THE TRAFFICKING CRISIS

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It's been 150 years since the Emancipation Proclamation, and slavery seems like an antiquated relic of the past. Yet, even in a country that claims to have eradicated the slave system, some individuals are forced to suffer lives of sexual servitude. Photo by Richard

intro

"I didn't see a way out. I didn't think that I could get out. I convinced myself that I needed to be there, and that was my life. It happened pretty fast. They played on my fears."

Katie Rhoades, founder of Healing Action in St. Louis, an organization that provides support to those affected by human trafficking, is a survivor of trafficking herself. She was introduced into this world of bondage at the age of 18.

"I was struggling with undiagnosed PTSD, I was severely depressed. I was having panic attacks and flashbacks," Rhoades said. "I thought I was crazy. I struggled to get through high school. When I finally graduated I did what most kids do: get away from their parents. So I moved out."

Rhoades turned to alcohol to escape her troubles, and did not realize that she had an addiction. She was unable to hold down a job, and did not have a place to stay as a result of her dependency.

"I couldn't go back home. I did not have a great relationship with my family. My dad was actually dying of cancer, so to go back home was to face that," she said. "[I had] a pretty negative relationship with my mother. I was sleeping in my car. I didn't have a job. I was struggling with addiction."

Rhoades almost gave up searching for a job when an old friend from high school who worked at a strip club came to her with a job offer. To Rhoades, the thought of stripping was absolutely terrifying. However, she was desperate to leave the streets. So Rhoades began her career as a stripper.

However, shortly after the start of her new life, Rhoades was approached by a woman with a different job offer. This time, she would travel to California, and Rhoades believed the new job would allow her to escape her substance dependence and life as a stripper.

Within three days, Rhoades traveled to California and met with the woman's boyfriend and business manager that she was going to be working with.

"It became apparent very quickly that it was not going to be legitimate work, it was going to be working in clubs, it was going to be prostitution. I didn't have any contacts or a way to get back," Rhoades said.

Rhoades knew these circumstances were not going to end well. She wanted a way out. Rhoades attempted to escape once, but eventually found her way back to California after her dad died. Finally, after she got into trouble with her procurer, Rhoades decided it was time to get permanent help.

"I had made eye contact with another pimp on accident. He told my pimp that I was out of pocket [when a victim is not under control of a pimp, leaving her vulnerable to threats, violence or harassment to influence her to choose a pimp]," Rhoades said. "I got put on the streets in what's called a pimp circle, where other pimps have an opportunity to try to get me to go with them. I knew that I was going to get killed by a trick or end up in a dumpster."

Rhoades convinced her owner to send her back home. The pimp agreed, and Rhoades was greeted by her family at the airport just days later. Rhoades kept her past a secret, despite her wanting to reveal her identity.

"During that couple months I was back home, my dad was really sick and ultimately died," Rhoades said. "I didn't think I could talk about it. Why would they be worried about me? My dad's dying."

Soon after her dad passed away, Rhoades fell back into the same boat. She started drinking again and her relationship with her mother fell apart once again.

"I did what I knew what to do and I went back to the strip clubs. I thought I was smarter this time around, and I wouldn't get roped in again," she said. "Within a month of my dad passing away, my pimp called to check in on me. He's like, 'Let's meet. I know you had a really crappy time. Let's talk about why you left.' He reeled me back in."

Once again, Rhoades was back in California––but this time was different. She would have more control over what was happening in her life. She figured this agreement would make the work she did bearable.

"Once I got back to California, it was like a moment of clarity. Geez, Katie, what did you do? I'm back in this crap. I started planning my next exit. He left me alone in Portland at the club. I reached out to a family physician of mine, and said I can't do this anymore," Rhoades said. "I need to get into treatment. I didn't really tell her the whole story of what was going on. She was able to work with my mom in getting me into rehab."

Rhoades entered rehab, and her mom supported her through the recovery process. As a result of her experience, Rhoades was compelled to use her story to help others. She applied to and was accepted at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis. After receiving her degree in social work, Rhoades started the Healing Action organization to help other survivors like herself.

