



## In the Shadows: Human Trafficking in the United States

By Jessica Vaughn

**H**idden in plain sight, shrouded only in the forced silence of its victims, human trafficking has taken a devastating toll on the bodies and minds of its victims around the globe for centuries.

Today, this malevolent business continues to breed fear and anguish at an elevated level with the help of the internet and social media. The speed and vast reach of the web grants ease to the practice of advertising “merchandise” to clientele. Many times, this “merchandise” includes young women and girls. At all times, they are unwilling.

Though it seems like something out of a “Taken” movie or a third-world reality, the truth is that human trafficking lives on in modern America. Even in Missouri, the trafficking business thrives in hotels, on streets, and in sports stadiums.

There is an active force in the state including both lay people and the religious, such as Sr. Jeanne Christensen, Sister of Mercy and Justice Advocate, who are fighting human trafficking through “boots on the ground” missions and education efforts. Education is the first and most important step to eradicating this danger, they say.

### THE FACTS—WHAT IS HUMAN TRAFFICKING?

There are two types of human trafficking defined under U.S. Federal Law. The first is labor trafficking, in which a person is forced to labor against his or her will. The second form and main focus of this Messenger is sex trafficking, in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion. Those last three words are very important. In order to classify an adult sex act as one of human trafficking, there must be either force, fraud or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, debt bondage, or slavery involved. (Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000) In the case of a minor, all children who are involved in the sex trade are considered trafficking victims.

Human trafficking victims include men, women and children, but the vast majority—98 percent—are women and girls. There is no one face of human trafficking; victims come from all backgrounds, but the most likely victims are those who have no family or support system to return to. For this reason, large metropolitan areas with homeless and

low-income residents are targets for traffickers. The precise number of trafficking victims in the United States is unknown, but it is estimated to be in the thousands. Worldwide, there are around 27 million victims of labor and sex trafficking today.

### HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN MISSOURI

Human sex trafficking isn’t just limited to big cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. The U.S. Department of Justice has identified St. Louis as being in the top 20 jurisdictions in the country for human trafficking. The state’s other metropolitan area of Kansas City is also a large hub for human trafficking.

There are many reasons why these cities are attractive to traffickers. The Midwest location, with two international airports and vast highway systems, makes it easy and cheap for coastal operations to ship women in and out. The metropolitan setting puts a target on low-income women and girls. Professional sports teams draw large crowds of men, some of whom will pay to have an hour or two of celebration after a win. This is a frightening reality to face, but it’s a reality we can’t ignore.

Girls as young as 11 have been reported as trafficking victims. Some are never able to escape their captors, and remain enslaved for decades, succumbing to the horrors of the trafficking industry, whether it be addiction, violence, or the day-to-day physical and emotional trauma.

### THE FIGHT TO END HUMAN TRAFFICKING

In what can seem like an endless war, organizations like The Justice Project, based in Kansas City, are working to put a stop to human trafficking.

The Justice Project uses a “boots on the ground” approach to help trafficking victims escape from their captors. CEO and co-founder Kris Wade has spent the last 13 years checking in with women around the city day and night to ensure their safety and to work toward removing them from the grasp of their traffickers. It’s an incredibly dangerous

task, for both Wade and for the trafficking victim. Women who try to flee often face punishment by their captors, and will remain in the trafficking ring in order to avoid further torment.

This dark realm takes complete hold of a victim's body and mind, exposing them to a world of grave dangers. Victims are often forced into drug addiction, creating a situation that is even more difficult, if not impossible to escape. Their captors hold this addiction over their heads, forcing them to repay their drug debts through indentured servitude. This intense hold that traffickers have over their victims is one of the most trying challenges to overcome when embarking on rescue missions.

"One of the biggest obstacles we have in working with victims is the trauma bonding that happens between the trafficker and the victim," Wade says. "She wants away from this guy, but yet, she'll still fall back [on him] and he can still control her. That's the kind of thing that is common."

Kris and her team want their clients to be comfortable opening up to them so that they are better able to get to the root of their issues. But it is hardly ever an easy bridge to build.

"It takes time for us to build a good, trusting relationship with them so that they understand that we'll be with them no matter what," Wade says. "There's so much shame about this; people are afraid to talk about it."

Wade and her team understand the dilemma these women face because they once faced it themselves. While not all of them have been victims of trafficking, they have survived domestic violence, prostitution, homelessness and drug addictions. It's this connection with clients that makes The Justice Project so successful in its rescue efforts.

"When they hear that, 'hey, we've been where you've been, we know what that's like,' they realize that 'hey, they're not like the other authoritarian professionals that we've had to be involved with who are busy judging us,'" she says.

In addition to their street efforts, The Justice Project acts as a liaison between other groups, including law enforcement and court systems, which can be difficult for victims to navigate on their own.

"We can help advocate in partnership with the women, because we see them as equals," Wade says. "We're guides out of the chaos, but at the same time, we're really trying to provide peer support for them, which is critical."

