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Are Milwaukee Youth at Risk for Sex Trafficking?

BY ERIN BERGE FEB. 18, 2020 3:24 P.M.

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The Polaris Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to combating modern-day slavery, reported the staggering

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national number of 23,078 survivors of sex trafficking in 2018. Those numbers could be even higher, according to Ozaukee County Board Supervisor Linda Krieg. In her time as a former FBI section chief, Krieg stated Milwaukee consistently ranked among the top five hubs for sex trafficking.

“It’s happening everywhere. Recognize this isn’t somebody else’s problem. It’s happening everywhere, and Milwaukee happens to be one of the notoriously high-ranked cities with the trafficking problem,” said Krieg at a recent presentation on sex and human trafficking by Impact100 Greater Milwaukee, a local women-led philanthropy group.

Krieg defines “human trafficking” as “a business of stealing someone’s freedom for profit; in some cases, traffickers trick to fraud or physically force victims into selling sex.” In Milwaukee, the Medical College of Wisconsin identified 340 individuals, aged 25 and under, as victims of sex trafficking from 2013 to 2016. Almost all were identified as female, and 65% were African American. Boys, men, transgender and non-gender-conforming persons are also affected, and the average age of an exploited individual was 15-17, according to the Polaris Project.

Milwaukee may be considered a sex trafficking “hub,” but the characteristics of the city are not unique to other major cities, according to Daria Mueller, doctoral candidate at the Helen Bader School of Social Welfare at UW-Milwaukee. “It certainly is not exclusive to Milwaukee, but what I think are some of the issues that are very relevant to Milwaukee is that we have very high poverty; and you know, really, that’s a fundamental cause, because it’s what drives people into situations where they’re trying to survive by any means necessary,” says Mueller.

Identifying the Vulnerable

Unresolved traumas can create vulnerabilities for a person, making it easier for a trafficker to lure a child or adult into sex trafficking. Those traumas can include running away from home, homelessness, poverty, racism and childhood abuse; and, if the traumas are not addressed or when basic needs are not met, a person is vulnerable. “A young person is not equipped to understand how this is unhealthy and inappropriate, but some of it is they are more vulnerable because of their unresolved trauma,” says Mueller.

The lack of investment in the public school system—and central city neighborhoods that need more resources and programs for at-risk youth—also can influence a trafficker’s ability to lure a child or adult into sex trafficking. “And those predators are not just traffickers and pimps, the predators are also the people who are creating the demand. Nobody would be selling sex or being trafficked or sold for sex if there wasn’t a demand for it. This is the hidden part of this issue... all the adult males who are buying sex from these young people,” says Mueller.

According to criminal defense attorney Lew A. Wasserman, the hyper-segregation seen in Milwaukee contributes to the amount of sex trafficking seen in the city, and the business of human trafficking is “market driven.” “Milwaukee is apparently the city where hyper-segregation and hyper-sexual trafficking are occurring simultaneously. A just society would not permit that,” said Wasserman at the Impact100 sex and human trafficking presentation.

‘Like a Kidnapping in Slow Motion’

The idea that children are abducted in parking lots or kidnapped and kept in basements is a little outdated, according to Democratic state Rep. Robyn Vining. Today, social media and social circles are the main channels where people can lure children into sex trafficking. “Now, it’s a slow lure, and it looks less like kidnapping. but it’s still forced, everything is still coercion, and it’s just like a kidnapping in slow motion,” she says.

Vining has had a long history in sex trafficking advocacy, working with the non-profit Exploit No More and speaking on the Wisconsin Assembly floor in favor of [Assembly Joint Resolution 116](#), which named January as Human Trafficking Awareness and Prevention Month. Vining continues to advocate for the passage of a Safe Harbor law in Wisconsin to shelter minors arrested for prostitution by diverting their cases from criminal penalties into rehabilitation. In other states, minors covered by Safe Harbor laws can be given access to medical and psychological treatment, job training, housing or other programs. In 2015, the [Polaris Project](#) reported 34 states passed Safe Harbor laws; Wisconsin wasn’t one of them.

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“[Sex trafficking] is wrong, and there is a moral imperative that we fix this, and there is a moral imperative that it’s wrong. And to me, it’s just very clear—these are children, their lives are being destroyed and their childhood, and we can stop that from happening, so why aren’t we?” says Vining.

According to the Polaris Project, the top recruiting or “luring” that is used on victims are intimate partners or marriage propositions, familial relationships, posing as a benefactor, job offers or advertisements, false promises and fraud. Comparable to dealing drugs, a dealer sells a product to a buyer. In sex trafficking, the trafficker can sell a person as a reusable product, selling to a buyer again and again for profit, according to Krieg. “The victims often can’t break away due to confinement, humiliation, shame, dependency and mostly hopelessness,” she says. On social media, traffickers look for children posting statements like, “Nobody gets me” and will respond with, “I understand you,” she adds.

While criminal justice looks to combat sex trafficking, it’s not the only avenue needed to end the crisis in Milwaukee, according to Jeanne Geraci, executive director of the Benedict Center. Working with legislation and organizations within the city such as Lotus Legal, Pathfinders and others can help victims of sex trafficking. “The good news is there are so many good organizations and good people who are working so hard to fight this... We appreciate each other’s work, and we partner, and that’s really good news. We are not spending our time and energy fighting with each other about who can fight

trafficking better; we are partnering, and that's really good news for Milwaukee," says Vining.

The DNC and Sex Trafficking

With the Legislature perhaps allowing bars to remain open until 4 a.m. during the [Democratic National Convention](#) in July, Milwaukee could see an increase in sex trafficking, according to Wasserman. Large events often increase sex trafficking because there will be people with money and a "sense of anonymity," according to Krieg. "There is an increase in paid sex ads; ads that traffickers take full advantage of," she says.

Organizations like Exploit No More provide education to hotels on sex trafficking for employees about the warning signs and what to do. Wasserman also thinks everyone in the city should be aware. "A flyer should warn people coming to this city that we take human sex trafficking very seriously in this city and county, and if you are caught, you will be indicted; not just prosecuted—indicted—and face the full wrath of federal law," says Wasserman.

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