BREAKING THE SILENCE: UNVEILING THE WORLD OF SEX TRAFFICKING IN THE LONE STAR STATE

by

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ABSTRACT

In this project, I delve into the complex and often misunderstood world of sex trafficking within the Texas Triangle. Through meticulous research and firsthand accounts from law enforcement, this story challenges prevalent myths and misconceptions surrounding the issue. By debunking common narratives, I hope to shed light on the true nature of sex trafficking and its distinctive features within this region.

The Texas Triangle, comprising Houston, Dallas-Fort Worth, and San Antonio, presents a unique landscape for trafficking operations, shaped by a convergence of demographic, economic, and geographic factors. Through an exploration of these dynamics, I uncover the mechanisms through which trafficking manifests in the area, revealing a stark differentiation from societal misconceptions.

Through various examples and insights, I present the intricate workings of sex trafficking, dispelling prevalent misconceptions about its methods and scope. Central to my narrative is of the distinction between sensationalized portrayals and the harsh realities faced by victims of trafficking. From the exploitation of vulnerable individuals to the complicity of trafficking tactics, I confront the realities of this crime in a raw, authentic way. By amplifying voices and challenging prevailing narratives, I emphasize the urgency of understanding and addressing this multifaceted issue.

Ultimately, "Breaking the Silence" serves as a poignant call to action, compelling readers to confront the uncomfortable truths of sex trafficking in the Texas Triangle and beyond. Through knowledge and awareness, we empower ourselves to combat exploitation and advocate for justice in our communities.

Dear reader,

In embarking on this in-depth journey to shed light on the realities of sex trafficking within our state, I am extraordinarily grateful to the many people who made an idea a reality. I could not have done it without your help and unwavering support these past few months.

First, I would like to thank my team. Patty, Jean, Mary—thank you for being with me every step of the way as we navigated the many moving parts of this project. Patty, thank you for putting up with me and my stressful self. You are the best mentor I could ever ask for.

Next, my heartfelt thanks go to the courageous survivors who bravely shared their stories. You are beacons of resilience and inspiration, and I am so proud of you.

I extend my deepest appreciation to the law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and advocates who tirelessly work on the front lines to combat trafficking and bring perpetrators to justice. Additionally, I am thankful for the community organizations, NGOs, and governmental agencies that provide vital resources and support to survivors, helping them navigate the path to healing and recovery. Special recognition is also due to the educators, researchers, and policymakers whose insights and efforts contribute to a deeper understanding of trafficking and influence change.

Specifically, I extend my deepest and most heartfelt appreciation to the Dallas and Fort Worth Police Departments as well as Homeland Security. You are the backbone of this story.

Lastly, I express my sincere gratitude to my readers for their engagement and commitment to confronting this issue. Together, we stand to the fight against trafficking, striving to create a world without exploitation and a place where every individual is valued and protected.

Sincerely,

Katharine K. Vaughn

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Introduction

According to the United States Department of Homeland Security, the human trafficking industry generates an estimated $150 billion and impacts around 27.6 million people per year globally.

The misconception that human trafficking only occurs in distant, less developed countries is just one of many. The reality is that human trafficking is everywhere, and it's closer to home than many think.

In fact, it's right in front of us.

Texas has the second highest trafficking rates in the nation.

Sex trafficking in Fort Worth, like many cities, often remains hidden from the public eye.

The issue is severely overlooked due to its graphic nature, and the false narratives on social media and news channels reinforce misconceptions.

Through my work, I'm hoping to debunk the myths and misconceptions about sex trafficking and how it operates.

Bringing awareness to this issue is the first step in influencing change. While educating our community of the hidden world of sex trafficking across the Texas borders is a small step, it's the first of many in finding tangible solutions to fight against modern-day slavery.

Before I begin, it's important to note I refer to the victim as "she" and the pimp/trafficker as "he" for the sake of conciseness. This is not to discount the fact that male victims and/or female traffickers don't exist, because they certainly do, but these situations are less common. This decision is simply for the sake of brevity.

"Working these cases has changed my perspective in the regard that I don't see commercial sex workers as prostitutes. I see them as people who are being forced to do something whether they admit it or not. I mean, how many girls growing up say, 'I want to sell my body for money. How many girls say that growing up? It's not something they want to do."

- Mark Laroche-PaHud, High Risk Trafficking Detective

Recruitment and Operation: The Four Phases

I. Targeting

Traffickers—in this case, pimps—target victims more vulnerable to manipulation. Victim vulnerabilities are certain factors that increase a victim's susceptibility to manipulation or coercion. These include living in poverty, a history of runaway attempts, unemployment, lack of education, homelessness, a history of sexual abuse or a history of trauma.

Most victims are runaways, many of them minors.

"They're running from their home, or they're running from placement, whether it be a residential center, a juvenile justice system, foster case, or something like that," Jones says.

For runaway children under the care of Child Protective Services, the only option is to send them back to homes that made them want to flee in the first place.

If the victim ages out of the system, "they're effectively kicked out into the world with no real-life skills," Jones says, which creates the perfect avenue for future in the commercial sex industry.

Between the inability and lack of resources, many runaways are not searched for and do not make it back home.

Many victims struggle to provide for themselves due to these vulnerabilities, so they resort to the commercial sex industry to make quick cash. They might promise a person sex in exchange for a hotel room for the night or something to eat, engaging in what's called survival sex. Victims who have a history of sexual or domestic abuse typically engage in this tactic because they feel as if they have no other option.

In terms of physical location, many traffickers will find their victims at bus stops and transportation infrastructures or will groom them into a relationship through social media. Typically, three types of traffickers, or pimps, exist. The pimp's actions and behavior determine which category he falls into.

The next phases in recruitment and operation are told as the perspective of a Romeo pimp, the most common of the three.

Other Risk Factors

1. Generational: In some situations, victims become a part of the sex industry because it's been normalized in the victim's household due to a parent's involvement in the industry. Trafficking becomes a method of financial gain, for example, rather than a criminal offense. If a child observes a family member or parent in the industry, that child is much more likely to follow in their parent's footsteps or consider it a possibility.

2. Familial: According to a study by the Polaris Project in January 2023, 37% of 457 trafficking survivors surveyed experienced familial sex trafficking. Familial sex trafficking refers to the trafficking of individuals by relatives or family-like figures in a victim's life, such as a stepfather or mother for financial gain or other benefits. Familial trafficking is especially challenging to detect because of its discrepancy, along with many other factors. In 2017, The International Organization for Migration predicted around 41% of child trafficking situations are facilitated by family members or guardians. Survivor and advocate Jasmine Myers experienced familial trafficking between the ages of five to 17. Unfortunately, very little research on familial trafficking exists because of its covert and elusive nature.
3. Social and Economic Disparities: Diverse communities may include populations that experience social and economic disparities, such as immigrants, refugees, or marginalized ethnic groups. These make individuals more vulnerable to exploitation due to factors such as limited access to education, employment opportunities, and social services, which characterize victim vulnerabilities.
4. Lack of Trust in Authorities: In some communities, there may be distrust or fear of law enforcement and government agencies, often due to past experiences of discrimination or persecution. This lack of trust may also be passed down from family members or friends.
5. Cultural Stigma and Shame: Cultural norms and attitudes toward issues might prevent a victim from speaking out about their experience. In some cultures, a stigma associated with being a victim of trafficking or seeking help might exist, which can prevent individuals from reporting trafficking crimes or accessing support services. Stigmatization further isolates survivors, prevents the victim from receiving essential resources and support and might leave them vulnerable to further abuse. Stigmatization might even lead to trafficking and remains in a victim's journey in the industry.

