants should be old enough to know better, the victims, according to investigation reports, are often the aggressors who act in provocative ways by flaunting precocious sensuality.

"That is not unusual to see in the cases we are seeing," Thompson confirms. "We're having young and younger girls who are being sexually active and are much more sexually sophisticated and knowledgeable than historically we would expect."

Latah County Public Defender Jay Johnson, who has represented defendants in the cases, says Idaho laws fail to take in the wide range of unacceptable behavior among both the perpetrators and victims.

"I don't blame them," Johnson says of the young victims. "They're just kids. But they don't have a clue as to the ramifications of their actions."

Brian Dulin, director of youth services in Latah County, confirms that the rash of criminal cases reflects a disturbing trend.

"We have noticed an increase in the number of 17-, 18- and 19-year-old boys who are alleged to have had sex with 11-, 12- and 13-year-old girls," Dulin says. "I think we have some girls who have been prematurely sexualized and are sexually active." He says some of the males claim they don't know how young the victims are, but he questions that.

"Some of them are just taking advantage of the girls and having sex anyway."

In the wake of national reports that teenagers over the past decade are actually having fewer sexual encounters, the Latah County cases may be little more than an anomaly amid the statistics. The latest report on prosecution of child sexual abuse cases in Idaho, for example, shows that 514 cases were filed in 2010, a decrease of 155 cases from the year before. Among the other four north central Idaho counties, according to the report, Idaho County had five cases, Nez Perce County had two cases, Clearwater County had one case and Lewis County had none.

Despite what some might call relatively low numbers, officials, including school administrators, say they're seeing an increasingly sexually charged atmosphere among younger and younger children. And the encounters between adults and children that end up in the courts, the experts agree, are probably a

fraction of what's most likely not being reported.

"I would agree with Bill Thompson and Brian Dulin. It's a trend that we see more and more," says Kevin Hill, principal at Moscow Junior High School. "One thing that we've definitely seen an increase is, through the multimedia via cellphones, Facebook, where kids can get on and upload pictures and derogatory comments or sexually explicit language to other students."

Idaho's age of consent remains 18. But the Legislature last year created exceptions by including age differences.

"It's rape, absolutely, if the female is under 16 and the male is over 18," Thompson says. If the female is 16 or 17, having sex is not rape unless the male is at least three years older. For example, with a 16-year-old girl, the male would have to be at least 19. With a 17-year-old girl, the male would have to be at least 20.

Technically, only a male can commit rape, according to Idaho law.

"Idaho has what I call a unified rape statute," Thompson explains. "Which means regardless of the degree or severity, the maximum penalty is up to life in prison. That actual sentence, however, is left to the discretion of the court."

Lewd conduct, which is defined as genital-to-genital, manual-genital or oral-genital touching also carries a maximum sentence of life, according to Idaho law. Sexual abuse of a child, where the victim has to be under 16, is punishable by a maximum of 15 years in prison.

"It's kind of a gray area to them," Dulin says of the knowledge young men have about the law. "And then they get charged with statutory rape and have to register as a sex offender. I think that's a surprise to them."

The punishment, however, isn't always a deterrent even to those who know the law.

"A lot of the young people we run into, they aren't concerned about what the law may say," Thompson says. "The potential severity is not impressed upon them."

Johnson agrees. "I'm not sure the intended effect is going to happen," he says of whether laws act as deterrents to sexual behavior.

Some of the girls in the current cases, at least one of whom became pregnant and had an abortion, seem oblivious to the consequences of their actions, Thompson says. "It's not unusual in these cases for the girls to not be particularly cooperative with the investigators. Rarely is it the girl who reports it directly. More typically, it's somebody who learns of it ... and then they report it."

The girls often flaunt their desires and availability, according to investigators, not only in the way they act and dress, but in cellphone messages and on the Internet by claiming they're adults.

They sometimes download photographs that make them appear much older. In one case, according to

court records, a 14-year-old girl went to a party in Moscow, stripped and walked around and offered to perform oral sex on anyone who was interested.

Hill suggests that sordid adult behavior as reported in the media contributes to such juvenile behavior. "You go back to the Bill Clinton affair with Monica Lewinsky and we had a huge problem with kids thinking oral sex is not really sex," Hill says. "And that went on for a number of years."