"To think that we all think that it can't happen to our kids, and that's just not the case," Rhoades said. "It's not about intelligence, it's about emotional vulnerability and just vulnerability in general. I don't know what would have happened if [my parents] would have asked more questions.=

STL lens

"In Missouri in 2017, the sex trafficking hotline received 420 calls. Out of the 420, 140 were validated as actual human sex trafficking cases," CHS social worker Sheila Powell-Walker said. "Out of those, 50 came from victims and survivors of human sex trafficking"

Powell-Walker has attended multiple conferences exploring the human trafficking problem in St. Louis and has been in focus groups designed to protect high school students from the issue. She is not just worried about high schools located in the eye of the human trafficking storm, but in those places that one might not expect to be troublesome, such as in Clayton.

"We should be talking about this at a high school level because any one of us could become a victim of it," she said.

According to Jessica Wilkins, the Reducing the Risk Coordinator for the Covering House, a non-profit organization in Brentwood dedicated to providing therapy to human trafficking survivors, St. Louis is especially susceptible to trafficking. According to Polaris, a human trafficking advocacy group, Missouri has the 17th most reported human trafficking cases in the United States.

"St. Louis has a ton of highways. They span the entire country, and the International Airport; these make trafficking easier," Wilkins said. "Also St. Louis has a high number of [runaways], shunned by their caregiver for whatever reason, and they end up in that situation where they have to make decisions to get their basic needs met that most people don't consider."

Much of the sex trafficking in St. Louis occurs in brothels, often in the form of Asian massage parlors. Asian massage parlors are common in the U.S., and these often serve as fronts for sex trafficking rings.

"They lie to women in Asia and tell them, 'oh, we need you to be a waitress or a housekeeper,' and they bring them here and force them into prostitution," Pam Gonzalez, a St. Louis nurse, said.

According to Gonzalez, the girls do not speak any English and lack passports and identification. These women are trapped inside these parlors that are used daily by the average St. Louisan.

"One day, before the FBI shut down Backpage, I got on Backpage.com to look for some brothels, and within a matter of 20 minutes, I found 35," she said. "And I'm sure there's way more, but I was just looking near me, up and down Manchester Road basically and in the South County area."

Diana Fine, the former co-chair of the National Council of Jewish Women in Creve Coeur, first joined a task force five years ago through the council years ago when a friend of hers learned that she was a therapist by profession.

"Our goal [was] to improve the lives of women and children and families," Fine said. "We don't usually have direct contact with the victims of sex trafficking, but a large part of our focus is getting the laws in our state changed to protect victims and survivors and to also make it more difficult for the traffickers."

Transitioning into this new line of work was new for Fine, especially given the severity of the human trafficking problem in St. Louis. She had never worked with victims of trafficking before.

"I really didn't know what I was doing," she said. "I didn't really know anything about human trafficking, but we met every couple of weeks over a period of about two years and it became very clear that St. Louis was a real hub of human trafficking."

Fine quickly realized that human trafficking was an issue that needed to be halted.

Human trafficking in the St. Louis area, as well as the nation, is far from being resolved.

"The national center for missing and exploited children, they have reported that in the last five years, there has been an 846 percent increase in child sex trafficking reports," Missouri State Representative Ann Wagner said.

Just how prevalent is trafficking in Missouri?

SINCE 2007*:

Total Calls: 2,390
Total Cases: 589
Total Victims: 684

** Statistics are up to December 31, 2017*

humantraffickinghotline.org | SOURCE

the victims

"We have to get away from the stereotype of the creepy old dude somewhere on the Internet who goes and snatches a child," Wilkins said. "It can happen in so many different ways."

There are many situations that can lead to the victimization of a person at the hands of a trafficker. According to Wilkins, it is often hard to differentiate victims of human sex trafficking from other people, because except in extreme cases, they lead lives very similar to anyone else. However, there are certain signs that could hint at a person being involved with trafficking.

