

A police officer took a teen for  
a rape kit.

Then he assaulted her, too.





The 14-year-old did not want to go to the emergency room. Her mother had begged her. Her therapist had gently prodded. And now there was a police officer in her living room.

“You really should think about it,” he said.

He introduced himself as Officer Rodney Vicknair. His New Orleans Police Department cruiser was waiting outside, ready to take her to the hospital for a rape kit. Early that morning, the girl said, a 17-year-old friend had forced himself on her.

Under the police department’s rules, a case like this was supposed to be handled from the start by a detective trained in sex crimes or child abuse. But on this afternoon in May of 2020, it was Vicknair, a patrol officer with a troubled past, who knocked on the girl’s door.

He tried to coax her into changing her mind. “If I’m a young man that has done something wrong to a young lady and she doesn’t follow up and press the issue,” Vicknair said as his body camera recorded the conversation, “then I’m gonna go out and do it to another young lady.”

“And it’s gonna be worse, maybe, the next time,” Vicknair said, “because I’m gonna think in my head, ‘Oh, I got the power. I can go further this time.’ ”

The girl didn't want that. She just wanted this to be over.

She didn't know it was only the beginning. Four months later, police would arrest a man for sexually assaulting the girl. But it wouldn't be her teenage friend. It would be Officer Rodney Vicknair.

The day the 14-year-old met 53-year-old Vicknair was the day the officer began a months-long grooming process, prosecutors would allege. Within hours of meeting the girl, Vicknair wrapped his arm around her while they took a selfie. He let her play with his police baton. He joked with her about "whipping your behind." He showed her multiple photos of a young woman dressed only in lingerie.



Americans have been forced to reckon with sexual misconduct committed by teachers, clergy, coaches and others with access to and authority over children.

But there is little awareness of child sex crimes perpetrated by members of another profession that many children are taught to revere and obey: law enforcement.

A Washington Post investigation has found that over the past two decades, hundreds of police officers have preyed on children, while agencies across the country have failed to take steps to prevent these crimes.

At least 1,800 state and local police officers were charged with crimes involving child sexual abuse from 2005 through 2022, The Post found.

Abusive officers were rarely related to the children they were accused of raping, fondling and exploiting. They most frequently targeted girls who were 13 to 15 years old — and regularly met their victims through their jobs.

The Post identified these officers through an exclusive analysis of the nation's most comprehensive database of police arrests at Bowling Green State University, as well as a review of thousands of court documents, police decertification records and news reports.

In case after case, officers intentionally earned the trust of parents and guardians, created opportunities to get kids alone and threatened repercussions for broken silence. Unlike teachers and priests, they did it all while wielding the power of their badges and guns.

Chuck Wexler, who leads the Police Executive Research Forum, a law enforcement policy and training organization, said the number of officers charged with these crimes is “very troubling.”

“Whatever we can do to prevent this and hold those accountable will help restore the trust in the police,” Wexler said.

But while many school systems and churches have created practices and policies to root out predators, law enforcement agencies have largely treated child sexual abuse as an isolated problem that goes away when an officer is fired or prosecuted — rather than an always-present risk that requires systemic change.

There is no national tracking system for officers accused of child sexual abuse. At a time when police departments across the country face staffing shortages and are desperate to hire, there are no universal requirements to screen for potential perpetrators. When abuse is suspected, officers are sometimes allowed to remain on the job while investigations of their behavior are left in the hands of their colleagues.

1,800+

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13 to 15

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90%

In the New Orleans Police Department, child sexual abuse has been a problem before. The city recently paid \$300,000 to settle a lawsuit over its 1980s Police Explorers program led by a lieutenant who was accused of sexually exploiting 10 boys. The case was investigated by the head of NOPD's juvenile sex crimes unit — who in 1987 was convicted of child sex crimes, too.

In more recent years, two officers remained on the force after they were accused of abusing young girls. Then they sexually assaulted other children. They are among six NOPD officers who have been convicted of crimes involving child sexual abuse since 2011.

Vicknair is the latest. His case reflects larger problems that police departments confront in conducting background checks, identifying red flags and responding to complaints of inappropriate behavior. To reconstruct what happened in New Orleans, The Post obtained hundreds of internal law enforcement records, hours of video footage and dozens of text messages.

Vicknair was hired in 2007 despite a record that included multiple arrests and a conviction for battery on a juvenile. His sexually charged interactions with the girl he drove to the hospital, though witnessed by another officer, went unreported to superiors. He frequently visited the girl's home in the summer of 2020, telling new cops he was training that they should stay in the car while he went inside alone. And when concerns about Vicknair's behavior were reported to the department, police officials allowed him to remain on duty for a week. During that week, the girl said, Vicknair sexually assaulted her.

