

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), human trafficking is a 150 billion dollar a yearⁱ industry, involving over 20.9 million victims worldwide (Polaris Project 2015). Victims of human trafficking are generally exploited for sexual purposes or labor against their will, under conditions of force, fraud, or coercion. However, according to both U.S. and Iowa law, all minors who are commercially sexually exploited are victims of human trafficking, regardless of whether force, fraud, or coercion can be shown. Commercial sexual exploitation involves any type of sexual act or performance in exchange for anything of value. For example, if a man offers a runaway youth a place to stay on a cold January night in Iowa, under the condition that that youth prostitute herself (or himself) to his friends to “pay” for the room, or participate in the production of pornography, this is an example of human trafficking. Another example of human trafficking would be a parent who allows a drug dealer to sexually exploit his or her child in exchange for drugs.

Homeless and runaway youth are the highest risk population for sex trafficking victimization; and children from troubled families are at considerable risk as well. In Iowa, over 10,000 youth experience homelessness every yearⁱⁱ; and many of these youth are homeless alone, due to running away or being discarded by their parents. Research by Estes and Werner (2001) suggests that approximately 1 in 3 homeless and runaway youth from the U.S., Canada, and Mexico are approached for a commercial sexual exchange within the first 48 hours of hitting the street. In the Midwestern U.S. in particular, it appears that over any 30 day period, at least 1 in 13 homeless and runaway girls are approached for a commercial sexual exchange. Research clearly indicates, then, that thousands of Iowa’s youth are at risk of commercial sexual exploitation every year. Although not all persons who sexually exploit youth, by offering them shelter or money, for example, in exchange for a sexual act, will traffic them, many will do so.

Adults traffic young people in Iowa because this is a highly lucrative crime for which they are unlikely to get caught. Whether they traffic youth from Iowa, or other states, they can sell them for sex up to twenty times a day and earn thousands of dollars a week from their bodies. They can traffic homeless and runaway youth more easily on “circuits” running across the state or nation, whereas they can traffic youth from troubled families locally, while they are still in school or living at home, in shelters, or in foster care. There is such tremendous demand for commercial sex in Iowa that, as soon as traffickers place an online ad for any given youth, it will take a prospective buyer up to an hour to get through. Since the demand is currently greater than the supply - and the chances of getting caught and prosecuted are very low - traffickers are motivated to recruit increasing numbers of youth into sexual slavery.

While some youth may initially enter the sex trade out of economic desperation, a tragic need for acceptance, or even to access drugs, traffickers must use psychological or other means of control in order to maximally profit from their exploitation. In order for youth to undergo being raped by buyers up to 20 times a day, only to turn over all of their money to a trafficker, they must somehow come to believe that this is what they deserve, or that escape is impossible. As such, traffickers control them through severe forms of psychological manipulation, or by beating and threatening them if they refuse to cooperate or do not bring in enough money. (Traffickers also permit buyers to inflict violence upon the youth, for sadomasochistic purposes.) The level of violence to which trafficked youth are exposed is so severe that the FBI estimates that they will live only seven years if they are not rescued.

Most trafficked youth are sold through online classified ads for adult services. Hundreds of such ads appear in Iowa every day, on sites such as Backpages, Craigslist, and socialsex.com. Youth are also trafficked through social networks and at hotspots such as strip clubs, bars, hotels, and truck stops. In essence, traffickers are hiding their illicit activities behind the guise of “legal storefronts,” under the noses of unsuspecting Iowans and a justice system which is ill prepared to stop them.

In order to prevent and stop human trafficking in Iowa, we need the following: 1) Law enforcement trained to identify the problem and with the necessary resources to investigate it; 2) A justice system which is trained and capable of bringing justice to victims and fully prosecuting traffickers and buyers; 3) Comprehensive services for survivors, offered by providers skilled in the provision of restorative services; and 4) Public awareness, including training in our schools for staff, parents, and youth. All of Iowa’s social service, advocacy, education, medical, law enforcement, justice, legal, and medical professionals who may come into contact with or provide services to victims must be empowered to respond to this issue.

Currently, Iowa has a number of excellent laws against human trafficking. However, these laws are not generally enforced, due to a lack of trained law enforcement, a lack of resources for an effective law enforcement response (among those who are trained), and a very serious lack of capacity to adequately investigate and prosecute human trafficking cases within the justice system, including among county attorneys. As such, we need funding to train law enforcement and enhance their capacity to respond, as well as to train our justice professionals. We also need to reiterate to our justice professionals the importance of using Iowa’s anti-trafficking legislation to investigate and prosecute cases.

Due to a lack of trained law enforcement and justice professionals, most victims of human trafficking in Iowa are not identified. They are not identified because no one is looking for them, or they are simply overlooked when they are seen. All too frequently, also, they are not identified because justice professionals do not recognize them as victims when they are found in prostitution stings. Rather than being recognized as victims, prostituted youth they are frequently criminalized or treated as juvenile delinquents. Furthermore, Iowa law enforcement does not generally investigate cases of young adult prostitution for trafficking victimization. Because Iowa’s outstanding anti-trafficking laws are not being recognized or enforced, then, traffickers can enslave youth and young adults with impunity, and buyers can purchase them without fear of prosecution.

During this legislative session, it is imperative that we fund restorative services for survivors, as well as prevention programming. However, we need to provide law enforcement and our justice system with the necessary training and resources to identify victims, if we are truly committed to rescuing them from slavery and restoring their lives.

ⁱ <http://www.polarisproject.org/take-action/365-days>

ⁱⁱ http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/pdf/report_cards/long/ia_long.pdf