

Human Sex Trafficking – A Detective’s Perspective

By Detective Don Howell

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The concept of forcing someone, adult or child, into the sex trade or some other form of servitude is a moral outrage – to most of us. Law enforcement is tasked with the responsibility of finding and breaking up the trafficking rings and the general public is comfortable believing that the problem is being handled – or is it? Law enforcement arrests criminals and rescues victims of human trafficking from deplorable conditions. That's the easy part. Unfortunately, the end result is that the public is duped into believing that a solution exists and a well-oiled plan rolls into action each time a human trafficking ring is discovered. The issue is far more complicated. Getting to the root cause of trafficking is the problem, and one that law enforcement does not have the power to address.

Motif #1: The Runaway Child

In order to get a grasp on the issue, there needs to be an understanding of the two basic types of human trafficking. The first type of trafficking involves

runaways. These individuals flee an abusive situation and are ultimately befriended by the pimp at the bus stop. This type of trafficking has been around a long time but is not properly understood by the general public. Many of these runaways are children who choose to escape from an abusive home, be it sexually, physically, emotionally abusive or severely neglectful. To the child, the adults in his/her life have failed them and the child has no reason to believe he or she would receive any better treatment from other adults. Faced with limited options, the child flees. Once the child is pulled into the world of the pimp, they come to believe that no one else will accept them, so a twisted and complicated relationship develops between the two. The victim becomes part of a world where the rules are simple;

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produce or get beaten, and the child has control over both. Mix in drug and alcohol use and the result is the perfect victimization cocktail.

Preventing this type of trafficking requires that parents do a better job of being parents. They need to give up their addictions (alcohol, drugs, work, or general apathy) and actually parent their kids. Law enforcement cannot force parents to do their job. Until parents take responsibility, the source of the problem remains unchanged.

Motif #2: The False Promise

The second type of trafficking is the one currently getting a lot of media attention; people being smuggled into the United States, from third world countries, with the promise of a better life as a maid or laborer but ending up in the sex trade. Sometimes they come here knowing they will be sex workers, but think it will only be until they earn enough to pay off their debt to the transporters, but that never happens. Either the debt continues to climb or, just as the worker has saved up a sizable sum, the pimp hires someone to rob him/her of all the money. Escape becomes impossible and acceptance of being enslaved is the result.

To address this type of trafficking, we need to

reduce or eliminate the customers. It really comes down to simple 'supply and demand'. Police do their best to eliminate the 'demand' by arresting the customers whenever possible, but the vast majority goes undetected. What police cannot do is change the social mindset of 'what's the fuss, she's just a prostitute'. Many customers are willing to overlook the age of the person being paid for sex, even if that person looks very young, rationalizing that being a prostitute trumps the age issue. These same customers would never beat or otherwise force a woman into having sex with them; however, the fact that the prostitute is being beaten by her pimp before she goes out each night is never even considered by the customer.

Preventing human trafficking will require a re-start of our ethical thinking. This is something law enforcement can't do, but each of us can do.

Don Howell is a retired detective with over 30 years' experience as part of the Huntington Beach Police Department (CA) who still works part-time on sex crimes and cold cases. He has taught at the University of Southern California's School of Sociology for 12 years and has written several books on sex crimes.