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Human Trafficking Evokes Outrage, Little Evidence

U.S. Estimates Thousands of Victims, But Efforts to
Find Them Fall Short

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Sunday, September 23, 2007; A01

Outrage was mounting at the 1999 hearing in the Rayburn House Office Building, where congressmen were learning about human trafficking.

A woman from [Nepal](#) testified that September that she had been drugged, abducted and forced to work at a brothel in [Bombay](#). A Christian activist recounted tales of women overseas being beaten with electrical cords and raped. A [State Department](#) official said Congress must act -- 50,000 slaves were pouring into the United States every year, she said. Furious about the "tidal wave" of victims, [Rep. Christopher H. Smith \(R-N.J.\)](#) vowed to crack down on so-called modern-day slavery.

The next year, Congress passed a law, triggering a little-noticed worldwide war on human trafficking that began at the end of the Clinton administration and is now a top Bush administration priority. As part of the fight, [President Bush](#) has blanketed the nation with 42 [Justice Department](#) task forces and spent more than \$150 million -- all to find and help the estimated hundreds of thousands of victims of forced prostitution or labor in the United States.

But the government couldn't find them. Not in this country.

The evidence and testimony presented to Congress pointed to a problem overseas. But in the seven years since the law was passed, human trafficking has not become a major domestic issue, according to the government's figures.

The administration has identified 1,362 victims of human trafficking brought into the United States since 2000, nowhere near the 50,000 a year the government had estimated. In addition, 148 federal cases have been brought nationwide, some by the Justice task forces, which are composed of prosecutors, agents from the [FBI](#) and [Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#), and local law enforcement officials in areas thought to be hubs of trafficking.

In the Washington region, there have been about 15 federal cases this decade.

Ronald Weitzer, a criminologist at [George Washington University](#) and an expert on sex trafficking, said that trafficking is a hidden crime whose victims often fear coming forward. He said that might account for some of the disparity in the numbers, but only a small amount.

"The discrepancy between the alleged number of victims per year and the number of cases they've been able to make is so huge that it's got to raise major questions," Weitzer said. "It suggests that this problem is being blown way out of proportion."

Government officials define trafficking as holding someone in a workplace through force, fraud or coercion. Trafficking generally takes two forms: sex or labor. The victims in most prosecutions in the

Washington area have been people forced into prostitution. The [Department of Health and Human Services](#) "certifies" trafficking victims in the United States after verifying that they were subjected to forced sex or labor. Only non-U.S. citizens brought into this country by traffickers are eligible to be certified, entitling them to receive U.S. government benefits.

Administration officials acknowledge that they have found fewer victims than anticipated. Brent Orrell, an HHS deputy assistant secretary, said that certifications are increasing and that the agency is working hard to "help identify many more victims." He also said: "We still have a long way to go."

But [Tony Fratto](#), deputy [White House](#) press secretary, said that the issue is "not about the numbers. It's really about the crime and how horrific it is." Fratto also said the domestic response to trafficking "cannot be ripped out of the context" of the U.S. government's effort to fight it abroad. "We have an obligation to set an example for the rest of the world, so if we have this global initiative to stop human trafficking and slavery, how can we tolerate even a minimal number within our own borders?"

He said that the president's passion about fighting trafficking is motivated in part by his Christian faith and his outrage at the crime. "It's a practice that he obviously finds disgusting, as most rational people would, and he wants America to be the leader in ending it," Fratto said. "He sees it as a moral obligation."

Although there have been several estimates over the years, the number that helped fuel the congressional response -- 50,000 victims a year -- was an unscientific estimate by a [CIA](#) analyst who relied mainly on clippings from foreign newspapers, according to government sources who requested anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the agency's methods. Former attorney general [Alberto R. Gonzales](#) told Congress last year that a much lower estimate in 2004 -- 14,500 to 17,500 a year -- might also have been overstated.

Yet the government spent \$28.5 million in 2006 to fight human trafficking in the United States, a 13 percent increase over the previous year. The effort has attracted strong bipartisan support.