"You might have someone that's suddenly missing class a lot, or absent from schools on random days," Jessica Lydon, Administrative Assistant of the Covering House, said. "Isolating from friend groups, having grades suddenly drop. These are basically your normal signs that something has occurred."

Other signs include people suddenly coming into possession into expensive, brand-name goods they would not normally be able to afford and changes to someone's social media accounts.

The ways people enter into the world of trafficking vary from young boys and girls getting picked up off the street to dysfunctional romances. According to Lydon, for more than 85 percent of the victims that come through the Covering House, trafficking began with a seemingly innocent relationship.

"We had one girl's boyfriend say, 'I don't have enough money to pay off my debts, but here's my girlfriend's address, you can go to her house and get my payment for what I owe you in whatever way you want,'" Lydon said. "He's not a traditional pimp in this situation, but it's still trafficking."

Other victims are sold by their parents to traffickers in exchange for drugs or other payment, a practice reminiscent of trafficking elsewhere in the world.

"In most other countries in the world, it's your family members that traffick you, your parents or a member of your community trafficks you, because of the tremendous amount of poverty in your community," Gonzalez said. "That happens in America - that family members sell their children - but it's not the norm."

Although not as common as other forms of trafficking, the stereotypical scenario of children getting snatched off the streets is still very relevant in St. Louis. This aspect is worsened by the city's high number of child runaways who leave home as a response to problems in their lives.

"A lot of kids get into sex trafficking because of already being a runner. Maybe they ran and ended up in having to participate in some kind of survival sex that turned into trafficking. Or maybe they keep falling back into trafficking because of the running," Lydon said. "What we deal with is a lot of inability to think clearly because of all the emotional trauma, and for them, running becomes something that is like a habit, becomes their initial response."

The problem of sex trafficking is not just perpetuated by male pimps, as is a common misconception.

"One of our young ladies was trafficked by another woman, just in building a friendship," Wilkins said. "That friendship was exploited."

Human trafficking victims are often first recognized at local hospitals. Victims will occasionally seek medical care on their own; however, these victims are typically accompanied by the men that are pandering to them to ensure they do not escape.

"We had one person who came in. It was her third visit in the week. She was a young female," Melissa Kroll, Emergency Medical Services physician at Barnes Jewish Hospital in St. Louis, said. "She was in a sex trafficking ring, and she didn't want to be there anymore. She was not happy where she was."

The young woman, who was only in her early 20s, went directly to Kroll for help. According to Kroll, the woman was not just running from her procurer, but also the law.

"She was like, 'I'm being used. I don't want this. Because I'd been forced to sell myself, there are prostitution charges against me. I missed my court date. My captor wouldn't let me make it. So I have warrants out for my arrest, am I gonna be arrested?'"

BY THE NUMBERS

11-14 Average Age of Victim

846% Increase in Reports in Last Five Years

1,500,000 Victims

Jessica Lydon, Javier Cardenas and Jessica Wilkins of the Covering House in St. Louis. Photo by Michael Melinger

Kroll said. "I couldn't promise she wouldn't be arrested. She left the emergency department before we were able to get her help. She just disappeared."

Unfortunately for medical care providers, these victims are not always upfront with their distress. It often takes a surplus of potential indicators for the doctors to confront the patient.

"We had one that didn't speak English. He came in and gave his birth date that made him 16. We were trying to contact his parents who were in Mexico," Kroll said. "He didn't have a phone number to his parents. What 16-year-old doesn't have a phone number to their parents?"

The teenager was accompanied by another man who was translating for him. According to Kroll, the 16-year-old appeared to be physically abused.

"This poor kid had a very large cut on his face. We had to take care of the cut. The number one priority is to take care of the health of the person in front of you. We took care of that. Then we said, 'because you're a kid, we have to get permission to treat you.' And then he [gave us] a new birth wdate," Kroll said. "[He said], 'they didn't give my date of birth right. They misheard me.' When he gave the new date of birth he was 20 so we could treat him."

Kroll was decidedly suspicious of his story. After further investigation by Kroll and her colleagues, it became apparent that the young boy was being trafficked.

