

# HUMAN TRAFFICKING: A HORRIFYING TRAGEDY

**By: Devon Aragona**

She would be beaten, raped, and then walk through her front door to sleep in her bed at night.

This was the story for Theresa Flores for two years as a teenager. She came from an upper class family who lived in the upscale suburbs of Detroit. Her family had no idea the living hell that Flores was living every day after photos of her being raped were used to blackmail her.

Flores is now an adult, and an advocate for fighting human trafficking



Modern slavery has manifested itself behind closed doors and in a way that is unimaginable: sex trafficking. It is one of the fastest growing crimes in the world.

According to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, TVPA, severe human trafficking is “sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age; or the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.”

The practice is usually facilitated and funding street gangs, major crime networks, money transfer organizations and hospitality and transportation industries. Money is made by victims being sold to the highest bidder or by forced prostitution.

Due to the profit potential and rate of demand, traffickers are willing to take the risk getting caught.

According to the International Labour Union, an estimated 20.9 million people world wide are in the sex trafficking industry every year. According

to statistics put out by the Polaris Project, between 14,500 and 17,500 foreign nationals are trafficked into the United States every year. It is estimated 70 percent of victims of commercial sex industry are female.

It is difficult to pinpoint exact numbers. This is attributed to the very nature of the activity being secretive, victims are frequently mobile, definitions of trafficking are not followed, and it is difficult to track the developing online marketplace due to anonymity.

According to a study commissioned in 2010 by the Ohio attorney generals office, a sub-committee found there are three main ways that sex trafficking is conducted: pimp controlled prostitution, commercial front brothels, and escort services.

The most common places for sex trafficking rings to be working out of are in rather plain sight.

According to multiple report including the National Institute of Justice, top places to find trafficking businesses being run would be in faux massage parlors that are really brothels, pimp controlled city streets, escort services, and truck stops. The mobility of these “business” is becoming increasingly difficult to catch. People can be moved easily with out red flags being raised.

Sex tourism is when a person travels with the intention or goal to engage in sexual

activity, often times with prostitutes. According to the Soroptimist, a women and girls advocacy group, the sex tourism industry is being reported as in the billions of dollars, with very little regulation. Very inconsistent laws due to the geographical spread of the problem; what may be illegal or able to be proved illegal one place, may not be illegal in another.

One highly publicized event that has been reportedly the cause of spikes in prostitution cases is the super bowl.

A study was done by the Arizona State University school of social work to review the reported connection between the super bowl and other such large sporting events and an increase in sex trafficking activity.

The report found that not just the Super Bowl, but rather any large event that draws a significant concentration of people to a relatively confined urban area makes it a desirable location of traffickers to bring their victims. They also reported that the sheer number of ads offering commercial sex will likely exceed the capacity of any one law enforcement agency to be able to respond to in a way that would discourage traffickers.

Victims become enslaved in many different ways. Debt bondage is when a individuals are forced into prostitution to repay a debt of some sort. Another branch of this is when desperate citizen of foreign countries are promised passage and jobs when they arrive in the states.

For the victims within our own country, runaway children, homeless children, and those who are from abusive homes end up sex trafficking victims. These lost kids are the ones that pimps pray upon.

According to the Ohio State Bar Association, 63 percent of those who were sex trafficked as minors reported having run away one or more times before they were trafficked.

According to the Ohio attorney general a sub-committee report, pimps can be divided into two types: Finesse pimps are traffickers who befriend and groom their victims. They will develop a real relationship their victims. They relate to their victims and make them feel safe. Victims will start to trust them, and then the trafficker will start to manipulate the young girls into situations where they seem to have the power to make their own decisions, and begin selling sex and giving the money back to the trafficker.

Guerrilla pimping is when force, threats and intimidation is used to force victims in to prostitution.



Human trafficking is a growing problem not just in large cities, but is closer to home.

In 2010, former Ohio attorney general Richard Cordray's created the Ohio Trafficking in Persons Study Commission Research and Analysis Sub-Committee. This committee published a report on the Prevalence of Human Trafficking in Ohio. According to this study, Toledo has the nation's highest per-capita rate of human trafficking.

"Toledo was one of the first to recognize the problem and doing something about it," Tom Blunk said.

Blunk is the director of the Center for Safe and Healthy Children in Findlay. Prior to that, he was an officer and a detective for the Hancock County Sheriff's department for 27 years.

According to an article put out by ABC 13 news on sex trafficking, Toledo was a main recruitment area.

