



THE
INVISIBLE
TRADE

55 percent of human trafficking cases involve the sex trade. The average age for victims who enter the sex trade ranges from 12 to 14-years-old.

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He **kisses her softly** on her forehead, his hands **pulling at her hips**. Her arm, decorated with a fresh tattoo and a new **Cartier bracelet**, reluctantly hands over a wad of money. Thirty dollars, it isn't enough. Her cheek goes numb - **another blow** to match the patch of **bruises on her leg**. She stumbles back, grabbing her face.



That's how the scenario typically escalates. The way a person falls victim to human trafficking in the first place, though, is often less overt. She could have just left home, looking for a refuge, for someone to take care of her. At first, he would have done just that – whispering promises of a stable home and a good job, bringing her gifts. She would be happy thinking she had someone who loved her. But, shortly after, things would inevitably change. He would ask her to do things she didn't want to do, mainly to be sexual with other men, and she would comply because it was for him. He loved her and she loved him – that's what she would tell herself. The abuse would follow, then the drugs. When she couldn't bring in enough money for a day's worth of pay, she would face the consequences in the form of balled fists and boot-heels. She would gain nothing and, if anything, she would be worse off than she would have been had she not left her home all those years ago. His promises to her would never be fulfilled, and her future would only extend as far as the next customer; the door to her escape seemingly closed forever.

Women like her are not alone. 4.5 million people around the world are forced into sexual exploitation, according to the International Labor Organization. In the United States specifically, Florida is ranked as the third state in the country for cases of sex trafficking. Even closer to home, Miami has the second highest volume of cases out of all American cities, and thus far, nothing has been done to effectively curb this dire situation. In fact, instances of sexual exploitation continue to rise, according to the Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office.

Sex trafficking is defined by the U.S. Department of State as the "recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision or obtaining of a person for a commercial sex act," meaning commercial sexual exploitation is more than prostitution alone. It includes everything from pornography and erotic massages to phone sex and internet-based exploitation.

Anyone can be a victim of sex trafficking – citizens, foreign nationals, men, women, children and members of the LGBT community. Namely, women are the most likely to be the marginalized victims, according to the Polaris Project, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that combats human trafficking. The organization reports that 95 percent of U.S. citizens involved in sex trafficking are female. Vulnerable populations are targeted, such as runaway youth and victims of sexual assault. In fact, according to the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children, of the 1.6 million children



who run away from home each year, a third of them will be recruited by a pimp within 48 hours. These startling numbers mean that no one case can be treated the same as another.

Each case of sex trafficking varies dramatically. In some instances, a victim is lured into the situation through romance and "grooming." Traffickers will seduce their victims with lavish gifts, affection and promises of a stable home and financial situation to gain their trust and loyalty. In other cases, a victim may be promised a career in dancing or acting, be sold into the business by a parent or family member, or have a completely stable life and stumble upon a trafficking website based off of pure curiosity and be ensnared from there.

Traffickers use violence, threats, lies, bondage, drugs and other forms of coercion to force the victims to engage in sexual activity, all of which have lasting damaging effects. Sometimes, however, the signs are not so clear. Sex trafficking can manifest in less obvious, yet still equally detrimental forms.

"A woman may not be chained to a bed, but she is still a victim," said Maria Harrington, the director of Project Gold. Harrington works on this program with Miami's Kristi House, a center that provides care for girls who are victims of sexual abuse. The program functions as a drop-in center and provides services to girls who have been exploited in sex trafficking. After seeing over 350 victims, Harrington cautions against generalizing.

"When we don't see behind the smiles, we don't see the abuse they are going through," Harrington said. "It is easy to assume that girl is out there willingly." Often, victims feel as though there is no way out of their new lifestyle or they are stuck in situations that would lead them to jail, such as drug abuse, Harrington said. A cycle is developed that can only be broken with tremendous bravery and determination, alongside the support of those external to the crisis.

Harrington notes several risk factors, such as sexual or physical abuse, mental health and poverty, that would make a person more vulnerable to be trafficked; however, each case is different and anyone is at risk. The impact of sex trafficking manifests both emotionally and physically. Hypersexualization, anxiety, depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder are just a handful of the emotional impacts, while STDs, pregnancy, abuse, tattoos with a pimp's name and substance abuse comprise only some of the

physical impacts. Victims are frequently asked to be sexual with numerous partners a day and are abused if they do not make enough money to satisfy their traffickers' desires. The victims themselves receive a small portion of the money, if any at all.

Even if victims are lucky enough to escape the sexual trafficking ring, their agony and strife do not immediately evaporate. The victims' horrific experiences have lasting effects, which make rehabilitation an arduous process. Paranoia or discomfort with personal interaction contribute to the difficulty of recovery. At times, the attitudes of society as a whole can serve as yet another obstacle.