Reached by phone last year, Vicknair declined to comment for this story. In November of 2022, he pleaded guilty to violating the girl's civil rights, admitting that he locked her in his truck and touched her under her clothing.

The city of New Orleans and its police department also declined to discuss the case with The Post, citing pending litigation. The victim and her mother filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against the city and its superintendent of police in 2021.

In court filings, the city has repeatedly denied that the police department is responsible for the girl's abuse, arguing that Vicknair was not on duty at the time of the assault he pleaded guilty to and was not acting on behalf of NOPD "while performing any of the inappropriate actions alleged against him."

Now, the case will go before a jury. A trial over what, if anything, the girl is owed by NOPD is scheduled to begin March 18.

With the permission of the victim and her mother, The Post is identifying the girl only by her middle name, Nicole.



At 14, Nicole was barely 100 pounds. She hadn't yet gotten braces. A large stuffed giraffe still watched over her bedroom.

She'd spent her preteen years in custody battles between divorced parents, in a domestic violence shelter with her mom and in a hospital for self-harm. She

believed all adults just wanted to tell her what to do. But on the day Vicknair persuaded her to go to the emergency room and then sat with her and her mother for hours, Nicole felt like he actually wanted to listen.

“If you ever just want to shoot, talk, text me,” he told her as his body camera continued recording. “You having problems, just need somebody to talk to, if I’m working I’ll come swing by and talk to ya, okay? ... We’ll go get some ice cream in McDonald’s or something.”

Nicole saved Vicknair’s number in her phone as “Officer Rodney.”

“Now hit call so I know it’s you and I can save you as a contact,” Vicknair said before leaving. He lifted his phone and aimed his camera down at her. Her bare legs were dangling off the hospital bed.

“No,” Nicole objected, raising her hand to block his view.

Vicknair took the picture anyway. “There we go,” he said. “Perfect.”

Nicole was just a year old when Vicknair applied for the job that would make it possible for him to meet her and other children.

“I always wanted to be a police officer in New Orleans,” Vicknair wrote on his NOPD application in 2006. “I truly love helping + serving my community.”

He was far from the typical police recruit. He’d worked as an EMT and a hospital security guard, but he was about to turn 40 — an age that would have disqualified him from joining some departments at the time. At 5-foot-11, he

weighed 237 pounds. He had lifelong tremors that regularly made his hands shake.

A department spokesperson told The Post that, today, NOPD has some of the most stringent hiring requirements in the state of Louisiana. Since entering into a consent decree with the Justice Department in 2012, NOPD has been working to reform its policies and practices.

But at the time Vicknair applied, NOPD was in disarray following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Public outcry over officers' actions had resulted in intense scrutiny from the outside and low morale on the inside. Recruiters needed to find people willing to wear the badge. According to the Justice Department, NOPD began lowering hiring standards and performing less rigorous background checks.





In his application, Vicknair disclosed to the department that he'd previously been charged with disturbing the peace and aggravated assault. Just the year before he applied, deputies from the St. Tammany Parish Sheriff's Office were called when Vicknair reportedly brandished a knife at his ex-girlfriend and beat a man she was dating.

Citing the "potential for future violence, as well as threats made by Mr. Vicknair in the presence of deputies," law enforcement seized Vicknair's knife and his gun

before taking him to jail, according to a police report included in his background check.

The charges were eventually dropped. Vicknair's ex-girlfriend, Denise Trower, told The Post that she asked authorities to stop pursuing the case because she was afraid of what Vicknair might do if she didn't. During their relationship, she said, Vicknair choked her and held a loaded gun to her head.

"He had threatened that he would make sure somebody did something to my son," Trower said.

Without calling Trower to learn more about what happened, the NOPD background investigator wrote that the arrest "should not reflect poorly" on Vicknair's application.

The incident was not the only time Vicknair had been charged with a serious crime. In 1987, he was convicted in Ascension Parish of simple battery on a juvenile — a part of his past he did not disclose to NOPD. He was sentenced to \$50 in fines or 10 days in jail.

Three of Vicknair's family members told The Post that he was charged after he had what they described as a sexual relationship with a minor. Vicknair was 20 years old. The girl, whom The Post is not identifying, was a preteen at the time. She did not respond to interview requests.

There is no indication that the background investigator looked into the simple battery conviction; he didn't appear to know it existed. Though The Post obtained a record of Vicknair's conviction from the court, the background investigator reported in his notes that Vicknair had no criminal record in Ascension Parish.