Steven Wagner, who helped HHS distribute millions of dollars in grants to community groups to find and assist victims, said "Those funds were wasted."

"Many of the organizations that received grants didn't really have to do anything," said Wagner, former head of HHS's anti-trafficking program. "They were available to help victims. There weren't any victims."

Still, the raw emotion of the issue internationally and domestically has spawned dozens of activist organizations that fight trafficking. They include the [Polaris Project](#), which was founded in 2002 by two college students, and the Washington-based Break the Chain Campaign, which started in the mid-1990s focusing on exploited migrant workers before concentrating on trafficking after 2000.

Activist groups and administration officials strongly defend their efforts, saying that trafficking is a terrible crime and that even one case is too many. They said that cultural obstacles and other impediments prevent victims from coming forward.

Mark P. Lagon, director of the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, said that such problems make the numbers "naturally murky. . . . There are vigorous U.S. government efforts to find and help victims in the United States, not because there is some magic number that we have a gut instinct is out there. Any estimate we're citing, we've always said, is an estimate."

But Lagon said he is convinced that "thousands upon thousands of people are subject to gross exploitation" in the United States.

Few question that trafficking is a serious problem in many countries, and the U.S. government has spent more than half a billion dollars fighting it around the world since 2000.

Last year, anti-trafficking projects overseas included \$3.4 million to help [El Salvador](#) fight child labor and \$175,000 for community development training for women in remote Mekong Delta villages in [Vietnam](#), according to the State Department. Human trafficking, in the United States and abroad, is under attack by 10 federal agencies that report to a Cabinet-level task force chaired by Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#).

In the United States, activists say that trafficking has received far more attention than crimes such as domestic violence, of which there are hundreds of thousands of documented victims every year.

The quest to find and help victims of trafficking has become so urgent that the Bush administration hired a public relations firm, a highly unusual approach to fighting crime. Ketchum, a [New York](#)-based public relations firm, has received \$9.5 million and has been awarded \$2.5 million more.

"We're giving money to Ketchum so they can train people who can train people who can train people to serve victims," said one Washington area provider of services for trafficking victims, who receives government funding and spoke on condition of anonymity. "Trafficking victims are hidden. They're not really going to be affected by a big, splashy PR campaign. They're not watching Lifetime television."

Yet the anti-trafficking crusade goes on, partly because of the issue's uniquely nonpartisan appeal. In the past four years, more than half of all states have passed anti-trafficking laws, although local prosecutions have been rare.

"There's huge political momentum, because this is a no-brainer issue," said Derek Ellerman, co-founder of the Polaris Project. "No one is going to stand up and oppose fighting modern-day slavery."

A Matter of Faith

Throughout the 1990s, evangelicals and other Christians grew increasingly concerned about international human rights, fueled by religious persecution in [Sudan](#) and other countries. They were also rediscovering a tradition of social reform dating to when Christians fought the slave trade of an earlier era.

Human trafficking has always been a problem in some cultures but increased in the early 1990s, experts say.

For conservative Christians, trafficking was "a clear-cut, uncontroversial, terrible thing going on in the world," said Gary Haugen, president of International Justice Mission in [Arlington](#), a Christian human rights group.

Feminist groups and other organizations also seized on trafficking, and a 1999 meeting at the Capitol, organized by former Nixon White House aide Charles W. Colson, helped seal a coalition. The session in the office of then-House Majority Leader Richard K. Armey (R-Tex.) brought together the [Southern Baptist Convention](#), conservative William Bennett and Rabbi David Saperstein, a prominent Reform Jewish activist.

The session focused only on trafficking victims overseas, said Mariam Bell, national public policy director for Colson's Prison Fellowship Ministries.

"It was just ghastly stuff," Armey recalled last week, saying that he immediately agreed to support an anti-trafficking law. "I felt a sense of urgency that this must be done, and as soon as possible."

