
Sexually Exploited Youth: A View From the Bench

by Hon. Fernando Camacho

In the winter of 1985, during the early morning hours of the “lobster” arraignment shift at 100 Centre Street, amid chuckles from the audience, the scantily-clad kids with the sad faces would walk out of the holding pens and face the judge. I, as the Assistant District Attorney, would recommend thirty days in jail. My friend Mike Piniero, the Legal Aid attorney, would ask for ten days. Judge Herb Adlerberg would peer down at the trembling teenagers and, as the mascara streaked down their tear-stained faces, he would offer them twenty days in jail. In a barely audible whisper they would take the plea. As they were being led back to the cells, I would avoid their gaze so as not to look into vacant eyes that reflected an innocence lost and a soul in turmoil.

Twelve years later, in Brooklyn Criminal Court, I saw the same young faces all over again as I presided over their arraignment as a Criminal Court Judge. The same script was repeated and I reluctantly played my part: “The Court’s offer is twenty days in jail.”

I have since come to appreciate that this approach to cases involving teenagers charged with prostitution is, to a large degree, shaped by certain misconceptions that continue to impact the criminal justice system’s treatment of sexually exploited youth.

Many of us assume that the overwhelming majority of women engaged in street prostitution in New York City are mature adults. In truth, many are not. Children’s advocates estimate that there are roughly five thousand youths involved in prostitution in New York City and the average age of entry into prostitution in the city is between twelve and thirteen years old.¹ New York City is home to more than two thousand sexually exploited youngsters under the age of eighteen.² Outreach workers report that they have come across children as young as eight years old who are forced into prostitution.³