Donald T. Carmouche, District Attorney for the Parish Court for the Parish of Ascension, State of Louisiana, who in the name and by the authority of said state prosecutes in this behalf, in proper person comes into said Court and gives the said Court here to understand and be informed that one RODNEY P. VICKNAIR  
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 \_\_\_\_\_ late of the Parish of Ascension, on the 15th day of April in the year of Our Lord nineteen hundred and 87 with force and arms, in the Parish of Ascension aforesaid, and within the jurisdiction of the Parish Court for the Parish of Ascension, State of Louisiana, committed a simple battery on one juvenile \_\_\_\_\_ in violation of LA R.S. 14:35

Records show the NOPD background investigator also did not contact anyone in Vicknair's family.

Vicknair's sister, Kim Vogel, said that if she had been contacted, she would have told the department not to hire her brother. She described him as loyal, generous and eager to help other people. But she also said his history of anger and violence still gives her nightmares.

"I don't think he should have been a police officer, and I hate even bringing that out there," Vicknair's sister said. "But I also blame that on the police department, because I know they do background checks, they do psychological tests and all that. And they missed all of it."

Vicknair did undergo a computerized voice-stress analysis, a type of lie detector test.

"Did you intentionally withhold any information from your employment application?" the examiner asked.

Vicknair answered no. The NOPD investigator rated his application as “acceptable.” He was hired onto the force in March 2007.

During the next 12 years, he was internally investigated for allegations of misconduct a dozen times, according to NOPD records.

In eight of the cases, which included accusations of unauthorized force, theft of \$1,000 and drug possession, the department found no evidence of misconduct, could not determine whether the wrongdoing occurred or deemed his actions justified. Vicknair was not disciplined.

Records show he was formally punished twice for reckless driving and twice for acting inappropriately toward women who claimed he had mocked or harassed them while on duty. The most severe consequence he received was a five-day suspension.

In 2016, he was promoted to become a mentor to new officers while he patrolled the neighborhood where he would meet Nicole.

After the swabbing was over, after she stopped hyperventilating, after she stayed at the hospital to ensure she didn't hurt herself, Nicole was discharged. Then she called Officer Vicknair.

“Let me know when back home and I'll come check on you,” Vicknair texted the 14-year-old on May 26, 2020. He'd started messaging her the night he met her, by sending a GIF of a waving puppy.

In the weeks that followed, he began showing up at her house in uniform. He'd sip a Dr Pepper while talking about the headlines on Fox News. He'd lecture Nicole about staying out of trouble.

Nicole's mother, Rayne, witnessed it all. Rayne — The Post is identifying her by her first name to protect Nicole's privacy — had grown up with a sheriff's deputy for a grandfather. She trusted law enforcement and raised her daughter to feel the same way.

So Rayne encouraged Vicknair to follow up on his idea to take Nicole out for ice cream. She called him when Nicole was having a breakdown. She invited him to visit Nicole on her 15th birthday.

Rayne didn't worry when she discovered that the 53-year-old officer was talking to her daughter on the phone late at night that summer. She was grateful that Nicole, who had become silent and surly in the weeks following her sexual assault report, was finally opening up to someone. Someone who could be a role model.

"She would be like, 'Oh, I had the best talk with Rodney last night, Mom. He's so nice,'" Rayne remembered.

The interest Vicknair was taking in her daughter was so different from how NOPD first responded. On the morning in May when Rayne discovered her daughter on the couch with her 17-year-old friend, two other patrol officers were the first to be dispatched to a report of attempted rape at her house.

It was 5:21 a.m. The teenage boy had already fled. Records show the officers spent 11 minutes at the house before leaving. They appeared to take no further

action.

Their response was exactly what the federal government had spent years trying to fix at NOPD. As a part of the 2012 consent decree, the Justice Department's investigators found that officers were repeatedly mishandling reports of sexual assault. NOPD's investigations were "seriously deficient, marked by poor victim interviewing skills, missing or inadequate documentation, and minimal efforts to contact witnesses or interrogate suspects."

Years later, NOPD's special victims unit continued to be understaffed and overwhelmed. According to a recent Justice Department report, the unit closed out 3 percent of cases in 2022.

Several hours after the first officers left Nicole's house, her therapist called to report the assault a second time. NOPD sent Vicknair and two other patrol officers to her house. Then a special victims detective, Kimberly Wilson, arrived. Body-camera footage shows she spent a total of four minutes with Nicole before saying she had somewhere else to be.

