

Domestic Child Sex Trafficking

Not Just an Urban Problem

By Jennifer Hemmingsen

“When we think of domestic child sex trafficking, we tend to think of urban centers. The reality is that rural jurisdictions play a critical role in domestic sex trafficking networks, with victims being trafficked from, to and through idyllic farming communities in Iowa and other less-populous states.”

When Iowa lawmakers passed anti-human trafficking legislation in 2006, it commonly was assumed that any case the state prosecuted under the new law likely would involve international victims trafficked into that rural state for labor.

Then Iowa Senator Maggie Tinsman, who authored the state’s anti-trafficking bill, had only heard of modern trafficking at the State Department conference the year before. A fair number of legislators likely gave her their votes doubting the new statutes ever would be used.

Two years later, a jury handed down the first trafficking conviction under state law, finding Leonard Ray Russell guilty of trafficking two Nebraska runaway girls, aged 15 and 16, and forcing them to dance in strip clubs and engage in prostitution in Iowa and Illinois towns, including Denison, Iowa – a rural county seat with just over 8,000 residents.

Since then, Iowa law enforcement agents have investigated a number of cases involving vulnerable young victims of domestic sex trafficking – runaway and “throwaway” girls as young as age 12 forced to work in strip clubs and as prostitutes in larger cities and remote rural areas.

Accurate numbers are impossible to come by, but it is believed that the United States is experiencing a dramatic rise in domestic child sex trafficking as criminal networks are finding it’s profitable, and relatively risk-free, to serially abuse young girls.

But when we think of domestic child sex trafficking, we tend to think of urban centers such as Oakland or Atlanta. The reality is that rural jurisdictions play a critical role in domestic sex trafficking networks, with victims being trafficked from, to and through idyllic farming communities in Iowa and other less-populous states.

In that Denison case, an anonymous tipster led police to recover one of the victims from a local strip club, where they learned Russell had sent the other trafficked girl to an accomplice in Washington, D.C., with the intent to prostitute her there. An earlier investigation, prosecuted in federal court, involved a 13-year-old kidnap victim trafficked from Minneapolis and prostituted in remote rural areas on the opposite side of the state.

Investigators have identified several other suspected cases of underage victims being trafficked from Iowa to cities such as Chicago and Las Vegas, Nevada. Just last month, a 37-year-old Chicago man was sentenced to life

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in prison by a South Dakota court for forcing adult and minor victims to engage in commercial sex acts in South Dakota, Iowa, Wisconsin and Illinois.

Still, even though all states but Wyoming now have anti-trafficking statutes on the books, the idea persists, even among front-line workers, that trafficking is not a rural problem. Police investigators, social workers, emergency and medical personnel, and others may not have received adequate training in identifying and responding to suspected trafficking victims. Services specific to trafficking victims can be spotty and difficult to obtain.

Even more ignorant is the general public, which tends to think of trafficking as an international issue, or one confined to a few major U.S. cities – certainly nothing their community needs to concern itself with. This lack of knowledge only makes it easier for traffickers to prey on vulnerable young victims, to operate virtually undetected and unchecked.

For the first time this year, the Federal Bureau of Investigation will collect and publish national trafficking statistics. That may provide a starting point for better understanding trafficking circuits and how to dismantle them. But even when they become available, that national trafficking data will provide an incomplete picture of domestic child sex trafficking, at best.

In rural areas, as across the country, successful investigations and prosecutions against traffickers are rare. Victims are commonly too terrified of their captors, too embarrassed about the crimes they’ve been forced to commit or too suspicious of law enforcement to cooperate with investigations. In rural areas there is an added complication – police and other front-line workers who simply aren’t looking for the subtle signs of trafficking.

That’s why it’s critical that rural departments are trained in trafficking detection, investigation and response. That service providers understand the unique needs of trafficking victims. That state laws provide victims immunity for crimes they were forced to commit while under the control of their traffickers. That we educate the public.

There’s a lot we don’t yet understand about the pervasiveness of human trafficking – including domestic child sex trafficking – and how to fight it. But the first step must be to share what we do know.

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