While it's true people with vulnerabilities are more likely to become victims to sex trafficking, there's no direct link between their demographics and likelihood of trafficking. Certain nationalities and races are more common among trends of victim vulnerabilities, but the relationship is not correspondent upon these factors.

"It's all races, all nationalities are being trafficked, and it's the vulnerability of the victims that I think is the most common factor between those who are victims and those who are not victims, both minors and adults," says Lindsey Lane, Senior Legal Counsel at End Human Trafficking Organization.

She explains most of the victims she encounters experienced some form of sexual trauma prior to engaging in commercial sex, whether it be domestic sexual assault by a family member or sexual assault by a stranger when the victim was a child.

"They all have that trauma that was created when they were kids, when they were minors," Lane says.

II. Grooming

During this stage, the trafficker gains the trust of the victim. This takes anywhere from just a few days to a few weeks. The trafficker creates a false sense of security by ensuring the victim's safety and wellbeing.

He offers quick and easy solutions as gestures of kindness and consideration. He might promise false employment opportunities, offer shelter or protection, shower the victim with words of affirmation, give gifts or offer promises of a better life. The trafficker takes on any role the victim needs fulfilled and will integrate himself into every aspect of the victim's life.

The trafficker might also shower the victim with gifts, especially if the victim is a minor.

"Clothing, nails, hair, a purse…Basic stuff is a big deal to a minor. So, that's what the pimp takes advantage of—their desire to have something" Homeland Security Investigations Special Agent John Jones of the Texas Human Trafficking Task Force says. "The pimp's going to find that little need and fill that need… Once they fill that need, they're under the control of the pimp," Jones says.

After the trafficker convinces the victim of his faithfulness and provides for her, the trafficker attempts to isolate the victim from loved ones by sabotaging her relationships, all while glorifying his relationship with her. At this stage, most cases involve the trafficker and victim pursuing a romantic relationship.

The trafficker might tell the victim he's the only person who truly loves her, her family doesn't care about her, and that she needs to escape. The trafficker knows exactly what to say to the victim to earn her trust, and he reinforces his statements by providing the victim with a false sense of security and belonging. The victim believes him, and the promise of a better life begins to look like a possibility.

"He's portraying them as a team—we're together. We're doing this," Jones says. "That's very motivating for them, to someone who's never had a family, and for them to be like, 'at least this is now my family. I have something, and we're working toward a common goal together.'"

III. Recruiting

After compelling the victim to leave her previous situation, he allows her to live with him as his girlfriend. Throughout the next few weeks, it's common to expect shifts in the trafficker's behavior and intentions, exposing a more aggressive side the victim hasn't seen before.

Once the trafficker is secure in his hold over the victim, he might start complaining of money issues. He insists she needs to repay him for what he's provided her, convincing her she owes him for his hospitality. The trafficker will suggest she "do a favor" for "one of his buddies," for example.

If the victim hesitates or becomes suspicious, the trafficker questions her loyalty to him and says something like, "it's not that big of a deal." The trafficker minimizes the situation by using indifferent language to downplay its severity and gaslights her into believing she's in the wrong.

He also might say things like, “you don’t love/trust me” or “I’ve done so much for you—just do this one thing for me.”

By agreeing, the victim simply assumes she’s making the best choice for the sake of their relationship.

Note that the trafficker never explicitly asks the victim to engage in commercial sex acts or become a part of the sex industry. This is an intentional part of the trafficker’s ruse.

Another method of recruiting involves the use of blackmail. A trafficker might threaten to send a victim’s explicit photos to family members or loved ones if she refuses his request, or the trafficker might threaten to harm the victim’s family members or friends.

IV. Selling: Becoming the Victim

During the victim’s first days in the industry, the trafficker might let her keep the entire or partial amount of her earnings. He convinces her to perform more acts, emphasizing the simplicity of quick and easy cash.

Gradually, the graphic nature of these sex acts increases, and her client base broadens. The victim recognizes a decrease in the amount of money she gets to keep. If she complains, the trafficker threatens, assaults and/or beats her.

By now, the victim has left everything behind to pursue a relationship she even doesn’t know is fraudulent.

She’s unaware the trafficker’s promises were all just a ruse to coerce her into the sex trafficking industry, and she believes she has no choice but to stay.

The process repeats itself.

The trafficker uses the same strategies to lure multiple girls in until he creates a ‘stable.' Nowadays referred to as a ‘family,’ this is a group of victims all under the control of the same pimp.

The girls are threatened, assaulted and abused repeatedly, victims of a vicious cycle called modern-day slavery.

The worst part is--they don't even know it.

IV. Selling: From Pimp to Pimp

"I was sold for $25,000."

- Familial Trafficking Survivor/Advocator Jasmine Myers, Program Coordinator at Collaborative to End Human Trafficking

Occasionally, pimps might sell or trade their victims to other pimps in return for drugs or money. Although there are many reasons why, here are a few of the most common:

1. Inability to control the victim: As previously mentioned, the trafficker repeats a similar process with each of his victims, each manipulating them into believing they're loved and adored by him. When multiple girls in the trafficker's 'family' all believe this, sometimes chaos erupts. If a girl causes enough disruption to the 'family,' the pimp will hand her over to another pimp. In addition, if a girl disobeys the trafficker's rules frequently or has begun to fight back against the trafficker, he'll sell her to another trafficker.

"The last case I tried, the guy turned a girl over to another trafficker in exchange for drugs, and so he said, 'Hey, you give me some heroin. I'll give you this girl. You can have her. I'm done with her. I can't control her anymore,'" Lane says.

If he's unable to sell her to another trafficker or gives up on her, he can 'fire' her, which means he'll just up and leave, whether that's leaving her on the streets or in a hotel room.

That leaves the victim with only two options: get picked up by another trafficker or engage in survival sex. Either way, the chances of her leaving the commercial sex industry are slim.

But, if they choose to engage in commercial sex as a means of survival, the only thing they can trade are their bodies—which means they can't leave the area.

"And if you're in those areas, the pimps are there too," Jones says.

In certain places that facilitate heavy trafficking, like Harry Hines Boulevard in Dallas and along Bissonnet in Houston, it's nearly impossible for a victim to operate independently.