A New Law

A law was more likely to be enacted if its advocates could quantify the issue. During a [PowerPoint](#) presentation in April 1999, the CIA provided an estimate: 45,000 to 50,000 women and children were trafficked into the United States every year.

The CIA briefing emerged from the Clinton administration's growing interest in the problem. First lady [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) had been pushing the issue, former administration officials said.

But information was scarce, so a CIA analyst was told to assess the problem in the United States and abroad. She combed through intelligence reports and law enforcement data. Her main source, however, was news clippings about trafficking cases overseas -- from which she tried to extrapolate the number of U.S. victims.

The CIA estimate soon appeared in a report by a State Department analyst that was the U.S. government's first comprehensive assessment of trafficking. State Department officials raised the alarm about victims trafficked into the United States when they appeared before Congress in 1999 and 2000, citing the CIA estimate. A Justice Department official testified that the number might have been 100,000 each year.

The congressional hearings focused mostly on trafficking overseas. At the House hearing in September 1999, Rep. Earl F. Hilliard (D-Ala.) changed the subject and zeroed in on Laura J. Lederer, a [Harvard University](#) expert on trafficking.

"How prevalent is the sex trade here in this country?" Hilliard asked.

"We have so very little information on this subject in this country. . . . so very few facts," Lederer said.

"Excuse me, but is the sex trade prevalent here?" Hilliard asked.

Nobody knows, Lederer said.

Bipartisan passion melted any uncertainty, and in October 2000, Congress enacted the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, significantly broadening the federal definition of trafficking. Prosecutors would no longer have to rely on statutes that required them to prove a victim had been subjected to physical violence or restraints, such as chains. Now, a federal case could be made if a trafficker had psychologically abused a victim.

The measure toughened penalties against traffickers, provided extensive services for victims and committed the United States to a leading role internationally, requiring the State Department to rank countries and impose sanctions if their anti-trafficking efforts fell short.

The law's fifth sentence says: "Congress finds that . . . approximately 50,000 women and children are trafficked into the United States each year."

Raising Awareness

Just as the law took effect, along came a new president to enforce it.

Bell, with Prison Fellowship Ministries, noted that when Bush addressed the [U.N. General Assembly](#) in 2003, he focused on the war in [Iraq](#), the war on terrorism and the war on trafficking.

Soon after Bush took office, a network of anti-trafficking nonprofit agencies arose, spurred in part by an infusion of federal dollars.

HHS officials were determined to raise public awareness and encourage victims to come forward. For help, they turned to Ketchum in 2003.

Legal experts said they hadn't heard of hiring a public relations firm to fight a crime problem. Wagner, who took over HHS's anti-trafficking program in 2003, said that the strategy was "extremely unusual" but that creative measures were needed.

"The victims of this crime won't come forward. Law enforcement doesn't handle that very well, when they have to go out and find a crime," he said.

Ketchum, whose Washington lobbying arm is chaired by former U.S. Rep. Susan Molinari (R-N.Y.), formed coalitions of community groups in two states and 19 cities, to search for and aid victims. The coalition effort was overseen by a subcontractor, Washington-based Capital City Partners, whose executives during the period of oversight have included the former heads of the Fund for a Conservative Majority and the [Manhattan Institute](#), a conservative think tank, in addition to the former editorial page editor of the conservative [Manchester \(N.H.\) Union Leader](#) newspaper.

Trying to Get the Number Right

Three years ago, the government downsized its estimate of trafficking victims, but even those numbers have not been borne out.

The effort to acquire a more precise number had begun at the [Library of Congress](#) and Mercyhurst College in [Pennsylvania](#), where graduate students on a CIA contract stayed up nights, using the Internet to find clippings from foreign newspapers.

Once again, the agency was using mainly news clips from foreign media to estimate the numbers of trafficking victims, along with reports from government agencies and anti-trafficking groups. The students at Mercyhurst, a school known for its intelligence studies program, were enlisted to help.