She left Vicknair and another officer to drive and sit with the teen at the hospital. Wilson stopped by later that afternoon, but didn't interview Nicole until two days later.

"I told him to stop," Nicole said about the 17-year-old. "He said ... 'No, let me get it over with.'"

Wilson declined to comment on her investigation. There is no record that Wilson ever interviewed the 17-year-old, and it is unclear from the case file whether Nicole's rape kit DNA was tested by the crime lab.

Instead of progress in her case, Nicole got visits from Vicknair.





The first time Vicknair came over when her mother wasn't home, Nicole remembered, he asked if she owned any booty shorts.

“What was running through my mind at that time was ‘Oh, he’s just a guy,’” Nicole said. “You know, that’s how guys think.”

The more he came over and called, the more he learned about what Nicole had been through in her life. Rayne told the officer that her daughter was the “textbook poster child for daddy issues.” Nicole told him about sneaking into bars on Bourbon Street while her mom worked nights — and about the older men who bought her drinks there.

Vicknair began warning her, Nicole said later, that he could report her mom for child endangerment and get her thrown in jail. He told Nicole he could arrest anyone. He whacked her with his baton.

She'd been taught to be afraid of strangers who might want to kidnap her, not adults in positions of authority who increasingly tested her boundaries.

So she told no one when Vicknair's texts shifted from "Lion King" GIFs to tongue emojis. Or when he confided in her about his own childhood trauma, then asked her to send nudes. Or when he went from telling her he wanted to touch her to actually doing it.

"I passed your house earlier," Vicknair texted Nicole on Sept. 7, three and a half months after he met her.

"Stalker," she replied.

"You like it," he texted back.

Later, she would wish she had told him to leave her alone. "I just kept going along with shit," Nicole remembered. "He knew where we lived, you know?"







Vicknair would admit to investigators after he was arrested that he visited Nicole at her house at least a dozen times.

But it wasn't anyone within NOPD who raised concerns about Vicknair's behavior. It was Nicole's mother, who in September found a photo on her daughter's phone. In it, Vicknair's tattooed arms were wrapped around Nicole, pressing the back of her body into the front of his.

Nicole told her mom only that Vicknair once followed her in his police cruiser while she was on a run, yelling "Nice ass!" out the window. Rayne consulted with Nicole's therapist. They both worried there was more going on.

How, Nicole's mother began to wonder, do you report the police to the police?



“[Nicole] and he took a pic, took a picture, a selfie picture in the mirror that I just was uncomfortable with the proximity of [redacted] body touching, you know, him being behind her and [redacted] way. And, and that kind of physical closeness, that contact, and [redacted] picture he said was because he had a picture of everybody else in his phone. ...”

n Friday, Sept. 18, 2020, nearly four months after Vicknair met Nicole, the head of the New Orleans Police Department received a text.

“It’s about potential sexual abuse of a minor by an officer,” read the message to then-Superintendent Shaun Ferguson.

The text was sent by Susan Hutson, then the city’s independent police monitor, a civilian oversight agency created after Hurricane Katrina. Hutson’s job included listening to citizens’ complaints about police and trying to get something done about them.

Often, that meant contacting NOPD’s version of internal affairs, known as the Public Integrity Bureau. While some police departments turn to outside agencies to conduct investigations when one of their officers is suspected of committing a serious crime, NOPD investigates its own.

Hutson notified Ferguson and then-integrity bureau leader Arlinda Westbrook that same Friday evening. Sgt. Lawrence Jones, a criminal investigator with the public integrity bureau, did not begin looking into Vicknair until the following Monday, Sept. 21. (Jones and Westbrook did not respond to interview requests from The Post. Ferguson, who retired in 2022, declined to comment.)

Jones first spoke with Nicole and her mother that Monday. Sitting in on the call was Stella Cziment, the deputy police monitor at the time.

Listening to Nicole talk, Cziment later told The Post, she could tell the girl was afraid to speak honestly about Vicknair. She called him her friend, and was clearly trying to protect him. They weren’t certain that sexual abuse had already occurred. But the red flags about the officer’s behavior were obvious, Cziment

said. She assumed that NOPD would act to remove Vicknair from duty as quickly as possible.

“What we were scared of was the amount of access he had to the child,” Cziment said.

But Vicknair was not removed from active duty that day, even after Jones, the investigator, visited Nicole’s house and saw the photo of Vicknair, in uniform, pressing Nicole into his body and texts in which the officer called her sweetie, honey, buttercup, baby girl and boo.

Vicknair remained on patrol the next day, even after Jones reviewed the body-camera footage from when Vicknair took Nicole to the hospital and showed her photos of a nearly naked woman.