"The pimps don't allow it," Jones says. "Any woman walking alone will be almost immediately confronted by pimps. If she's not working for someone, then that'll result in an assault or rape to get her under his control."

2. Pressure from law enforcement: The trafficker will give a girl away because it's 'getting hot,' meaning there's an increase in police activity in that area.

Sometimes, a trafficker will get a victim back after she's been picked up by law enforcement. If the victim is underage, her trafficker will have to sell her to another trafficker in a different location or transport her to a different city because law enforcement knows what she looks like.

3. Personal security: A constant rotation of victims makes it's more challenging for law enforcement to track down traffickers, so there's a consistent flow of victims entering and leaving these major areas.

Control Mechanisms: Violence

Traffickers regularly use violence as a way of controlling their victims. If a victim disobeys the trafficker or his rules, the trafficker punishes them by threatening, abusing and beating them.

In one case, a trafficker "put a gun to her [victim] head and pulled the trigger on an empty barrel because she tried to keep five bucks," Detective Laroche-PaHud of the Fort Worth Police Department said. "That girl ultimately ended up being impregnated by her trafficker as another way of controlling her and her future."

A trafficker might beat a victim and force her back onto the streets if she fails to reach her quota, or the set amount of money the trafficker requires of her. Traffickers typically enforce an average quota of $2000/day. This goes without exceptions, even if the client refuses to pay or robs the victim. Clients commonly trick victims into meeting with them and show up without cash, gun in hand, with the intention to rob and rape the victim.

“I mean, we've interviewed hundreds of victims that have all been robbed and raped by customers,” Jones says.

In an undercover operation, Homeland Security Investigations reported around 20% of 134 customers showed up without money with these intentions in mind within a five-day time span. Customers, some included in the results of this operation, also commonly force the victim to indulge in violent acts, like choking.

Traffickers couldn’t care less about what happens to the victim—they only care about the money, and they’re more fearful of the possibility of another trafficker picking up his victim than a client assaulting the victim.

If a victim returns to her trafficker after a rob and rape scenario, the trafficker might sexually assault her as well for not reaching quota.

“John and I have had lots of victims that despite their pimp over watching them out of the blade, have been assaulted many times from customers assaulted, kicked out of the car, and she had to make her way back to her pimp only to be returned right back to the blade,” Homeland Security Special Agent Jason Stewart of the North Texas Trafficking Task Force says.

Moreover, the trafficker might beat his bottom girl in front of the other girls to demonstrate the consequences of disobedience. A “bottom” or “bottom girl” refers to an appointed victim who supervises the other victims and ensures they’re following rules. She might collect the money to give to their trafficker and navigate the specifics of girls’ dates. Typically, this is the girl with the strongest trauma bond to her trafficker.

(Note: Scroll down to ‘The Psychological Effects: Trauma Bonding’ to learn more about the role of a trauma bond in sex trafficking.)

It’s important to note despite the bottom girl having a higher position, she is not exempt from a trafficker’s abuse. In fact, the trafficker might occasionally beat the bottom girl simply to set an

example for the others. This is another method the trafficker utilizes to assert his dominance and keep his victims under his control.

Control Mechanism: Psychological Manipulation

To keep victims in line, a trafficker might also employ tactics of manipulation and blackmail to threaten the victim just as he did in the recruitment process.

Most pimps will take photos and videos of his victims engaging in sexual acts for the sole reason of blackmail. A pimp holds this leverage over them in case they act out of line, refuse to cooperate in sex acts, or consider escaping. He might threaten to share the content with their families or post it on their social media platforms.

The Role of Media

As social media becomes more prevalent in society, so does the online world of sex trafficking.

Traffickers recruit victims through social media platforms, such as X (formerly Twitter), Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook, for example. They use social media, specifically WhatsApp, to contact clients and schedule meetings.

Despite general assumption, traffickers recruit victims through social media platforms more than any other way.

"A child is more at risk of being exploited and trafficked at home on Instagram than they are walking around a mall," Lane says.

When children feel like their parents neglect their desires or they don’t feel heard or understood, they resort to social media in hopes of filling those voids.

“What we have is a daughter gets mad at mom and dad…They [the victim’s parents] took away the keys to the car, they grounded them [the child]. They can’t go out with their friends, so they go to social media,” says Sargent Brian Johnson of the Fort Worth Police Department.

“They’re voicing how much they hate their parents because they did all this stuff to discipline them.”

Traffickers know exactly how to respond to that child, comforting the child with reassuring and understanding words.

Additionally, traffickers utilize social media to advertise their victims and set up ‘dates’ with clients. Sometimes, victims aren’t even aware their trafficker posted their ads online.

To post advertisements, traffickers install a program, called an M-I-S crawler, designed to sift through known sex sites and republish the ads on different sites. This means a high possibility of

ads existing on other sites even if the original one is taken down. So, no matter how many sites law enforcement takes down, another site will pop up just as quickly.

Just recently, Homeland Security Investigations conducted a study to track the number of ads posted within a certain distance and time span. They discovered in between September 25th and October 25th, there were 142,000 separate commercial sex ads posted in DFW within a 20-mile radius.

But law enforcement might refrain from taking down a site, even if they have jurisdiction and evidence supporting illegal activity. Many of these sites operate in countries outside of the United States, so they don't have the same power to take down the sites as they would for those operating nationally. For sites based within the United States, law enforcement chooses to cooperate with site owners instead of take the sites down. Site owners don't want them taken down, so they're willing to cooperate with law enforcement if they issue a subpoena.

Moreover, websites actually benefit law enforcement in better tracking and investigation of cases. They assist in locating victims from ads posted online and gather an understanding of ad frequencies in certain locations.

"It's a very difficult position, because do we spend the time to take a website down that would take away from us working cases with actual victims?" Jones says. "How do we spend our resources?"

Again, there's such a heavy aggregation of them on secondary sites due to site crawlers, taking them down wouldn't really do anything but make it more challenging to build a case.

Victim Impact

“I get a lot of questions, like why didn't you leave? Or, why didn't you run away?” Myers says. “I always talk about that of like, well, where was I going to go?,”

“Why don’t they [victims] just leave?”

This is a question people commonly ask, but they don’t realize the hardships and challenges that accompany living—and leaving—this lifestyle.

Because the industry of sex trafficking is misunderstood by communities, many are unaware of these setbacks victims endure because of their situations. The effects of sex trafficking don’t end when, or if, the victim escapes the situation.

The truth is, escaping the industry is not only challenging but life-threatening because of a variety of factors, many of which people fail to consider, which I address.

For some, it’s just the beginning of a tedious road to recovery and regaining trust in a society where its members failed to protect her.

In this second part of my research, I will explore the victim impact, or the mental and physical effects of sex trafficking and how they tie into a victim’s ability, or disability, to leave the life.

The Psychological Effects: Trauma Bonding

Nearly all the victims trafficked by a Romeo pimp experience a complex, psychological bond that’s extremely challenging to recognize and break. Because of its prevalence in trafficking cases, this is the first setback I will discuss.