According to Kroll, the hospital should not overwhelm and intimidate these victims.

"Our only hope is that every time they come into the hospital, they recognize that the hospital is a safe place," she said. "That any point in time they decide they want to leave [trafficking], they have a safe place to go to."

Although the new homes for the victims while encompassed by the world of trafficking are seemingly harrowing and unpleasant, to the victims their new residence can be quite the opposite.

"A lot of these victims come from very dangerous locations, [to] a lot of these victims, the place that they are currently living is not as bad as the place that they came from. These are kids that you would hope have a family somewhere," Kroll said. "But a lot of these kids, who ended [up] in human trafficking have been through the foster system or are runaways because their home environment is not good. Their biggest fear is getting sent back home."

When the children are finally able to escape trafficking, their first concern is not getting pulled back into trafficking. Instead, it is of being pushed back to their original home.

"When we think of human trafficking, we think of it as a very much in our faces, where we can look at it and say, 'oh yeah, that's what happening,'" Powell-Walker said. "But it doesn't necessarily work like that. There are so many ways it could happen, and it can happen to anyone."

legal issues

Jaytonya Claydorn-Muldrow, Detective Sergeant with the Intelligence Division of the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department, supervises human trafficking investigations.

"The problem is very prevalent," Claydorn-Muldrow said. "Our problem mostly deals with minor females or black, juvenile females between 14 and 16 years of age. That's the most common victim that we identify within the St. Louis City Police Department."

Bringing sex trafficking cases to light can be difficult. To have a solid case against a suspected pimp, there needs to be a victim who's willing to risk it all in order to make a case against the trafficker.

"Once we receive those referrals, a detective is assigned to investigate that case," Claydorn-Muldrow said. "They have to meet with the victim and see what's going on. I will say that most cases, especially with our juvenile victims, the victims will not disclose immediately."

According to the detective, it typically takes multiple visits before a victim will disclose their situation. Once a case of human trafficking is verified, law enforcement will collect evidence to attempt to file charges against a suspected trafficker.

The role of the police in the cases made against traffickers is essential. Gathering information for the report as well as securing a reliable victim to cooperate are both key pieces in a trial against a sex trafficker.

"Without the police officers conducting the investigation, writing a report, gathering evidence and identifying a victim and a suspect, there would be no case to present in court," Claydorn-Muldrow said. "Before we can take the case to our circuit attorney's office we have to have those three elements in place."

They will then take the police report to the circuit attorney's office for further review, involving a decision to issue or refuse charges. In some instances, the trafficker cannot be pursued due to the sudden absence or noncompliance from a victim.

"There are times where we have victims who say they're going to cooperate but we will arrest the suspect and then the victim will go into hiding or go on the run," Claydorn-Muldrow said. "Without a victim, we can't prosecute a case. That's most often why those types of cases are refused once we take them to the circuit attorney's office."

Often in these types of scenarios, prosecutors will find other incriminating evidence to use against the defendant. Other charges can be pressed to incarcerate the criminal when solid evidence against a trafficker is lacking.

"A lot of these traffickers end up with drug possession charges, they end up going to jail for marijuana or cocaine," Javier Cardenas, Manager of Donor Development and Legislative Affairs at the Covering House, said.

Jail time can vary greatly for those convicted of human trafficking.

"With the St. Louis City Police Department, we usually try to take our cases federal whenever possible because the federal system has stiffer penalties; however, sentencing can depend on the suspect's past criminal history and the judge that's hearing the case," Claydorn-Muldrow said. 'There are a lot of variables that come into play and it's very hard to pinpoint just what a sentencing would be."

Pleading guilty versus not guilty can vary ones outcome as well. In 2013, a male took another female across state lines to participate in prostitution. He was faced with a 25-year sentence if the case went to trial, but he accepted to a plea agreement of 10 years.

Although the issue of human trafficking has become more widespread in St. Louis over the last few decades, the laws surrounding it have not changed much in response.