Wade's efforts wouldn't be so successful without the help of those who are educating the public on the issue of human trafficking and vying for legislative action. That's where Sr. Jeanne Christensen shines.

Christensen is a Sister of Mercy and Justice Advocate who travels throughout the country to educate students and other groups about the realities of human trafficking. In addition to education, Christensen works to pass legislation at both the state and federal level. She is the "go-to" person for information on trafficking in the order of the Sisters of Mercy, and emphasizes the importance of spreading the word, and doing so through resources. She sends emails and hands out hard copy materials after her talks.

"The goal is to talk about what human trafficking is," Christensen says. "What's it look like, who can traffic, who can be trafficked. We talk about social media—especially with the kids. The goal is to say, if you see it, speak up, call the hotline or call law enforcement; do what needs to be done."

It is this advocacy on all levels that helps the fight against human trafficking continue with great force.

#### LEGISLATION AGAINST WEB TRAFFICKING

Revenue from online prostitution advertising totaled \$45 million in the U.S. in 2013. Backpage.com, a general classified ads site that has succeeded Craigslist as the nation's leading publisher of online prostitution advertising, generated 82.3% of this revenue. Congress has taken notice and last May it passed, and President Obama signed, the "Stop Advertising Victims of Exploitation (SAVE) Act." This legislation takes the next step towards combating human sex trafficking.

The SAVE Act makes it illegal to knowingly "advertise," or to knowingly benefit financially from advertising, commercial sex acts involving a minor or any individual engaged in such an act through force, fraud, or coercion. Backpage, for its part, opposes the SAVE Act, claiming that the term "advertise" is vague and isn't defined by the law, and that it has systems in place to prevent underage women from being trafficked on its site. To show its resolve, Backpage recently sued U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch to block her from enforcing the law.

## HUMAN TRAFFICKING BY THE NUMBERS

# 27 MILLION

people enslaved worldwide

# 1.2 MILLION

children enslaved worldwide

# 100,000 TO 300,000

children forced into the sex trade each year in the U.S.

# 98%

are women and girls

# 95%

experienced physical or sexual violence during trafficking

# 18-24 YEARS OLD

age range of majority of victims

# The Four P's

The Polaris Project, a leading organization working to end human trafficking, has come up with the four steps necessary to take the fight against human trafficking to the next level.



## Prayer Against Human Trafficking

Source: Vatican News Service

*"O God, when we hear of children and adults deceived and taken to unknown places for purposes of sexual exploitation, forced labor, and organ 'harvesting', our hearts are saddened and our spirits angry that their dignity and rights are ignored through threats, lies, and force. We cry out against the evil practice of this modern slavery, and pray with St. Bakhita for it to end. Give us wisdom and courage to reach out and stand with those whose bodies, hearts and spirits have been so wounded, so that together we may make real your promises to fill these sisters and brothers with a love that is tender and good. Send the exploiters away empty-handed to be converted from this wickedness, and help us all to claim the freedom that is your gift to your children. Amen".*

## HOW CAN YOU HELP?

- Become well informed
- Contact your elected legislators
- Talk with peers, parents, friends, and family about this issue
- Donate to organizations that help rescue trafficking victims
- Call the National Human Trafficking Hotline if you know someone is being trafficked

### HOTLINES TO CALL:

National Human Trafficking Hotline:  
1-888-373-7888

National Domestic Violence Hotline:  
1-800-799-7233 OR 1-800-787-3224

Congresswoman Ann Wagner from St. Louis and Senator Mark Kirk from Illinois, the lawmakers who sponsored the SAVE Act, defend the act, stating that they consulted with legal and industry experts before filing the legislation. They assert that Backpage just wants to capitalize on this dark and unsavory business, turning a blind eye to the realities of what is happening on their site.

State House Representative Elijah Haahr (R-Springfield) filed a very similar bill to the SAVE Act, HB 1562, for the 2016 Missouri legislative session, which passed in the House 153-0. It was then referred to the Senate Committee on Seniors, Families, and Children, where it received a "Do Pass" vote. Barring another Senate shut down, the bill should pass. The MCC will be reporting on this bill in the coming months.

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## Create in Me a Clean Heart: The U.S. Bishops' Recent Statement on Pornography

The U.S. bishops issued a new statement on pornography at their fall meeting in Baltimore this past November. Recognizing the exponential growth in the production and use of pornography over the last several years, and experiencing the corrosive impact of porn in the confessional and in their daily ministry, the bishops issued the statement "to give a word of hope and healing to those harmed by pornography and to raise awareness of its pervasiveness and harms."

Bishop Richard J. Malone of Buffalo, New York, chairman of the Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family and Youth, announced that the statement shows the collective concern of his brother bishops "for the widespread problem of pornography in our culture today." "Virtually everyone is affected by pornography in some way," Malone remarked. "So many people—including within the Church—are in need of Christ's abundant mercy and healing. My hope is that the statement can serve as a foundation and catalyst for increased pastoral attention to this challenge at the national and local level."