Though traffickers don’t keep their victims physically bound to something, they’re emotionally and psychologically bound to their trafficker and lifestyle. This is called a trauma bond, or when a person develops a strong emotional connection by causing harm to a person but reinforces it with positive actions.

For example, the trafficker might hit a victim but then shower her with gestures of love and ask for forgiveness. Although the relationship is toxic, it can be very difficult for the victim to leave her situation because of the deep emotional tie formed during moments of apparent kindness, appreciation, and remorse.

Jones describes it as a form of disorganized attachment, where the same person abusing them throughout their life is the same person giving them affection—something they’ve already most likely experienced growing up.

“That’s a familiar relationship they have with their trafficker,” he says. “To them, it’s not unusual that the person they fear the most is also the person they have affection for.”

Breaking a trauma bond can takes years--even decades--and can result in more mental health issues down the road.

“You see these exaggerated, elevated levels of stress hormones that you wouldn’t otherwise see,” Dr. Jeffrey Newport, Director of Women’s Reproductive Mental Health of Texas says.

Nearly all victims who leave the commercial sex industry continue to experience mental health issues, even decades after their escape.

Dr. Newport conducts stress-response-based tests to analyze psychological patterns in women who have experienced childhood trauma. In one study, a victim’s stress levels are either normal or lower than ‘normal’ at baseline, or without a stressor present. Once they encounter a stressor, most women reacted with a heightened biological response.

“What we saw was, the individuals who had childhood trauma, be it physical or sexual abuse, just had these astronomical hormonal responses,” he says.

Victims suffer from PTSD, anxiety disorders and depression. Some victims, unable to cope from years-long trauma, commit suicide.

"I don't think it ever ends," Johnson says. High Risk Trafficking Detective of Fort Worth Police Department, says. "Once you've experienced it, I think it's a forever thing you have to deal with."

The Psychological Effects: Law Enforcement

Traffickers also manipulate the intentions and trustworthiness of law enforcement. They trick victims into believing officers aren’t there to help them, the officers won’t believe them, or the officers will arrest them.

“The pimps are very good at manipulating these victims into believing law enforcement is not their friend,” Perez says. “We are the enemy.”

In one instance, Lane interviewed a victim who police once pulled over. Lane asked whether the victim told the officer she wanted to escape or needed help, to which she replied:

“No. That never crossed my mind because my trafficker had told me routinely, ‘you ever try to go to the police or tell someone about what’s going on? They’re never going to believe you…You’re strung out on drugs. You’re breaking the law, too. You’re the one who’s going to jail.” Lane says.

Traffickers paint a false picture of people whose jobs exist to protect and serve our communities, potentially reinforcing already-existing narratives about them that might have stemmed from earlier experiences in their lives.

The Psychological Effects: ‘Not a Victim’ Mindset

“I've never, in all of my career, out of all the victims I worked with, worked with a victim who actually recognized that they were a victim of human trafficking during the time they were being exploited,” Lane says. “It's not how trafficking works.”

This is one of the aspects that makes trafficking cases challenging to investigate and unique from other offenses.

This disparity occurs due to an accumulation of the trafficker’s tactics of manipulation and psychological abuse.

Even if the victim senses something’s off, she won’t admit she experienced sex trafficking and might deny the accusation. She might think, *“That’s not true”* or *“That wouldn’t happen to me”* or *“That wasn’t what was going on.”* Even after realizing the seriousness of the situation, she might blame herself for what happened to her.

“I had a victim say, ‘I'd made my bed. I was going to lie in it. This was on me,’” Lane says.

Moreover, they refuse to associate themselves with the term ‘sex trafficking’ due to the media’s distortion and societal beliefs. Social media plays an essential role in reinforcing false stereotypes and narratives about sex trafficking.

The idea that sex trafficking as portrayed in the media—a white van follows a little girl home, abducts her, sends her to a trafficking ring where she’s bought and sold by wealthy men in foreign countries—might happen, but it’s not common as we think. Often, media portrays this narrative because of sensationalism, a term I discuss later.

In other cases, their denial is associated with the fear of the reality of the situation. Their story doesn’t match the media’s narrative, so they assume their reality can’t be true.

Victim Impact: The Physical Restraints

1. Location:

Since most victims grow up with an absentee parent(s) or with trauma, going back to the same environment isn’t a safe decision. Unfortunately, there are limited places the victim can go to if she’s an adult, especially if that adult can’t get access to survivor services.

If the victim is a minor, there are even more limitations.

“It’s even harder because with the CPS (Child Protective Services) system, the only choice is to send them back to the home that created the factors that made them flee in the first place,” Jones says.

Under the care of Child Protective Services, law enforcement doesn’t have the power to place the child in a safe location or give them the help they need. Usually, they see a repetitive process where juvenile victims run away, someone finds and removes them from the situation, CPS

places them back in the foster care system, and then they run away again because the situation that made them want to escape hasn't changed.

"They say, we're going to send you back to mom. Well, mom is addicted to drugs and lives in a shack. You're going to go back to her and back to the lack of clothing, lack of food, lack of stability that you fled from and seek this male figure who promised you stability," Jones says.

With adult victims, service provides can at least offer them an apartment to live in or find job training.

"That's why our hardest cases involve minors," Jones says. "What do you do with a 15-year-old?"

After experiencing this stability with her trafficker, the victim doesn't want to return home to inescapable instability, trauma, and the problems she faced under her parents' care.

"She wants to be out being an adult," Jones says. "Well, we can't offer that to her as law enforcement. We can't offer that to her as direct service providers because the CPS system is in control of her because she's a minor."

Last traffickers might transport their victims in places hundreds of miles from home and even outside the borders of the United States. If a victim escapes, there's no guarantee she'll make it back home safely, especially if she lacks any form of currency or identification.

2. Income:

Because many sex trafficking cases operate as criminal exploitation, the victim might have been charged with a felony at some point, making it very difficult for the victim to get a self-sufficing job.

The act of an offense occurring within another offense is known as forced criminality, and nearly all cases deal with drug trafficking. Specifically, a trafficker might force a victim to deal drugs to buyers to disaffiliate himself with the crime if police were to bust the victim.

In addition, the victim's lack of education might place her in a position where attaining a job is difficult, or it might be challenging to sustain herself with such a low income.

Because the operation revolves around financial gain, a victim is far less likely to be drawn to a job offering $15/hr when she's capable of making $150/hr. To her, the choice is easy, because she's been conditioned to believe her situation is 'normal.'

If the victim chooses to remain in the sex industry and work independently, there's the possibility her previous trafficker will track her down, or another trafficker will pick up her if he suspects she's operating alone. Traffickers are always watching.

If a victim wanders the street unaccompanied, a trafficker will use this opportunity to lure or force the victim back into trafficking under his control. Or, the trafficker might locate her ad on social media, pose as a client, and force her back into trafficking when meeting with her as a 'client.'