The entire week, Vicknair kept his job, his badge, his gun. Not until Friday, Sept. 25, seven days after the text to the head of police, was Nicole interviewed by someone specially trained in child abuse at the New Orleans Child Advocacy Center.

“I try to keep him happy,” Nicole told the forensic interviewer, according to a videotaped recording obtained by The Post. “He’s a cop, so it’s not like he’s going to get in trouble for any of this.”

The last time she’d seen Vicknair, she said, was just two days earlier. He’d come to her house while on duty, then returned after his shift. She went out to his truck and got inside.

“Did something happen?” the interviewer asked.

Nicole squirmed in her chair, her Converse high-tops shaking.

“I just can’t say it,” she said.

“I’m not gonna put words in your mouth,” the interviewer said.

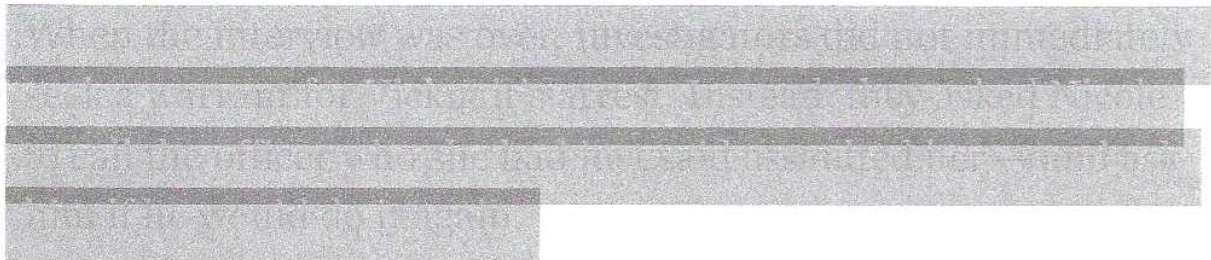
“Fine,” Nicole said. “He stuck his finger in my, in my — ”

She pointed downward. At 15, she was too embarrassed to name her own body parts. The interviewer asked her one more time, and then her story came rushing out. How weird it felt. How scared she was.

She tried to hug him goodbye, she said, but then, “He stuck his finger in one more time and was like, ‘Just one more taste.’ ”

That night in Vicknair’s truck, Nicole said, he asked her for a favor. He wanted to keep her underwear.

He still had them, she said.



She was deeply uncomfortable. But she did as she was told. She pulled up “Officer Rodney” on her phone.

“Can we do what we did in your truck again?”

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

When the truck returned, it was gleaming, with fresh gloss on the tires and exterior. The officer wrote in his surveillance report that it appeared Vicknair had gone to get his vehicle detailed.

If there was any evidence — or underwear — remaining in the truck, it had just been washed away.

y 2 a.m. the next day, Vicknair was inside an interview room, handcuffed to a table.

“Rodney, first of all, I want to thank you for sitting down and talking with us,” said Jones, seated across from his colleague.

“I didn’t have much choice,” Vicknair balked.

Sheriff’s deputies had knocked on the door of Vicknair’s home just before 1:30 a.m. on Sept. 26.

Vicknair came out in only his boxer briefs and lit a cigarette. He kept smoking as they cinched cuffs behind his back.

When he learned during his recorded interview that his arrest was related to Nicole, he laughed.

“On her?” he said. “Okay.”



Over the next hour and a half, Vicknair switched between denials and explanations for what he couldn’t deny. Yes, he’d gone to Nicole’s house just before midnight two nights earlier — but only because she’d asked him to sniff her to see if she smelled like weed, he said. Yes, he had sexual photos of her on his phone — but he’d only taken screenshots of her Snapchats “in case

something ever did happen,” he said. Yes, he told her which of her thongs were his favorite and that she had “a nice ass for your age.”

“If that was inappropriate, then so be it. It was inappropriate,” he said. “But there was never nothing sexual.”

Vicknair was adamant that he did not penetrate her or take her underwear.

“I care about her the same way I cared about several other girls and boys that I’ve given my business cards to and talked to them,” Vicknair said.

He accused Jones of trying to “make a case or something of a disturbed child.”

“The issue is that we have a 52-year-old, 15-year, veteran police officer who’s seeing ... this 15-year-old girl regularly,” Jones said.

“That ain’t nothing,” Vicknair said. “I talk to a lot of younger people four or five times a week.”