But their work was thought to be inconsistent, said officials at the [Government Accountability Office](#), which criticized the government's trafficking numbers in a report last year.

A part-time researcher at the Library of Congress took over the project. "The numbers were totally unreliable," said David Osborne, head of research for the library's federal research division. "If it was reported that 15 women were trafficked from [Romania](#) into [France](#), French media might pick it up and say 32 women and someone else would say 45."

A CIA analyst ran the research through a computer simulation program, said government officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were discussing the CIA's methods. It spat out estimates of destination countries for trafficking victims worldwide. The new number of victims trafficked into the United States: 14,500 to 17,500 each year.

The simulation is considered a valid way to measure probability if the underlying data are reliable. "It seems incredibly unlikely that this was a robust, sound analysis," said David Banks, a statistics professor at [Duke University](#).

The CIA's new estimate, which first appeared in a 2004 State Department report, has been widely quoted, including by a senior Justice Department official at a media briefing this year. It's also posted on the HHS Web site.

The Justice Department's human trafficking task force in Washington has mounted an aggressive effort to find victims.

But at a meeting of the task force this year, then-coordinator Sharon Marcus-Kurn said that detectives had spent "umpteen hours of overtime" repeatedly interviewing women found in Korean- and Hispanic-owned brothels. "It's very difficult to find any underlying trafficking that is there," Marcus-Kurn told the group.

People trafficked into the United States have traditionally been the focus of the crackdown. In recent years, there has been increasing debate about whether the victim estimates should include U.S. citizens. For example, adult U.S. citizens forced into prostitution are also trafficking victims under federal law, but some say that such cases should be left to local police.

D.C.: A Trafficking Hub?

In a classroom at the D.C. police academy in January, President Bush appears on a screen at a mandatory training session in how to investigate and identify trafficking. The 55 officers who attended watch a slide show featuring testimonials from government officials and a clip from Bush's 2003 speech to the [United Nations](#).

Sally Stoecker, lead researcher for Shared Hope International in Arlington, which aims to increase awareness of sex trafficking, takes the microphone. "It's a huge crime, and it's continuing to grow," Stoecker says, citing the government's most recent estimate of victims.

The D.C. officers are among thousands of law enforcement officials nationwide who have been trained in how to spot trafficking. In [Montgomery County](#), police have investigated numerous brothels since the force was trained in 2005 and last year. Officers have found a few trafficking victims, but there have been no prosecutions.

The Justice Department runs law enforcement task forces across the country. It's a top priority for the department's Civil Rights Division.

Justice officials have said there has been a 600 percent increase in U.S. cases. But the department said in a report last September: "In absolute numbers, it is true that the prosecution figures pale in comparison to the estimated scope of the problem."

The 148 cases filed this decade by the Civil Rights Division and U.S. attorney's offices might not include what Justice officials call a limited number of child trafficking prosecutions by the Criminal Division, Justice officials said Friday. They could not provide a number.

[Arlington County](#) Commonwealth's Attorney Richard E. Trodden, who studied trafficking for the [Virginia Crime Commission](#), said he doesn't know of any local prosecutions in [Northern Virginia](#).

Nearly seven years after it began, the anti-trafficking campaign rolls on.

"This is important for me personally," Gonzales said in January as he announced the creation of a Justice Department unit to focus on trafficking cases. Encouraged by Gonzales, who sent letters to all 50 governors, states continued to pass anti-trafficking laws.

[Maryland](#) enacted a law in May that toughens penalties.

[Virginia](#) has not taken legislative action; some legislators have said that a law isn't needed.

HHS is still paying people to find victims. Last fall, the agency announced \$3.4 million in new "street outreach" awards to 22 groups nationwide.

Nearly \$125,000 went to Mosaic Family Services, a nonprofit agency in [Dallas](#). For the past year, its employees have put out the word to hospitals, police stations, domestic violence shelters -- any organization that might come into contact with a victim.

"They're doing about a thousand different things," said Bill Bernstein, Mosaic's deputy director.

Three victims were found.