3. Addiction

If a victim didn't already have a substance addiction before being trafficked, she develops one when she becomes involved in the commercial sex industry. The pimp typically provides the victim with these substances--alcohol or drugs--to keep her dependent on him. The victim might develop a dependence on these substances on her own to cope with the nature of her work and its effects.

If a victim with a drug addiction escapes, she has no means of getting the drugs to support her addiction. A lack of access and money to purchase drugs might force the victim to experience withdrawal symptoms if she cuts cold turkey. Depending on the type of drug the victim abuses, withdrawal symptoms can be life-threatening because of the way the victim's nervous system adapts to certain high-dependency drugs. Depending on the severity, some cases can be fatal.

In addition, quitting cold turkey causes the victim's body to lose its tolerance to the substance. If a victim suddenly relapses and takes her usual dose, the risk of overdose and death is higher as well. It's essential these victims, or anyone, seeking recovery should get help from professionals who specialize in addiction treatment.

4. Isolation

During the recruitment phase, the trafficker attempts to isolate the victim from family, friends, or any loved ones in her life. He prohibits her from maintaining close relationships with others outside of the 'family,' or anyone outside of the trafficking world.

He does this by monitoring her social media or replacing her phone with one strictly designated to responding to clients.

This way, if the victim contemplates escaping, or does escape, there's few to no people she can contact for help or protection. As previously mentioned, the trafficker has conditioned the victim to fear law enforcement or assume they're unwilling to help her, so seeking help from officers isn't an option worth considering.

5. Reintegration

"As I began to heal and as I began to learn about my experiences, I realized there was just this thought process of when you've been forced to do that for so long, it becomes a possibility." Myers says. "That never probably would've been a possibility had I not had that experience."

The longer a victim is in the life, the more challenging it is for the victim to reintegrate back into society upon leaving. Because the trafficker provides her with everything she needs to survive, the victim's contact to the outside world is limited, and there's less of a desire to leave.

This, in addition to the trafficker's watchful eye over the victim and isolating her from loved ones, limits her from integrating or interacting with society.

This life is all the victim knows, and readjustment in society isn't simple.

For example, what the victim might consider appropriate clothing to wear in public might be widely inappropriate to others. This is just a small consideration in comparison to the many other factors that accompany reintegration or integration into modern society.

In many instances, reintegration into society—stepping into a whole different world—is too complex or overbearing for the victim, and she might go back to the simple life she's known for most, if not, all her life. Or, worse.

"We've had multiple cases where we recovered a 13-year-old girl from a trafficking situation, and since 2016, one has committed suicide and the others are still engaged in either still engaged in commercial sex or still being trafficked just by different traffickers," Johnson says.

The Side the Media Doesn't Show You:

On April 8, 2022, reports of an abduction at a Mavericks Game in Dallas, Texas, flooded news headlines. Within just a few hours, it had shaken the nation.

The coverage of this case reinforced the narrative we've seen time and time again on news channels and on social media.

Trafficking occurs everywhere, all the time, but this situation is different from the reality of its nature. So, why did multiple news outlets across the country decide to run this story in particular? Why don't they cover stories by which most sex trafficking instances occur in?

This is because of a concept called media sensationalism.

Media sensationalism is defined as an editorial tactic to gain an audience's attention, typically covering stories which provoke shocking emotions and cause immediate response from its viewers.

While the facts of the story might all be true, the act of only covering sex trafficking stories from kidnapping misinform the viewers of the false assumptions that all sex trafficking situations occur from kidnapping, when, as we know from this study, they rarely operate in this form.

But because these are the only stories the media portrays regarding sex trafficking, the news leads people to believe these are most popular instances of human trafficking or even the only ones. The whole white-van-kidnapping-a-girl-from-a-sidewalk scenario is reinforced.

It's important to note that while many sex trafficking situations all occur in different ways than this Texas survivor's, stories involving kidnapping are not to be discounted or disregarded, and vice versa. Each survivor deserves a life of freedom and the opportunity to let her voice be heard.

Trafficking in the TX Triangle: An In-Depth Focus on Texas' Major Cities and the Dallas-Fort Worth Area

"You have big cities, you have big problems." – Special Agent Jason Stewart

This is true for all large cities or metroplexes in the nation, not just those in Texas.

So, what is it that makes trafficking in Texas different from other places? Why does Texas have the second-highest trafficking rates in the nation?

The answer is more complex than we might think, and it's more than the fact that Texas is home to some of the largest cities in the nation.

In this section, I will address specifically how trafficking in Texas operates and list factors that make the Lone Star State the ideal hub for carrying out trafficking operations, with an in-depth focus of the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

In addition, I will analyze challenges and setbacks with Texas law enforcement's abilities to operate cases and prosecute the offended.

What Makes the Triangle Unique:

First, what even is the Texas Triangle?

The Texas Triangle is a phrase commonly referring to Texas' three major cities, Houston, San Antonio, and the Dallas-Fort Worth area. When their vertices are connected, the area forms a triangle, thus coining the Texas Triangle.

The triangle encompasses some of the most populous cities within both the state and nation, and the triangle is known for its advancements in technology and medicine, booming economy, cultural diversity, major transportation networks and other aspects.

Specifically, these factors create a bustling hub with various opportunities for sex trafficking to operate within its borders:

Population:

The Dallas-Fort Worth area is one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the country, characterized by a gradually increasing influx of residents each year.

In fact, the United States Census Bureau recorded Texas as experiencing the largest numeric change in the nation in 2023, adding an estimated 473,453 people in 2023.

A greater population does not necessarily cause an increase in trafficking itself, but it correlates to a higher demand, thus drawing in traffickers from all over the country. In addition, a high population density provides anonymity for traffickers, making it easier to exploit victims.

Proximity:

As depicted in the figure above, these major cities exist within a few hours' drive from one another. It's the ideal situation for traffickers to conduct business, especially when considering the other factors that contribute to a thriving trafficking network.

In addition, three-to-four-hour drives along highways and interstates allow traffickers to easily rotate victims from one city to another if necessary.

"Most of our cases, if we have a girl being trafficked in Fort Worth, she's probably been trafficked in Arlington. She's probably been trafficked in Dallas. She's probably been down to Houston and Austin." Laroche-PaHud says.

Even excluding the triangle, a person can drive 10 hours along one of Texas' highways or interstates and never leave the state.

Transportation Systems:

Texas is home to several major transportation hubs, such as highways, airports, and ports. Pimps commonly take advantage of the easy and simple access to Texas' public transportation systems.

They might utilize Texas' highway systems, interstates, or transportation systems such as buses. Buses don't require identification, making them a simple and practical way to transport victims across the state.

"I had a case where I had four minors that were put on a bus and circuited around the Triangle throughout the state." Says Stewart, who noted the victims were all aged between 14 and 15 years old.

The process is simple: The trafficker purchases a ticket online, sends a screenshot of the ticket to the victim and drops her off at a station. Within just a few hours, she's in a city essentially the same as the one she left—without ever leaving the state.

