

Sex Workers Outreach Project

Sex Workers' rights and Human Trafficking

<https://swopusa.org/blog/2016/03/01/latesha-sentencing-youth-as-adults-and-the-hypocrisy-of-anti-trafficking-rhetoric-practice/>

Campaign and Advocacy

On January 11th, in Kent County, Michigan, Latesha, a 15-year-old African-American girl and mother to two toddlers, was sentenced in an adult court to 9 years in jail for being used as bait in a scheme to rob men responding to a backpage escort ad placed for her. After men met Latesha at a motel and gave her money for sexual services, two older teens would show up to rob the men using a fake gun.

SWOP-USA members and board share outrage at the injustice that has already [been voiced by the sex worker](#) community. As others have already pointed out, Latesha, as a minor advertised for commercial sex, meets the Michigan [state](#) definition of a human trafficking victim. Similarly, the men who were robbed [committed](#) several state felonies when they agreed to pay for sex from a minor, an act that is now federally defined as human trafficking.

These laws were created from the belief that all youth in the sex trade are victims and all men who solicit sex from a minor are perpetrators. Why, then, was Latesha treated as a perpetrator and charged in an adult court? Why weren't the men who had solicited and paid to have sex with her? And worse, Michigan has [no statutory requirements](#) to try minors as adults so why did prosecution specifically petition to have Latesha tried there?

This injustice, as well as [many similar ones](#), affirm what organizations like Incite [have been saying for years](#): that new anti-trafficking laws are constructed to arrest black men and halt migration, not save black children and immigrant women. That a judge would give an 9-20 year sentence to a vulnerable 15 year old girl with a complicated life who played a marginal role in the robbery of men attempting to committed state and federal sex offenses against a minor (Michigan [banned](#) mandatory minimum sentences last summer) suggests that all the energy funneled towards trafficking awareness and legal reform is ultimately failing the people this energy is intended to help: public awareness campaigns dramatizing perfect (often white) victims are distorting our understanding of sex trafficking to the extent that we can't recognize a real (and fairly typical) victim; and immunity and record relief remedies for minors, if restricted to minors in the sex trade and prostitution charges alone, fail to adequately help most youth in the sex trade, who are criminalized in multiple ways for, essentially, just trying to survive.

Latesha also serves as a reminder of the injustice of the juvenile justice system in America. Latesha is one of [an estimated 250,000 youth](#) tried, sentenced or incarcerated as adults each year. She is also [one of roughly 10,000](#) minors in an adult prison or jail today. Among high-income nations, the United States practice of sentencing youth as adults, mandatory minimums sentences, and excruciatingly long sentencing lengths is an outlier and an aberration. Sentencing any of the teens who participated in the robbery, least of all Latesha, to time in adult prisons is an injustice.

Latesha's sentencing is also a glaring reminder of race and class disparities in sentencing. Minority youth [are far more likely](#) to be arrested, and subsequently far more likely to be tried in adult courts, convicted in those courts, and incarcerated than white youth. And had Latesha been white and middle-class, well, it's likely she wouldn't have needed to engage in survival crimes to support herself and her children.

What You Can Do

COYOTE and SWOP-USA are working on researching concrete ways to support Latesha. We will update you with further information as it becomes available. In the meantime, COYOTE director Bella Robinson, who has been in touch with Latesha and offers the following action items:

- 1.) Sign [the Change.org petition requesting clemency or an appeal](#), organized by the Survivors Connect Network.
- 2.) Donate to [Latesha's fundraiser](#). This will go to help Latesha's older sister take care of her two babies, go to her commissary and help her buy books. She loves music and is trying to save up for an mp3 player right now.

Comments are closed.

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