

An industry built on human misery – and it's here, in Mississippi

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Millions of women, children, and men are trapped in forced service, abused, and hidden in the dark shadows that comprise communities and neighborhoods around the world and across our nation and our state. The vulnerable are kept isolated as they are exploited in factories and sweatshops, fields and forests, brothels, and domestic servitude. They are the victims of human trafficking, a multibillion-dollar criminal industry that denies freedom to an estimated 40.3 million people in the world today.

Human trafficking is a violent crime that diminishes the value of human life, debases our common humanity, and destroys our society's moral fabric. Each year, criminals profit an estimated \$150 billion from human misery. That's over \$4,750 a second.

Trafficking crimes are not only perpetrated by transnational criminal enterprises and gangs. In some cases, these criminals are disguised as our neighbors, owning local businesses or farms, and living in our communities. Victims can even be trafficked by those closest to them, like intimate partners, parents, or other family members. These perpetrators span all racial, ethnic, and gender demographics.

While the world was shutting down in response to COVID-19, these criminals took advantage of the circumstances. They used stay-at-home orders and social distancing to make it easier to hide their operations and to make their victims even more invisible.

At the same time, dramatic increases in unemployment and reductions in income that came with the pandemic have made vulnerable populations still more exposed to the risk of severe exploitation as they do their best to take care of themselves and provide for their families. And, more time online has meant more time for traffickers to groom their next potential victims.

In April, Polaris released a report containing the data they have been tracking through the National Human Trafficking Hotline, one of the most extensive data sets on human trafficking in the U.S. When comparing post-shelter-in-place data in 2020 with pre-shelter-in-place in 2019, the number of crisis trafficking situations increased by more than 30%, more than 90 reports in a 30-day period. And, the number of people needing immediate emergency shelter nearly doubled.

Victims are often hidden, but you could save a life if you know how to spot the signs. While not comprehensive, these are some key indicators to watch for: Is the person living with their employer, in poor living conditions, or in a situation where multiple people live in a cramped space?

Does the person have an inability to speak to people alone, or do their answers appear to be scripted or rehearsed? Does their employer hold their identity documents? Are there signs of physical abuse, often in various stages of healing? Is the person particularly submissive or fearful, unpaid or paid very little, or under 18 and in prostitution?

Victims of trafficking can include our neighbors, and we must work together to combat this horrible form of abuse through spreading education and outreach, giving victims hope through the recovery and support services they need, and prosecuting the perpetrators.

My office has prosecutors, investigators, advocates, and education specialists who are dedicated to bringing perpetrators to justice, protecting survivors and helping them reenter society without shame or blame, and preventing further victimization of the innocent. More importantly, Mississippi has you.

January is National Slavery and Human Trafficking Awareness Month. This is a time to remember the role we can all play in helping bring light to the dark and hopeless place in which trafficking victims live.

If you believe you have identified someone in a trafficking situation, alert law enforcement immediately by calling 911. You may also want to contact the **National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-800-373-7888**. Trafficking is in our communities, but it does not have to be. We can all be a part of the solution that ends human trafficking.