Economy/Industry:

Booming economies and industries exist in major cities, and the Texas Triangle serves as a hub for business, trade, and tourism.

The Dallas-Fort Worth area alone has oil, gas and energy industries, agricultural and mining industries, entertainment industries, technological and medical institutions, major universities, and major sports teams all within a 50-mile radius.

These unlimited opportunities draw in people from all over the country and provide them with ample sources of employment and entertainment. Lane explains we often believe a false assumption that a larger population correlates to higher trafficking rates.

“You’ve probably seen some of the media, like, ‘The Super Bowl is the number one trafficking weekend,” she says. “I hate that. That makes no sense to me. Trafficking is existing whether there’s a Super Bowl or not.”

She further explains trafficking is like supply and demand, driven by a blend of Texas’ population, economy, and opportunity.

“A trafficker will take his goods to where he knows there's a demand for them,” she says. So, if you have a hundred thousand men, and a trafficker's trafficking women, that makes sense that he would go there to try to drum up business.”

Trafficking rates increase based on demand, not population. So, heavily populated places with a higher demand for trafficking, such as NCA tournaments, conferences, or at military bases result in higher trafficking rates, but other heavily populated places, like Disney World, don’t result in high trafficking rates because there’s not as much demand.

Border Proximity and Immigration:

Texas shares a long border with Mexico, which facilitates trafficking of victims across international borders. This is especially prevalent today given the current border crisis, which correlates to an influx of victims coming into and leaving the national border.

According to the American Immigration Council, one in six Texas residents is an immigrant, while another one in six residents is a native-born U.S. citizen with at least one immigrant parent. An estimated 4.9 million immigrants comprised 17% of Texas’ population in 2018, and half those immigrants came from Mexico.

The Trafficking Industry in TX: An Independent Operation

Traffickers coexist in what operates as a network, working independently but in proximity of one another. This network exists in high-trafficking areas and consists of the commercial sex market, hotel providers, strip clubs, and sex stories. These components make up the larger operation taking place.

They rarely work together, but every so often, if the organization is large enough, a pimp hires a lieutenant, or a third-party-facilitator, who assists the pimp. He might help book rooms and transport victims to and from hotels, for example.

Traffickers mainly work independently because, unlike other organizations, trafficking doesn’t operate as a hierarchical structure where supply runs low.

“A pimp doesn’t need that,” Jones says. “His supply doesn’t run out. He’s just using the same person over and over and over.”

They might sell their victims to each other but only because the trade is a financial transaction that benefits both parties. Apart from this, traffickers rarely interact with one another due to the nature of the business.

“A pimp doesn't want to share his money with his victim, so he's not going to share his money with another trafficker,” Stewart says.

“They are very competitive, and they are very protective of what they have,” Jones says.

Looking at Each City: Common Places Trafficking Occurs

Regardless of location, traffickers utilize hotels and motels to respond to in-calls, in which a client meets a victim at a specific location of the trafficker’s choice, like a hotel room, or out-calls, in which the trafficker arranges for the victim to meet with the client at a location of the client’s choosing.

While these are consistent in trafficking everywhere, the way trafficking operates in each of these cities differentiates slightly because of the geographic set-up of their hotels and motels.

For example, in Dallas, hotels and motels line what’s referred to as “The Strip,” a stretch of strip clubs, bars, and nightclubs located along Harry Hines Boulevard near Interstate 35E. This area is monitored closely by law enforcement because of its heavy facilitation of sex trafficking, among other illegal activities.

“They have hotel after hotel, motel after motel all lined up along Harry Hines. We don't have that set up in Fort Worth. Most of our hotels and motels for Fort Worth are off the freeway, so they don't have that capability of walking the strip.”

The Dallas Strip is also referred to as a “blade,” or a term used to refer to areas or districts known for prostitution and sex trafficking. The term isn’t universally used for every location of sex trafficking, though. It’s more of a colloquial term that’s specific to certain regions or communities, like Dallas. Other places where heavily prostitution or sex trafficking occurs might use different terminology. Houston, for example, uses the term “track.”

Listed are some areas, but not limited, where heavy prostitution and trafficking activity occur within the triangle:

Dallas: Composite Drive, Harry Hines Boulevard, Walnut Hill

Fort Worth: Easter Lancaster Avenue, Las Vegas Trail, South Freeway, Lamar W 10th, between Calmont Street and 30 Lancaster

Houston: Bissonnet Street, Airline Drive, Berry Road, around Hobby and Bush Airports, the Gulfton area 10 minutes northeast from downtown Houston

San Antonio: Blanco Road, East and West side of San Antonio, near military installations

Traffickers utilize the proximity of the hotels and rotate back and forth to one another. Laroche-PaHud recalls a case where a trafficker utilized a Best Western and LaQuinta that shared the same parking lot.

"He [the trafficker] checked into the LaQuinta, told the guy at the front desk that she [the victim] was his wife. So, he said, 'this is my wife, my kid, we need a room and it's going to pay night tonight for however long we need to be here.'"

He bought two rooms—one at the Best Western, the other at the LaQuinta. He used the room at the Best Western to respond to in-calls and the room at the LaQuinta to sleep in and keep his child someplace.

The Texas Triangle: Challenges with Law Enforcement:

"The cases are hard. They're a ton of work—more than anything I've ever done," - Jones

PD Staffing Shortages:

Cities throughout the nation have been suffering from staffing shortages for years, and these larger cities are no exception.

Currently, Fort Worth Police Department is actively trying to fill gaps of nearly 200 vacant positions.

Understaffed departments result in limited surveillance and monitoring of areas where trafficking occurs, challenges in building cases, a shortage of officers working these cases, and limited engagement with victims.

"Large police departments are responding to violent, dangerous calls and service trying to keep the cities, if you will, from burning down," Stewart says.

So, officers are busy combatting everyday crime and are unable to devote time and resources into cases that take months—even years—to build.

In addition, because sex trafficking is just now gaining traction and awareness, large cities have relatively small counter trafficking investigation units.

For example, in 2022, Houston has over 2.3 million residents, Dallas has 1.3 million, Fort Worth has nearly 1 million and San Antonio has nearly 1.5 million. Fort Worth's trafficking unit only consists of two detectives, Dallas' consists of six.

“Statistically, it’s going to be very hard for law enforcement to work those individual cases,” says Stewart.

In some places, trafficking cases are just offenses investigated by everyday detectives who don’t have the specialized training necessary to work trafficking cases.

Difficulty building cases:

Because of these factors, cases can take years to build. The process is a slow, tedious one, and every case is different from the others. Most cases are interconnected, meaning they operate like a web—every new victim found leads to a search of more victims.

Laroche-PaHud recalls following a case in 2017 where he believed a trafficking situation was occurring. The proposed victim he encountered refused to cooperate with law enforcement to build the case, so it never developed.

A few months passed by, and he recovered another victim in association with the assumed trafficker, but the victim refused to cooperate as well.

