

Sex trafficking, a term that has long secured its place on the covers of tabloids, is no longer a foreign phenomenon but a Sacramento-wide epidemic.

In 2017, the National Human Trafficking Hotline analyzed all calls received between December 7, 2007 and December 31, 2016. Sacramento ranked 6th among all U.S. cities for the number of calls per capita.

Sex trafficking is the act of using force, fraud or coercion to get someone to engage in commercial sex. With adolescents as the prime targets, Country Day middle and high schoolers are no less susceptible than the rest.

Sergeant Chris Shippen of the Sacramento Police Department attributed some of the city's distinction as a hotspot to its unique location, one piece of a complex puzzle.

"We have several major arteries that run through our area," he said. "Between Interstate 80, I-5 and I-99, you can basically go anywhere."

The second-longest highway in the nation, I-80 spans from San Francisco to Teaneck, New Jersey, making transportation between cities incredibly simple.

That said, very few traffickers make their way across the country, opting instead to alternate between Los Angeles, the Bay Area and Las Vegas.

For many traffickers, trips between major cities allow them to evade legal prosecution. Without a persistent presence, law enforcement has a difficult time recognizing patterns and preventing recurrences.

Shippen refers to these rapid, successive relocations as "hotel hopping," a particularly frequent occurrence on the street level prostitution scene, one of few fields that persisted through the pandemic.

In fact, activity around the high prostitution areas of Sacramento drastically increased during the pandemic, said Sacramento County District Attorney Investigator Annette Fucles, specifying those areas as Watt Ave but more so Stockton Blvd.

And yet, despite all the talk of prostitution, it is important to note that it is not always interchangeable with sex trafficking. Prostitution is a form of sex trafficking, but not all instances of sex trafficking are prostitution, said Fucles.

Regardless, what makes Country Day students vulnerable?

According to Brittany Bray, Director of Outreach & Education at WEAVE, adolescents are at the greatest risk of being targeted.

"There's a lot of changes that are going on for you physically and emotionally as an adolescent," Bray said. "You want to fit in, and if you're experiencing feelings of rejection, traffickers will look to exploit some of those vulnerabilities by posing as a friend or an intimate partner."

For this reason, Rachel Ewing, Clinical Supervisor at Capital Star Behavioral Health Consultation, Support, and Engagement Team for Commercially Sexually Exploited Children and Youth, said it is important to be attuned to the signs.

"If a person starts to isolate, if they have an older partner or someone who's providing a lot of gifts or alcohol or drugs, those are definitely signs to look out for," she said.

She brought up drugs and alcohol not necessarily because they are hot commodities amongst youth but more so because they are common tactics used by a lot of traffickers.

When traffickers get people addicted or reliant on heroin or fentanyl, they introduce a new level of control. Not only may this person already be emotionally or psychologically involved with the trafficker, but he or she is now also reliant on them physically for a substance.

In addition to alcohol and drugs, Ewing identified new clothing or small tattoos as possible indicators of suspicious activity.

"It's called branding," she said, "like a little tattoo with somebody's initials, maybe a crown or a diamond."

The oftentimes permanent tattoos might seem a bit extreme to some, but with the increased popularity of stick-and-pokes, temporary tattoos can last up to a few years.

SEX TRAFFICKING: A COMMUNITY AT RISK

STORY BY SIMONE DEBERRY;
GRAPHICS BY ARIJIT TRIVEDI,
GARMAN XU AND DEBERRY

Thus, Ewing encourages students to look out for friends that underwent a rapid lifestyle change, making sure to clarify that, again, nothing other than proof of activity can definitively prove that someone is being sex trafficked.

That said, students must always prioritize their own safety, said Ewing, meaning it is important to recognize that others are no more at-risk than oneself.

To allow students to better understand the most at-risk within the population, investigator Fucles provided a victim profile, a description of a person that is most vulnerable to being trafficked.

"Twelve to 14 years old is the age at which people most often begin to be exploited, although no age is off-limits," she said, making sure to note that boys are not immune to trafficking. "Aside from that, the victim profile includes low self-esteem, history of sexual/physical abuse, neglect, running away, and a desire to belong; all of which make adolescents more vulnerable to being exploited."

The victim profile, though in-depth, does not apply to everyone, said Fucles. Some victims may exhibit additional traits while others may have an absence of certain traits.

Regardless, most victims experience exploitation at the hands of someone they know.

In fact, with a 2011 study reporting that less than 10% of sex trafficking cases include kidnapping, these instances of relationships beginning as romantic or mentorial are incredibly common.

"We call it a Romeo pimp scenario," Ewing said. "There's typically an older boyfriend, or partner, who starts out as very romantic but will eventually switch the script on you, becoming more controlling and coercive as time goes on."

For this reason, Country Day mother and former Aldea social worker Maya Webb encourages all students to be aware of their social media presence.

"You hear a lot about catfishing and things of that nature, but it really does happen," she said. "I've seen adults messaging kids, trying to find out about them and befriend them. For some vulnerable kids needing attention, those people on the internet function as open ears, and if they aren't careful, it can become far more."

Webb warns against public profiles because predators often attempt to identify locations in hopes of better understanding habits. With Snapchat, she suggests hiding your location, prohibiting others from finding your house and recognizing trends in your activity.

Ultimately, however, Bray explained that the best preventative measure is education.

"When we educate people on healthy relationships, consent, and warning signs of sex trafficking, we provide an environment where open and honest discussion is welcome," she said. "With education, students can recognize potentially dangerous situations like sex trafficking and reach out for help or support if

needed."

Bray's perspective on the need for education is one backed by the state of California. In January 2016, the California Healthy Youth Act went into effect.

The CHYA requires all California school districts to provide their middle and high school students with a complete, accurate and unprejudiced sexual health and HIV prevention education at least once in middle school and once in high school.

As a private school, Country Day is not legally required to meet this standard. Thus, although efforts have been made to provide a complete education, sex education teacher Kellie Whited said that the SCDS curriculum does not formally include sex trafficking.

"It comes up almost every year in conversation during sex ed, and even drug and alcohol education," she said, "but I have yet to officially work it into my curriculum."

Whited said she would gladly incorporate information about sex trafficking into her lesson plan.

"It's less about avoiding the topic and more about it just not being on anyone's radar," she said. "Since it's a problem in our area, I don't see any reason why I shouldn't add it."

Sex trafficking is not the first topic Whited incorporated as a result of increased prevalence. Previously, she introduced material on pornography addiction after recognizing it as an issue in this new era of the internet.

As a parent to two Country Day students, Webb would gladly welcome this new addition to the curriculum.

"Obviously, it's important to keep discussions age-appropriate," she said, "but I would feel safer for my children if they learned about healthy relationships and the cycle of abuse in classrooms as young as sixth grade."

For students desiring immediate information or help, Ewing recommends reaching out to CSEC via their Instagram, @shiningstars100, or their warm line, a nonurgent support center, at (916) 844-2426.

Most importantly, she wants students to know that "sex trafficking is never an individual's fault, and shame and close-mindedness only perpetuate the issue."

"TRAFFICKING CAN HAPPEN ANYWHERE – THERE IS NO COMMUNITY IMMUNITY."

DIRECTOR OF OUTREACH & COMMUNICATION AT WEAVE BRITTANY BRAY