"I think that the difference now is that there's more awareness," Claydorn-Muldrow said. "There's more people paying attention and referring cases to us, but I think the numbers have always been the same. There's no way to verify that, we just don't know, but I think people are being educated on the topic of human trafficking or being more aware. They're actually wanting to do something about it and get involved."

> "People are being educated on the topic of human trafficking. They're actually wanting to get involved."
> - Claydorn-Muldrow

Photo by Aaron Zoll

PAM GONZALEZ

Pam Gonzalez, who has worked as a nurse for 34 years, has a passion for fighting human trafficking. She has been a part of multiple human trafficking boards throughout St. Louis.

"The [group] I started with in the beginning [is] called the Protect Me Project and that is a group that works solely in South America to fight human trafficking," Gonzalez said. "Their whole premise is to prevent it, so they work in schools with teachers and through local community groups and even in churches to kind of get the word out to teachers and parents what some of the common denominators of girls that end up getting trafficked are."

The Protect Me Project currently works to save victims in six countries of Latin America. However, the group does take part in some domestic work as well.

"I went to Houston with them last year to the Super Bowl. The Super Bowl is the biggest human trafficking day of the year in the United States because it is the biggest sporting event," she said. "Unfortunately, whenever you have a large group of men that gather, there's always a high demand for prostitution, and wherever you have a high for demand for prostitution, you're going to have a lot of human sex trafficking going on to fill that prostitution need."

Gonzalez spent some time in Houston spreading awareness of the issue.

Gonzalez recently joined another rising human trafficking awareness group in the St. Louis area: Tiger Lily.

"They work with both women that have been rescued out of sex trafficking, and they want to start working with the men. Because if we don't stop the demand for sex trafficking, then what's going to happen is when we rescue girls and women out of trafficking, the traffickers are just going to get more women, because there's still a need and they're making money," Gonzalez said. "So we will have ended up facilitating more girls getting trafficked that might not have been trafficked in the first place."

Although Tiger Lily does not yet have a house for the victims, Gonzalez plans to help implement a facility that can hold at least 10 women during their recovery.

Photo from Gonzalez

THE COVERING HOUSE

"It usually takes about six months to where they've built enough trust and feel safe enough in the environment and feel ready to actually start processing their story," Lydon said. The Covering House, a non-profit organization in Brentwood dedicated to providing therapy to human trafficking survivors, consists of a year-long rehabilitation program, saturated with constant guidance from the many staff members that have dedicated part of their lives to helping these victims.

The Covering House consists of 10 administrative staff members and six board members, and houses girls aged 13 to 17 years old. The Covering House allows anybody to refer a potential client directly from their website. However, not all of the referrals live in the house. The Covering House offers community based services that allow sex trafficking victims to live at home while still receiving supplemental services, such as group or individual therapy.

"In community based services we have more flexibility to have transgender clients, boys and girls and different ages. Our oldest referral was 57," Lydon said. "We can work with a much bigger demographic. We really want to open a home for boys. There are not many services for girls, there's barely anything for boys."

There are two phases to the recovery. According to The Covering House website, "The first phase explores the meaning of safety and self-care as well as feelings and fear identification. The second phase focuses on developing self-awareness and efficacy as well as establishing appropriate boundaries and connection within relationships."

However, the residents of the home do not spend all of their year in therapy meeting with counselors and talking through their past. The Covering House places a large emphasis on education and experiential learning. The girls will learn basic culinary, gardening and photography skills, as well as participating in drama courses and Bible study.

"We are seeing a lot of the transformation through the relationships they are building with the staff," Lydon said. "Really just building what we call a chosen family to help them walk through the process."

the internet issue

On April 6, 2018, the website Backpage.com, an infamous hub for sex advertisements and prostitution, was forcefully shut down by U.S. federal law enforcement agencies. Until its closure, the website had served as one of the largest online marketplaces for sex trafficking.

The closure of Backpage.com and numerous other similar websites came as a result of the passage of the "Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act" (FOSTA) bill through Congress. According to Rep. Wagner, Backpage.com had remained protected from law enforcement for a simple reason.