"They are recruited here in Toledo, and they are trafficked other places outside of Ohio," says Toledo FBI agent Dave Dustin.

Toledo is connected to major highways such as Interstate 75, highway 475, the turnpike, and is in close proximity to the Canadian border.

“The geographical location of Toledo, and Ohio in general makes it a popular place for traffickers, Blunk says. “Within eight hours you can be in several major cities.”

According to the Ohio Attorney General’s website, the average age for a child to be at risk for becoming a sex trafficking victim in Ohio: 14-years-old.

The attorney general’s sub-committee identified four factors that increase the risk to youth in Ohio. The first, Ohio’s weak response to trafficking victims, second is evidence that first responders to human trafficking in Ohio are unaware and unprepared. The third is high rates of vulnerable youth in Ohio. And finally, that customers who purchase the victims remain protected, receiving minimal charges and rarely being prosecuted in Ohio in any significant way.

Legislature is beginning to catch up to the problem with the passing of new laws in the last ten years that are defining the problems in accordance to the law, making things easier on the victims, and making things harder for the traffickers.

“The big push for new legislation came after the first federal law about human trafficking came out in 2000,” said Veronica Scherbauer, programs and

development specialist at the office of Ohio attorney general Mike DeWine.

According to the Ohio congressional website, House bill 262, also known as the Safe Harbor bill, was passed in Ohio in 2012. The bill was commissioned by Representative Teresa Fedor, of Toledo.

This bill increased trafficking in person to a first degree felony with a mandated prison term of 10 to 15 years. It requires offenders convicted of promoting prostitution or of trafficking in persons for sex related purposes to register as sex offenders. The bill also created procedures to expunge prostitution related connections and adjudications of victims of human trafficking.



Since then, three more bills have been signed in to law that have increased penalties, expanded on cyber advertisements for promoting prostitution, and recognizing January as National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month.

Ohio has also been working towards improving their letter grade given out by the National Human Trafficking Resource Center, or NHRTC. According to the NHRTC Innocent Challenge website, the grades are based on a yearly comprehensive study of existing state laws designed to inspire and equip advocates. There are 41 key legislative components that must be addressed in a state's laws in order to effectively respond to the crime of domestic minor sex trafficking.

When first graded in 2010, the state of Ohio received a 60.5, or a D. In 2014, it has improved to 78, C, for the challenge.

Part of governor Cordray's task force recommendations was also to add mandatory training to law enforcement, as well as recognizing child advocacy centers to help raise awareness in communities and help rescued children.

Up until around five years ago, prostitution was seen as a victimless crime.

"As a cop, we were taught that prostitution was illegal," Blunk said. "We didn't know that there were psychological manipulation or coercions in many cases. We didn't really use the word human trafficking."

What Blunk refers to as "the old way" was to simply arrest the women for

prostitution. There wasn't much legally to be done to try and catch the pimps.

There are a large number of foundations and projects have been created to raise awareness about trafficking rings and to help victims integrate into the world again.

Attorney General Mike DeWine re-created the Human Trafficking Commission (formerly named the "Trafficking in Persons Study Commission" under Attorney General Cordray) in August 2011

"Our local coalition, Lucas County Human Trafficking Coalition, is very involved in the community, and educates approximately 4,000 individuals each year about human trafficking," Wickersham said.

Toledo has Advocating Opportunities, Ao, which are legal services and whole person advocacy for human trafficking victims. The city also hosted this year's International Human trafficking, prostitute, and sex work conference.

Non-profits such as the Polaris Project, International Association of Human Trafficking Investigators, or IAHTI, the FBI and their Ohio Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, and countless others are working to raise awareness and gain more understanding in to the dark world of human trafficking.

“Toledo has an FBI task force, 1 of 69 in the country, specifically assigned to human trafficking and violent crimes against children,” Ashley Wickerham, associate director of the social work department at Toledo University, said.

One such initiative working to make a difference is a Truckers against Trafficking.

With sex trafficking being a mobile industry, those who are on the road almost constantly are the ideal watch dogs.

“Truckers are the eyes and ears of the nation,” Pam Zimmerman of Ohio Logistics and the Findlay Zonta club says. “A lot of these victims just need someone to care.”

Although great strides have been made in combating sex trafficking, more must be done identify victims of this crime. The National Institute of Justice cites that “to date, at least 39 states have passed sex trafficking laws.”

“Yes, Overall the education of the community and the public is growing. It is being recognized as a problem,” Blunk says. “I think we are moving in the right direction to put a large dent in the problem.”