Pornography is a billion dollar business in the U.S., although no one really knows the exact amount of money involved, since many of the holding companies producing it are privately held. What is clear is that pornography is more and more accessible, to the point that it has become ubiquitous, and sexually suggestive images are everywhere: from the cover of Sports Illustrated magazines on the rack at the supermarket, to advertisements for hamburgers on television, to the windows of Victoria Secret stores in malls across the country. One can scarcely get away from it, or avoid being subjected to its allure.

The bishops note that pornography has become so much a part of our society that it can be considered "a structure of sin." It has a range of victims: men, women, children, marriage, and families. It is an industry that is "aggressive, savvy, and regulated only sporadically."

"Pornography is not art," nor is it harmless, as many would suggest. Authentic art seeks to communicate truth and beauty and lead the viewer to contemplation. Pornography, in contrast, "reduces the persons portrayed to their sexual attributes, with the purpose of provoking sensuous craving in the viewer."

Moreover, the effects of pornography use on the user are physiological, financial, emotional, mental, and spiritual. Those using pornography often "experience a deep sense of shame and an erosion of self-worth." It has an addictive quality, and combined with sins such as masturbation, directly affects the brain's reward pathways in a manner similar to the use of cocaine and alcohol.

Pornography also has connections to other societal ills, such as human trafficking, and the commercial exploitation of women and children, who are often the objects of the pornography trade. As the bishops note, "[m]any sex trafficking victims (mostly women and girls) are forced into prostitution, which may include pornography

as 'training' or as their 'product.'"

In closing the statement, the bishops remind us of the Church's role as a "Field Hospital," quoting Pope Francis' reference to the Church as a place of healing for the wounded of the world. "All of us are wounded," they proclaim while assuring us that "[n]o wound is so deep, ... as to be out of the reach of Christ's redeeming grace."

They call upon all people of good will to "live in our own lives the witness of a joyful and pure heart." "May we work together for laws and for a culture that remove pornography from its prominent and privileged place and counter its numerous injustices, building instead a culture that honors the true dignity and meaning of human sexuality."

The bishops' statement can be accessed from the USCCB website.

## In Plain Sight

By U.S. Representative Ann Wagner (R-Ballwin)

"The girl told agents [they] beat and threatened the girls to force them to comply. She said she held one girl in her arms as she died. She also told agents [they] threw another girl to the alligators."

When most people read this horrendous account, they will assume the acts were committed in a third-world country and far away from our community. Instead, this harrowing account from a 15-year old trafficking survivor in St. Louis was disclosed, just last year.

Human trafficking exists, and it exists in every community across the country. This issue has for too long festered in the shadows, but victims are hiding in plain sight. They can be the middle school student who frequently acts up or the teenage girl who is picked up from school by someone other than a family member. Victims can be our neighbors or friends of our children.

As a mother, I would do anything to protect my children and all children from sexual predators. As a lawmaker, I feel blessed that I am in a position where I can make a difference.

Increasingly, schools are becoming one of the biggest targets for sex traffickers to hunt their prey. According to Eve Birge, an education program specialist with the U.S. Department of Education, the average age of children who fall victim to human trafficking is 12 to 14 years old for girls, and 11 to 13 years old for boys.

Earlier this month, I hosted training sessions for education professionals in the greater St. Louis area to help them identify warning signs and at-risk behaviors in students that indicate possible trafficking activity. Identifying victims is the first step in saving lives and these sessions gave these dedicated professionals tools they can use in our local schools to better protect our children.

Sex traffickers have also taken their criminal trade to the internet, advertising victims to lure predators. They can browse websites and have child prostitutes sent to their hotel rooms or homes as easily as ordering up a pepperoni pizza.

These acts are truly sickening. That is why I am so proud that last year Congress passed, and the President signed, the first major package of anti-trafficking legislation in over 13 years. Included in this historic package was my legislation, the Stop Advertising Victims of Exploitation (SAVE) Act, which criminalizes online sites that knowingly advertise victims of sex trafficking, and puts them in prison.

I have met with numerous trafficking survivors in the St. Louis area who have volunteered to share their stories to help educate, raise awareness and speak the truth of this evil underbelly within our society. Their courage and strength to speak out, refusing to let their past experiences define them, is nothing short of heroic.

In Missouri, and across the country, we must do more to educate ourselves and our community of these monstrous crimes. We must provide a voice to the voiceless. We must prevent future crimes like the one detailed above. I ask that you join me in raising awareness by visiting my website that is full of helpful anti-trafficking resources at [www.wagner.house.gov/NotForSale](http://www.wagner.house.gov/NotForSale). I will not stop fighting to protect our children and our community from the horrors of sex trafficking, I hope you will join me in that fight.