"The [Communications Decency Act] (CDA) was written back in 1996, before the internet was much of a thing, and courts had been siding with Backpage, even though they didn't want to, because Backpage was hiding behind an immunity clause," Wagner said. "The courts were saying, 'Hey, Congress, we need legislation, not litigation, we need you to verify congressional intent.'"

The CDA was designed in order to control obscene content, including pornography, in cyberspace.

"There's a link between pornography and this very casual attitude towards sex and human sex trafficking and prostitution," Gonzalez said. "They all kind of run together, and it's really hard to separate them out and say which one leads to the other, because they all just kind of run in a circle. Because ultimately, sex trafficking and prostitution and pornography all are the commodification of women, and saying that a woman's parts are more significant than a woman as a whole."

Before the FOSTA bill, in lawsuits against sex advertisement-oriented websites, courts had to side with the websites because of section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act. This section states that "No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider", meaning the websites could not be held accountable for what users posted. The FOSTA bill is aimed at revising this in the context of websites promoting sex trafficking.

According to the Congresswoman, the chief sponsor of the bill, since the signing of FOSTA, the online economy around trafficking in America has decimated.

"We never intended for the internet to be a red-light district," Wagner said. "If it is a crime offline, it is a crime online."

President Trump signed the bill on April 11, with Wagner and multiple human trafficking victims and their family members present.

According to Wagner, since the bill's passing, there has been an 80 percent decrease in online advertising for commercial sex.

"To have a piece of legislation that actually saves lives, and has such an immediate impact, we're proud of some of the results we've already seen," Wagner said. "FOSTA is probably the most significant anti-online sex trafficking bill Congress has passed in nearly 20 years."

There is some concern that the FOSTA bill infringes on First Amendment rights, as it limits what people can post on websites. However, Wagner believes that because of the bill's specificity to posts regarding prostitution or trafficking, this is not an issue.

Wagner has been leading the fight against sex trafficking since she came to Congress in 2013. From 2005-2009, Wagner worked with the state department as the U.S. Ambassador to Luxembourg. It was there where Wagner was introduced to the severity of human and sex trafficking in modern society.

During this time, Wagner watched as young women and boys were trafficked from Eastern Europe to wealthy countries in Western Europe. After she returned to St. Louis, she learned that the city ranked among the top 20 cities in America for sex trafficking, and was inspired to take action.

However, Wagner believes that it takes more than just political action to solve problems.

"I do not believe you can solve all of society's ills through legislation," Wagner said. "It takes education and awareness. I've been to the covering house, all the state houses, and across the country. I've worked with parents and victims and volunteers, they're the ones I think about when I pass this kind of legislation. I want them to know that they're not alone, that there are people looking out for them in our society, to try to make our community safer."

making a difference

Although human trafficking remains a prevalent issue in today's society, high schoolers and other community members have several opportunities to help reduce its occurance.

The first step to taking action is educating oneself on the issue. "What I would recommend a high schooler doing is number one: get involved and learn about the issue," Cardenas said. "Talk to your parents and talk to your friends."

Moreover, Cardenas warns against writing or calling lawmakers. Oftentimes, an assistant will receive these letters and phone calls, but will not pass the message onto their executive.

"If you want to make a difference, then you also have to vote. That's the reality of it," Cardenas said. "Lawmakers are more afraid of your ballot than your call."

Gonzalez remains optimistic that human trafficking can eventually be prevented altogether.

"If you turn the water in your sink on full force, and you let it fill up and run over onto the floor, and all you do is dry the floor but you don't turn the faucet off - and I'm certainly not suggesting that we don't need to be rescuing women out of human sex trafficking," Gonzalez said, "because we do - but if we don't do something to stop it, then we are just wiping up the floor. We have to turn the water off."

But in the meantime, the only way to reduce the risk of trafficking, is to raise awareness of the issue. An issue, according to Kroll, the asperity of which is often severely underestimated.

"[Human trafficking]," Kroll said, "is modern day slavery."

Call 1-888-373-7888 or Text "HELP" to 233733

If you think that someone you know is a victim of human trafficking, please call or text now.