Behavior aside, Hill says most young people simply don't know the laws. "And the part that's probably the most difficult for me," he says, "is that the schools are not knowledgeable, and parents are not knowledgeable."

In two cases, according to court records, mothers read explicit text messages on their children's cellphones, then called police. In another case, a doctor reported to authorities that a girl was pregnant. In yet another case, a mother confronted a young man about her daughter being pregnant. The man agreed to pay for an abortion and authorities eventually became involved.

"When we saw this trend building the middle part of last year," Thompson says of the increase in cases, "we started to get pretty alarmed because it was so new." He says questions as to cause were raised in task force meetings. "But we don't have a good answer."

In some cases, officials suggest, adults take advantage because the young victims lack good parenting or caring adults in their lives. "Some of the common characteristics are girls who haven't had a good relationship with their parents," Dulin says. "They've never had a dad tell them how wonderful they are or how much they love them. And so, when some 18- or 19-year-old boy comes along telling them how pretty they are and how special they are, they're apt to do anything for that boy."

As for the young men, one of them recently sits quietly with his attorney during a hearing before 2nd District Judge John R. Stegner. The defendant's hair is freshly cut. He wears a robin's-egg blue shirt. His parents and grandmother sit behind him in the relatively empty courtroom. A plea agreement has been struck between the prosecution and defense.

"Yes, your honor. No, your honor," the defendant says in answer to a series of preliminary questions from the judge.

Then comes the time to fess up.

"Guilty," the young man says.

"I heard you to say guilty. Is that correct?" Stegner asks.

"Yes, your honor."

The judge then asks why the young man was pleading guilty?

"The charges are true," comes the response.

"Has anyone promised you that I would be easy on you if you plead guilty?" Stegner probes.

"No, your honor."

"Is the charge against you true?" Stegner asks again.

"Yes."

With that, a sentencing date is scheduled and the young man leaves the courtroom with his parents. His attorney advises against him or family members speaking to the press.

No victims attend the hearing. No one talks on the way out. No one smiles.

Outside the courtroom, another adult defendant waits to enter another guilty plea.

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The cases

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The disposition of 2010 Latah County criminal sex cases involving juvenile victims and adult perpetrators are as follows. All cases were resolved, with some charges being reduced, after plea agreements were reached between prosecutors and defense attorneys. Some sentences remain subject to judicial review and could be suspended or changed:

Travis Matthew Winther, 18, Potlatch

Pleaded guilty to one count of rape stemming from incidents with a 12-year-old girl and a 15-year-old girl.

Sentencing: *Scheduled for May 23.*

Allen James Lewis, 19, Sandpoint

Pleaded guilty to rape involving a 14-year-old girl. Sentenced to two to five years in prison. Must file as a sex offender.

Judge retained jurisdiction.

Markus D. Gallo, 18, Moscow

Pleaded guilty to rape involving a 14-year-old girl.

Sentenced to two to eight years in prison.

Judge retained jurisdiction.

Blake C. Bunney, 18, Princeton

Pleaded guilty to injury of a child, a girl 13 years old.

Sentenced to 180 days in jail and 10 years probation.

Curtis Wayne Dolittle, 19, Viola

Pleaded guilty to sexual abuse of a child, a girl 12 years old. Sentenced to two to eight years in prison, successfully served 180-day rider, rest of sentence suspended and placed on five year's probation.

Brent William Wetherell, 21, Deary

Pleaded guilty to a reduced misdemeanor of injury to a child (engaging in sexual activity) involving a 17-year-old girl. Sentenced to 60 days in jail, with 48 days suspended and placed on unsupervised probation.

Tanya Rippey, 31, Genesee

Pleaded guilty to sexual abuse of a child involving a 13-year-old boy.

Sentencing: *Set for June 6.*

Maximum sentences for felony sex crimes involving children

Rape: *Life in prison*

Felony injury to a child: *10 years in prison*

Lewd conduct with a child under 16: *Life in prison*

Sexual battery of a child age 16 or 17: *25 years in prison*

Sexual abuse of a child under 16: *25 years in prison*