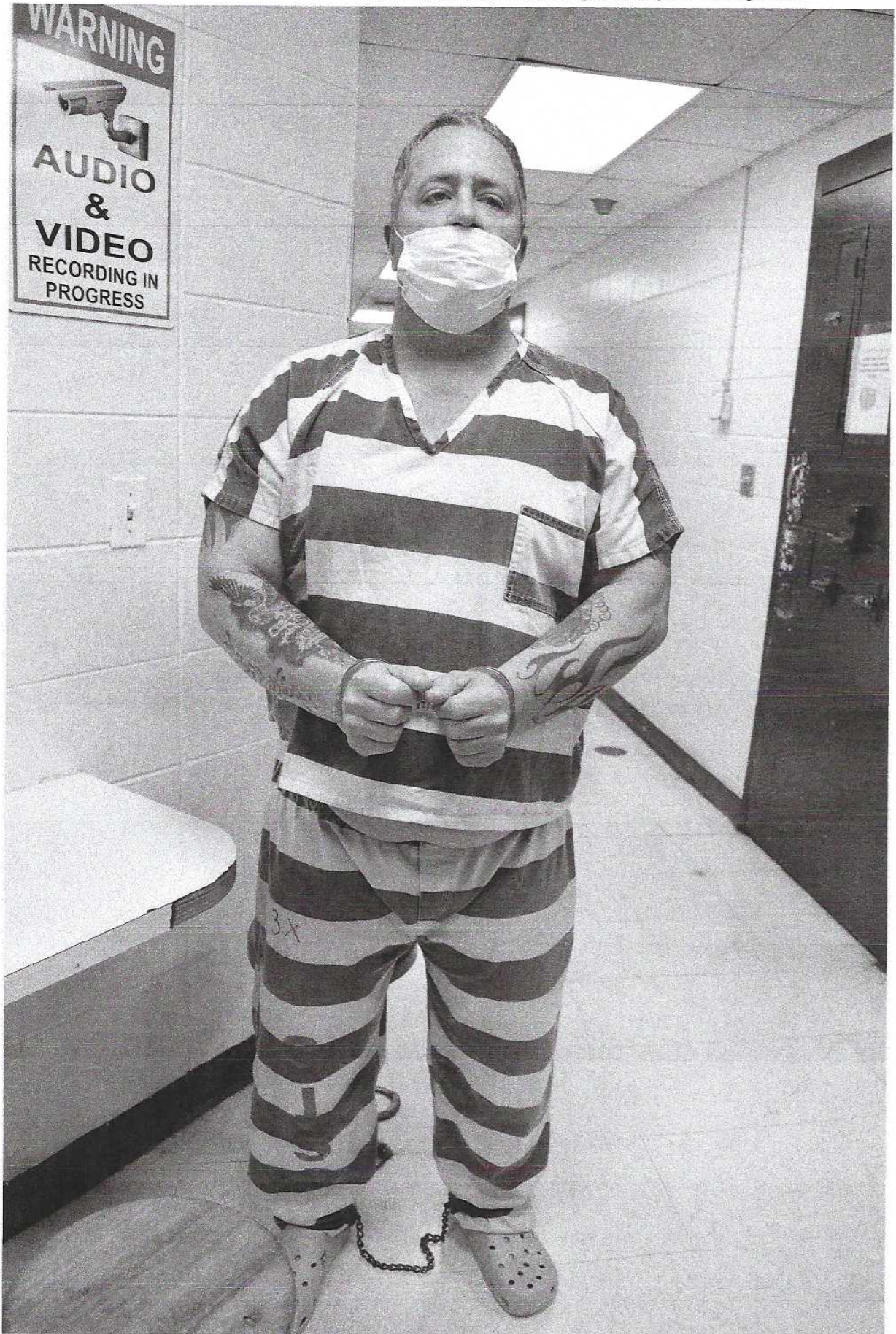
At no point during the interview did Jones ask for the names of the other young people Vicknair claimed to be talking to, including a runaway girl he mentioned specifically. There is no indication in the internal case records that NOPD ever conducted a review of other children Vicknair had interacted with.

“We just hope,” Jones told Vicknair, “none of them come calling here.”

arged with sexual battery, indecent behavior with a juvenile and malfeasance in office, Vicknair spent a week in jail before posting a \$55,000 bond.

He submitted a letter of resignation to the police department in January 2021.

His wife of five years filed for divorce. He suffered three heart attacks and a stroke.



The Justice Department, which took over his prosecution from Orleans Parish, charged him with deprivation of rights under the color of law, the same federal charge often filed against officers who use excessive force. In November 2022, Vicknair agreed to plead guilty.

In his plea, he signed a statement admitting that he made sexual comments, requested and received sexually explicit photos and touched Nicole's genitals under her clothing without her consent inside his locked vehicle.