Part of our culture glorifies sex trafficking, according to Harrington. "Our culture glamorizes sex and pimps; for example, we have shows like 'Pimp My Ride,'" Harrington said. She also points to the influence of pornography, music videos and the lack of education in American culture as factors that contribute to the prevalence of sexual exploitation. The lack of seriousness surrounding this crime subsidizes the struggle of past, current and future victims by painting an image of an unsympathetic society.

As students, education can be one of the most powerful tools in combating trafficking. Kyla Leonard, a University

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of Miami junior studying psychology, established the student organization Project Unchained to help combat sexual exploitation. Leonard developed the organization out of SPARK, a pre-existing organization on campus that mentors young girls.

"We were originally a site for mentoring [for SPARK] when we realized that our needs greatly outweighed the abilities of the club," Leonard said. "We split off and began adding education and outreach as components to Project Unchained." The student organization works with



According to the Florida Department of Children and Families, there were 1,892 reports of human trafficking in 2016. This represents a 54 percent increase in reports from 2015.

Project Gold and Kristi House to provide services to survivors, educate the campus and the greater Miami community, and assist in the eradication of human trafficking.

"We hope that one day there will be no need for us," Leonard said. "But until then we work to educate, advocate and mentor." Leonard works with the same core group of girls on a regular basis in order to solidify her relationships with them and form an environment of trust and compassion. She also teaches the girls lessons on important topics, such as self-empowerment. These lessons teach the girls what they were never taught before, as their opportunity for a quality education was initially stripped away from them through sexual exploitation.

"When you are with these girls and you see everything they have been through and everything they are trying to accomplish despite that, it's just incredible," Leonard said. "A lot of the student volunteers go in and they are shocked at how the girls talk and

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Sex trafficking comprises the majority of human trafficking in Florida. The most commonly-used venues for sex trafficking in Florida are hotels and motels.



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act because, even though they are 13 years old, they act like adults. They have tattoos, acid marks and other obvious signs of abuse and these things can be scary when you are first introduced, but then you get to know the person and none of that matters.” Although the girls Harrington and Leonard encounter have been through traumatic experiences, both Harrington and Leonard emphasize the victims’ normalcy, dreams and talents.

“These girls are so so intelligent,” Leonard said. “They write poetry, they do art, they write stories and they would blow your mind. They have this incredible ability within themselves.”

Sex trafficking is not the only form of modern slavery that exists. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (ONODC) identifies other forms of human trafficking aside from sexual exploitation including forced labor, organ removal, child soldiering, petty theft and begging. Globally, roughly 53 percent of human trafficking is in the form of sexual exploitation, 40 percent is forced labor and the remaining seven percent is a combination of organ removal, child soldiering and petty theft. Out of the detected global victims, 71 percent are female and 29 percent are male – of that, 28 percent are minors. In North America specifically – which UNODC classifies as the United States and Canada – 55 percent of trafficking cases are sexual, 39 percent are labor and six percent are petty theft or begging – in 60 percent of these cases, the victims are women. Human trafficking, according to The International Labor Organization (ILO), is a \$150 billion industry worldwide – the second largest criminal industry in the world behind drug trafficking. The ILO identifies that, of this \$150 billion, \$99 billion is from commercial sexual exploitation, \$34 billion is from construction, manufacturing or mining, \$9 billion is from agriculture and \$8 billion is saved by private households that employ domestic workers.

The difficult process of identifying human trafficking and its influence is made even more challenging by the fact that there is no one standard way to identify victims and report information. Furthermore, though criminalization of victims – especially

in sexual exploitation cases, such as prostitution – is improving, in many instances victims are still prosecuted as criminals while their traffickers and exploiters escape unscathed. There is no way to fully know the mass scale of human trafficking because most of the cases will go unreported. For example, the National Human Trafficking Hotline, a resource established by the Polaris Project, has had a total of 145,764 signals and 31,659 proven cases of trafficking in the United States since 2007, but these numbers are just a fraction of the truth.

The first step as an individual in addressing trafficking is education and understanding the risk factors and signs. Among the most common signs are anxious behavior, paranoia, avoidance of eye contact, malnourished appearance, signs of physical abuse and hypersexualization.

“Knowing that it occurs everywhere is important,” Leonard said. “It may be expected in Miami, but it also happens in the suburbs.”

Additionally, human trafficking can be fought by avoiding businesses that contribute to trafficking, such as the pornography and prostitution industries. Human trafficking is a business in and of itself, and if the demand decreases, so will the volume of cases.

Human beings should not be a commodity to be bought and sold. No individual – child, adult, female or male – should be subjected to the emotional turmoil that derives from human trafficking. The spontaneous reversal from an all-accepting, all-indulgent home, to that of abuse and violence, evokes intense pain and leaves deep scars, both emotionally and physically. Upon returning home, people should not feel panic over the amount of money in their pocket, but joy over the amount of love with which they will be greeted.

The impact that human trafficking has on its victims is immeasurable. But the degree to which we can fight this awful injustice is measurable. 📞

If you or someone you know is a victim of human trafficking, call the National Human Trafficking Resource Center at 1-888-373-7888.