Finally, after a few years, he recovered a victim associated with the same trafficker who spoke out about the abuse and trauma she endured under him.

“She starts talking, and then everything just starts snowballing and building out,” recalls Laroche-PaHud. “That case went from one known trafficker and one suspected victim to nine confirmed traffickers and 16 confirmed victims [spreading across] Hawaii to Florida.”

The case isn’t over yet, though.

“That’s just the first round we’re doing.”

Similar to any other case, the team is continuing their investigation in hopes of unveiling more trafficking operations and identifying victims intertwined with the case. Because trafficking operations commonly operate as a web, they know that despite their success in the investigation so far, their discoveries might have only scratched the surface.

In 2016, Johnson recalls being the only detective in Fort Worth investigating human trafficking, and this case was one of about five he was currently working on.

“I mean, you can only do so much with one person, but what I was told was you keep digging,” says Johnson. “You keep pulling those strings, keep pulling on all the strings you can pull, and you go from something like this to a giant case.”

The task force itself has been in existence for a long time, but only within the last five years this unit has been given the support from politicians, local leadership, and headquarters to make the issue a priority.

“We’re really in the infancy stages of people recognizing the problem and are willing to put the resources behind it.”

Dallas and Arlington Police Departments just received the resources and support to create a human trafficking unit within the past year.

“In the trafficking world, this is a relatively new discipline that people are just starting to take seriously.”

Victim’s Distrust/Trauma:

A victim’s trauma and distrust in law enforcement prevent the victim from accepting help from and confiding in officers. Because of this heightened state of vulnerability, officers spend months slowly attempting to gain the victim’s trust and maintain secure relationships with them until, or, if, they’re ready to speak out about their experiences.

Anyone outside of the trafficking world can’t fully understand the trauma these victims experienced. Unlike the environment most of us were raised in, these victims grew up in neighborhoods conditioned to fear law enforcement.

Even more, victims aren’t aware they should be speaking out about their experiences, because they don’t know they’re victims, or they refuse to identify with the stereotypes we’ve continued to reinforce for decades.

“It’s different from any other crime in the sense that, because they don’t know they’re victims, they don’t know they’re at the center of a serious offense,” Johnson says.

How?, you might ask.

The answer is simple: We know that growing up, children depend on either parents or who most closely resembles that of a parental figure in their lives. Over time, children might mirror behaviors, actions, and patterns they pick up on. In some cases, children are unable to decipher what’s ‘normal’ or not based upon their upbringing. So, they gravitate toward what’s been demonstrated in their environment and imitate those same behaviors.

“They’ll tell us they feel like they have to do these kinds of things [commercial sex acts] for this guy, that they owe him how a relationship was modeled in their family.”

Prosecution Process:

There’s no challenge in finding trafficking cases, Jones explains.

“We could literally go down to Harry Hines tonight and pick up 25 cases,” says Jones. “The problem is in prosecuting the cases—they’re not simple like drugs [cases].”

It’s easy to build a case when the evidence falls in line seamlessly with the offense, like cases involving drug distribution.

Suppose an officer finds drugs in a person’s car. Law enforcement could easily determine whose name the car is registered to just as easily as they could trace text messages proving intent to distribute. With substantial evidence, officers would convict that person.

Prosecution of human trafficking cases doesn’t operate in this way. To go to court, the victim must be cooperative, and the trafficker can’t receive a sentence if the victim refused to testify against him.

Unfortunately, it could take years to encourage a victim to speak up about what she experienced. In the case the victim does agree to testify against her trafficker, law enforcement must monitor the victim’s mental state. Just as it’s challenging for a victim to testify against her trafficker, it’s just as easy for her to go back to him.

Jones describes the prosecution process as a matter of bandwidth—how many victims they can stabilize and how many organizations can assist.

“If our victims are not stable, we could have all the evidence in the world to show [if she were to testify],” he states. This entails evidence of the trafficker posting the ads, collecting money, traveling between the states, renting hotel rooms, even on surveillance video of the trafficker and customers walking in and out the room with the victim.

“But, if she’s not stable enough to testify, then we don’t have a case.”

Whereas 98% of federal cases end in a plea, trafficking cases defy this statistic.

“Traffickers are narcissistic psychopaths who go to trial way more than anybody else because they believe in the trauma bond they created,” Jones says. “The victim will not testify against them, and they know that we need the victims to testify for them to get convicted.”

So, in knowing this, traffickers drag out the process for as long as possible.

“The average time in Dallas from arrest to sentencing is 38 months. So, they're betting against the idea that we can keep a victim stable for that long.”

Stability refers to the victim’s well-being and ensuring she doesn’t relapse the time she’s in recovery. Relapse is common, and the possibility of a victim relapsing increases the longer she’s a victim.

“The same things that made her likely to be trafficked are also the things that make her a difficult witness,” Jones says.

Despite the challenges in gaining the victim’s trust, law enforcement never gives up on a victim even in the situation of unsolved cases. They patiently wait for the moment the victim is ready to

speak out about her situation, even if she's unable to fully place her trust in their hands at that moment, and even if she's back on the streets that evening.

"There are victims that I dealt with as a detective that still have my phone number and can call me at any day or night if they need help," Johnson says.

He heavily stresses the importance of reaching out to others, especially if a victim senses she's in a dangerous situation.

"If it's me, great. If it's not me, call somebody you can trust," he says.

Because of their distrust, it's not uncommon for victims feel skeptical about the idea.

"I've had several victims who would test you to see if you were being truthful with them, that you could be trusted and relied on," Johnson says. "They'd call me at three o'clock in the morning to see if I would answer the phone."

While law enforcement can't force victims to get help, they still encourage them to picture a safer, healthier life if they did give detectives a chance. Lane describes victims as having ultimately two choices that determine their future—one in the life, and one not.

"You get out of this one of two ways. One, is you decide 'I can't live like this anymore. I don't want to live like this. I know there is a better life for me and we're going to find out what that looks like,'" Lane explains.

"Or, you're going to end up dead. You're either going to die from a drug overdose or he's physically going to kill you, or a buyer's going to kill you," she says. "When I left the D.A.'s (District Attorney) office, we had five murders pending that involved a trafficking victim."

Community Response and Texas Initiatives

The Side the Media Doesn't Show You:

On April 8, 2022, reports of an abduction at a Mavericks Game in Dallas, Texas, flooded news headlines. Within just a few hours, it had shaken the nation.

As we now know, few sex trafficking cases operate this way. So, why did hundreds of news stations across the country run this story, given most cases operate differently? How come they almost never cover stories by which most sex trafficking instances occur?

This is because of a concept called media sensationalism.

Media sensationalism is defined as an editorial tactic to gain an audience's attention, typically covering stories which provoke shocking emotions and cause immediate response from its viewers.

While the facts of the story might all be true, the act of only covering sex trafficking stories from kidnapping misinform the viewers of the false assumptions that all sex trafficking situations occur from kidnapping, when, as we know from this study, they rarely operate in this form.