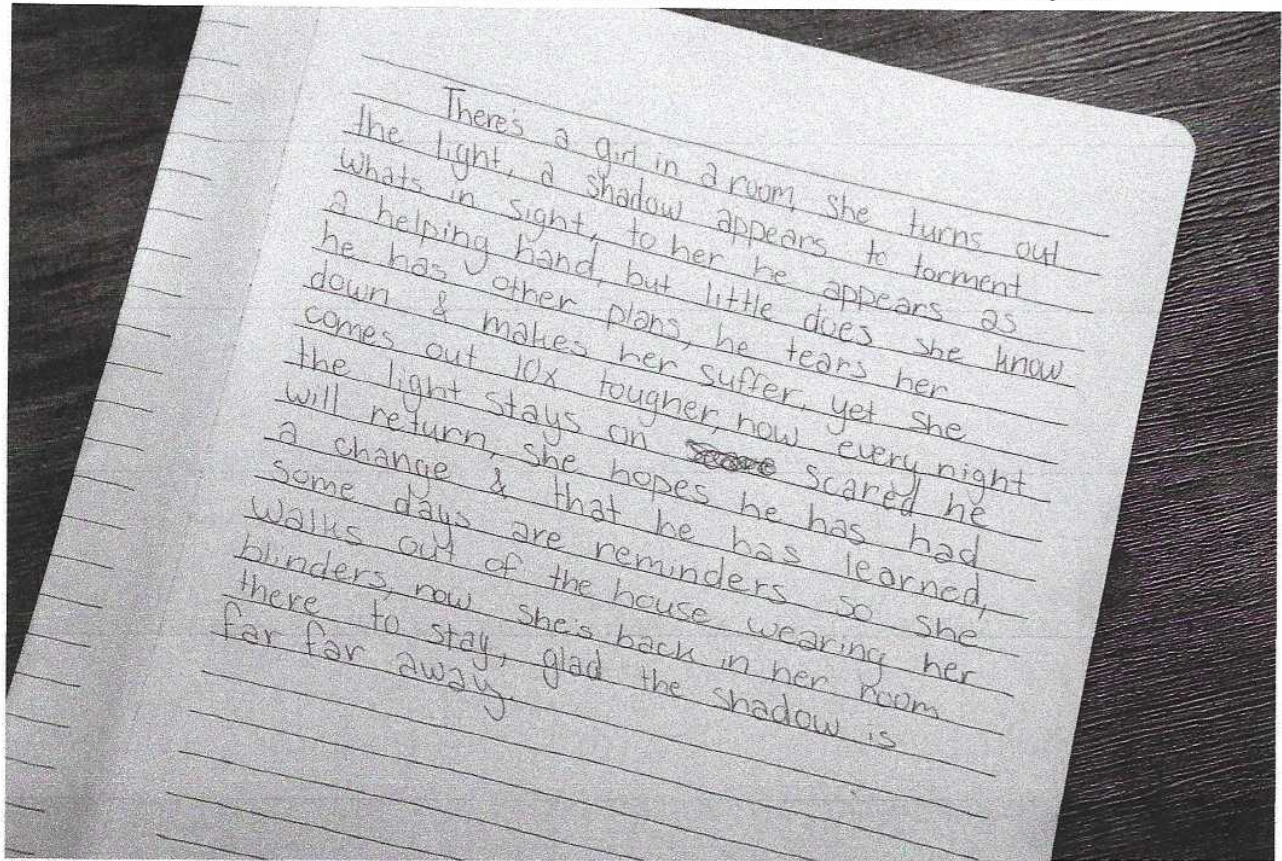
In exchange, prosecutors asked the judge to send him to prison for seven years.

On March 8, 2023, Vicknair shuffled into a federal courthouse for his sentencing hearing using a cane. For the first time since the night in his truck, he was in the same room as Nicole.

She was 17 years old. She wouldn't stick with therapy. She and her mother fought so often that she'd moved with a boyfriend to California. There, she reasoned, she would never have to see an NOPD cruiser again.

She spent her days sleeping and watching documentaries about sex crimes and murders, telling herself that what happened to her wasn't as bad as what happens to other girls. She spent her nights playing "Call of Duty" online with strangers, nearly all of them boys and men. She shot and swore and screamed at them, and reminded herself that none of them knew where she lived.

"Is there something you would like to say to the court?" the judge, Lance Africk, asked her.



She stood at a microphone in a stiff white button-down shirt she'd purchased just hours before. She hoped it would make the judge take her seriously.