Because these are the only stories the media portrays regarding sex trafficking, the news leads people to believe these are most popular instances of human trafficking or even the only ones. The whole white-van-kidnapping-a-girl-from-a-sidewalk scenario is reinforced.

It's important to note that while many sex trafficking situations occur in different ways than this Texas survivor's, cases involving kidnapping shouldn't be discounted or disregarded, and vice versa.

Education and Communication:

Educating communities about the reality of sex trafficking is the first step of many to becoming a place rooted in awareness, acceptance, and action.

It's crucial to recognize the signs of exploitation, understand the tactics traffickers use, and take action to prevent victimization. By raising awareness and providing knowledge about sex trafficking and how it operates in our communities, we can identify and support survivors, advocate for policies to combat trafficking, and hopefully prevent exploitation from occurring in the first place.

Additionally, education helps break the stigma surrounding trafficking, encourages survivors to seek help, and equips individuals with resources and knowledge to protect themselves and others from falling victims to sex trafficking.

Providing education takes many forms, whether that entails conversations between parents and children or in the classroom or workspace, education campaigns and advocation for new policies,

especially, in cases where trafficking might be detected. As a country, these conversations need to happen more often, which is why the way we communicate is so important.

Communication is key to understanding the reality of sex trafficking, discussing its prevalence within society, and advocating for preventative measures to protect the youth. Communication is central to influencing change not only in future generations but the one in which we live as well.

“The way we talk about trafficking is so important,” Myers says. “Language matters.”

That can be said by the way we communicate with one another but also by the way we receive our news. News coverage raises public awareness of important issues occurring in our communities, and they hold the power to influence prominent figures in society.

“If we continue to share this narrative that media is sharing, we're missing the real ways it's happening,” Myers says.

Stigmatization:

“And that's why it's so important for me to have learned what I went through was human trafficking, that it was a crime, that it wasn't my fault, and that's not how the world wants us to operate, and it's not how we have to operate, because I'm worth more than that.” - Jasmine Myers

By promoting education and communication, we’re a step closer in reducing the stigma around sex trafficking. Challenging myths and misconceptions, raising awareness, and fostering empathy and support for survivors are also highly impactful ways to diminish these false narratives.

Openly sharing and discussing survivor stories can amplify survivors’ voices to humanize the issue and counter stereotypes. By highlighting survivor’s resilience and shared experiences, we can create a safe space for conversation and education and inspire positive change.

Ensuring access to support services, like healthcare, counseling, legal assistance, and safe housing, creates a supportive environment. This allows survivors to feel validates, secure and empowered, which can help break down physical and psychological barriers in seeking help.

Though officials believe we’re moving the right direction, there’s still a lot of stigma that needs to be debunked.

First, we need to break the assumption that survivors are commercial sex workers or prostitutes, or that this is something they willingly choose to participate in.

“We have to change the mindset of the general public to understand this is not a victimless crime,” Perez says. “It is not two consenting adults. It’s actually a true crime of exploitation. Just like it is in a child exploitation investigation or a sexual assault or rape investigation, there’s a victim in the crime.”

Second, we need to break the assumption that traffickers are the only ones committing a felony.

“The purchasers of sex are just as guilty of exploiting the victims as the traffickers are,” Perez says.

By educating and supporting survivors while challenging misconceptions, we're working towards a society that views sex trafficking for what it truly is and providing justice for survivors.

Texas Initiatives:

Texas is the first state in the nation to make solicitation of prostitution a felony offense. Additionally, Texas stands out from other states in combatting trafficking because of the effective initiatives and approaches that have been implemented.

These laws consist of harsh penalties for traffickers, protection and support for victims, and measures to prevent trafficking. The state has been proactive in updating and strengthening its legal framework to address emerging trends and challenges in trafficking.

Specifically, the Texas Department of Public Safety's Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) has launched an innovative operation to identify trafficking victims.

Putting victims' needs first is central to their anti-trafficking strategy. This approach is now being implemented statewide. Texas DPS has shifted its focus from solely making arrests in prostitution cases to working with victim support groups, and their goal is to provide healing to victims and manage their escape from trafficking.

Since Governor Abbott has been in office, he’s created many anti-trafficking and survivor healing programs.

His methods of combatting trafficking have been implemented in partnerships with law enforcement and nonprofit organizations, establishing a model unique than that of any other.

CSEY Advocates: These are nonprofit agencies that connect employed advocates to provide 24/7 crisis response and continual long-term support to children survivors. Advocates are dispatched by first responders when recovering a child and meets the child where they are (mentally and physically). Developed by Praesidium, a company specializing in providing abuse risk management services to various organizations, they’re there to establish a trusting relationship through healing stages, including relapse and are supported by the CSTT.

Abbott’s CSTT: Created by Gov. Abbott in 2015, CSTT is a division within the public safety office whose mission is to protect, recognize, recover, support healing, and bring justice.

- **Protect:** research-based prevention education, education programs
- **Recognize:** CSE-IT, a research-based screening tool that improves early identification of commercially sexually exploited youth up to age 25, GRACE initiative by Mrs. Abbott

- **Recover:** CSEY advocates, Care Coordination, Drop-In Centers, Emergency Shelters
- **Support healing:** Case Management and Counseling Programs for Adults, Residential Programs for Adults, Residential Programs for Youth and Young Adults
- **Bring justice:** provides funding and training to criminal justice partners, specialized toward investigators and prosecutors

They don't come in with prosecution as the top goal—their top goal is to provide the victim with an exit from trafficking. They partner with three NGOs. They prioritize the stabilization and recovery of a victim over the prosecution.

They're different in the sense of them having those resources available and make sure they partner with organizations who can be nimble and responsive to their needs and workload they have.

If an organization is unable to provide this help and resources, they look for other ones so ensure the victim doesn't relapse.

"We've had victims who were in long-term treatment, doing great, relapse, and went back into the trafficking world." "We pull our resources together, and we go back and recover that victim again and place them back in services."

Victim: A victim was in treatment for a long time, but something happened at home and triggered a relapse, and she went back into the trafficking world. They recovered her, put her back into services and now she's doing great.

"So, it takes time and it can take upwards of seven contacts with an NGO or with law enforcement before they finally make that decision to exit trafficking."

"It's not an overnight fix and it's not an easy fix, but we make sure we have those resources available to stand behind what we say we're going to do."

Law enforcement as a whole is slowly moving towards that model and adopting that methodology to where they can provide those resources across the board, not just with the federal agency but with state and local partners as well.

"We have to change the factors that made them likely to be trafficked in the first place if we have a hope of keeping them out of going back to it."

The DHS established the Center for Countering Human Trafficking and few years ago. DHS is taking that Dallas methodology and adopting it nationwide.

"So every HIS field office will get the same program and same method, and they'll be implementing the way we do our operations here across all HIS field offices," Perez says. "It's growing and expanding in the right way, and we're changing that culture and mindset, slowly but surely. It's just going to take time."