All day, people had been telling her how “strong” she was. She thanked them, saying nothing about her recurring nightmare in which uniformed, tattooed arms were wrapping around her again. Or the knife she kept in her closet in case they ever did.

“To her, he appears as a helping hand, but little does she know he had other plans,” Nicole said, reading a poem she'd written as her victim impact statement.

Vicknair, coughing behind a mask, was watching her.

“He tears her down and makes her suffer, yet she comes out 10 times tougher. Now every night the light stays on, scared he will return. She hopes he has had a

change in heart and that he has learned.”

The judge told her she was strong. He told her mother not to feel guilty. Then he began to narrate, in graphic detail, everything Vicknair had done to Nicole.

“I guess he was thinking: Who is going to believe a 14- or 15-year-old over me, a New Orleans police officer?” the judge said. “He served himself, not this young, trusting child.”

But the child he was talking about was no longer there. The moment the judge began describing it all again, Nicole ran out of the courtroom in tears.

While she hovered over a bathroom sink, trying not to vomit, the judge announced that he was refusing to accept the plea. He believed seven years was not enough time. He told both sides to come back the next week.

When they did, Africk agreed to a new deal. He sentenced Vicknair to prison for 14 years, Nicole’s age when he met her.

Two months later, Nicole was scrolling on her phone when she started to shake. She rubbed her eyes, thinking she must be imagining the notification that had just appeared on her screen.

A Snapchat account with a familiar name was trying to contact her.

A bitmoji of a dark-haired man was waving at her, surrounded in confetti.

“Officer Rodney,” the notification said, “added you as a friend.”

Vicknair was not yet in prison. The judge had granted him time to seek medical care before he turned himself in.

Vicknair's heart problems had become something more. After he was sentenced, doctors had discovered a fast-growing tumor in his brain. It appeared that Vicknair was trying to contact Nicole from his hospital bed. She did not reply.



Vicknair had two brain surgeries before his brother and ex-wife drove him to Massachusetts to report to federal prison. He continued to deny to his family members that he had sexually abused Nicole. He continued to be paid police retirement benefits of more than \$2,700 per month, records show. Louisiana has no law that automatically disqualifies police officers convicted of serious crimes from receiving their pensions.

Days after Nicole's 18th birthday, Vicknair was rolled into prison in a wheelchair.

Most of his sentence was spent at a federal prison medical facility in North Carolina, where he received chemotherapy and radiation.

He served less than six months. Vicknair died on Jan. 1, 2024.

Nicole was at a restaurant in California when she heard the news from an attorney in her civil rights lawsuit. She wanted to feel relieved. Instead, she kept thinking about how little time Vicknair served. And how, before he died, he'd given a deposition in her civil case. Under oath, he returned to denying that he'd ever assaulted her.

Now, it felt like not a single adult was taking responsibility for what happened to her. If she gave up her lawsuit against the city, no one ever would.

She'd already endured a day-long deposition in December, when an attorney representing New Orleans asked her questions such as, "Was there any sexual meaning to him hitting you with the baton?" In January at a settlement conference, she listened to the lawyers debate just how much her trauma was worth.

The same city that had once charged Vicknair with sexual battery and malfeasance in office was now claiming his assault was "wholly unrelated" to his job.

But a judge disagreed, ruling in February that the city was, in fact, liable for Vicknair's actions. It would still be up to a jury to decide how much New Orleans owed Nicole — and whether NOPD was at fault for hiring Vicknair in the first place.

As the March trial date crept closer, Nicole's stomach started to ache. The pain kept getting worse, until it was so agonizing that she couldn't sleep. But for days, she refused to go to the emergency room.

When she finally gave in, she reminded herself that this ER was different. That she was no longer 14. That Vicknair was not beside her. She still hyperventilated through every exam.

She learned that what could have been a relatively minor issue had become a serious kidney infection. It would take weeks for her to recover.

While she waited for the pain to ebb, her attorneys in New Orleans prepared for her trial by deposing the city's police officials. Why, they asked, had the city hired someone with a history of arrests? Why had no one flagged an officer repeatedly returning to the home of a child who had reported a sexual assault? Why hadn't Vicknair been pulled from active duty as soon as the photo surfaced of his body pressed against Nicole's?

They wanted to understand what NOPD was doing to ensure that what happened to Nicole didn't happen to another child. But when the sergeant in charge of all department policies was asked that question, he could not cite a specific policy or training method that had changed because of the case.

"You don't know of anything NOPD has done differently," the attorney confirmed, "to prevent another Officer Vicknair?"

The sergeant's answer was one word:

"Correct."