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[Ronald Weitzer](#)

Professor of sociology, George
Washington University

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Myths About Human Trafficking

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As recently as fifteen years ago, the term "human trafficking" was virtually absent from public discourse. Today, it is all the rage, and a huge amount of taxpayer money has been spent fighting it. There is no doubt that, when force or deception is involved in the recruitment or transportation of laborers (the definition of trafficking in U.S. law), trafficking is an evil that deserves robust countermeasures. But there are also many popular myths about trafficking -- frequently voiced in the media and by government officials -- that have distorted proper understanding of the problem and, more importantly, hampered efforts to combat it. What are the chief myths?

Trafficking is a mammoth problem

Interest groups, the media, and the U.S. government have given very high estimates of the number of persons trafficked each year into the sex industry or other labor arenas. In some instances, the numbers appear to be pulled out of thin air, as in a *Washington Post* [editorial](#) (June 28, 2011) declaring that "trafficking is understood today as a global phenomenon exceeding 20 million cases each year." Or consider a November 2005 episode of *Oprah*, in which it was claimed that "millions" of children are trafficked into prostitution each year. The U.S. Government's [figures](#) are lower -- 800,000 worldwide victims (down from an estimated 4 million in 2000) and 14,500-17,500 domestic victims (down from a high of 50,000 in 2000) -- though the sources of these figures have never been disclosed.

There is a stark difference between the official estimates and the tiny number of victims identified and rescued each year or the number of traffickers brought to justice, both domestically and internationally. Worldwide, the State Department [reported](#) in 2010 that only 0.4% of the estimated number of victims have been officially located and assisted. No one would claim that the official estimates could possibly match the number of identified victims -- given the obstacles to locating victims in illicit, underground markets -- but the huge disparity between the two should at least raise doubts about the alleged scale of victimization.

Trafficking is growing worldwide

Not only is human trafficking said to be a huge social problem, but also one that it is escalating worldwide. Trafficking does appear to have increased in some parts of the world, especially with the loosening of controls in the former Soviet empire. But the generic assertion that trafficking is growing globally cannot be substantiated. A related claim, by activists and some government officials, is that human trafficking has progressed from the third largest criminal enterprise in the world, behind the drug and arms trades, to number two status, behind drugs. I have yet to see any supporting evidence for this claim. Estimates of the profits -- [said to be](#) between \$5 and \$12 billion annually -- are similarly dubious. We simply have no reliable data on which to extrapolate

profit margins in black markets.

Conflating sex trafficking with sex work

While U.S. law distinguishes between human trafficking (use of force or deception) and smuggling (voluntary, assisted migration), the U.S. government has gradually moved in the direction of linking all commercial sex to trafficking. In 2004, the State Department created a "factsheet" called [The Link Between Prostitution and Trafficking](#) that defined prostitution as "inherently harmful" and proclaimed that it is intrinsically "brutal and damaging to people." Some prominent activists and officials also claim that many women working in pornography and at strip clubs have been trafficked. The evidence for this is wafer thin.

Activists have fought for years to intensify sanctions against "johns," and the U.S. Government has now embraced this campaign. The focus on clients is evident in recent anti-trafficking laws that contain provisions targeting "the demand." The 2005 and 2008 Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Acts, for instance, [allocated](#) substantial funds for increased local law enforcement against prostitutes' clients. The crackdown applies to all clients, not just those who may have bought sex from a trafficked person. Some officials have expressed concern about such "federalizing" of prostitution enforcement, the traditional domain of local authorities.

Outcomes

We are left with a set of farfetched claims about trafficking, claims that hardly lend themselves to evidence-based policy-making. The available evidence does not allow us to draw any conclusions about the magnitude of the problem. There are no reliable statistics on trafficking in any one nation, let alone worldwide. Even ballpark estimates are guesswork, given the clandestine nature of the sex trade. But precisely because the asserted numbers, trends, and proceeds cannot be verified, they can easily gain a life of their own and a veneer of credibility when repeatedly cited by the media and in government reports. And such grandiose claims certainly have shock value. They alarm the public, generate sensationalized media coverage, and are used to justify huge government expenditures to fight a problem that may have been blown way out of proportion.

And a ton of money indeed has been thrown at the problem -- funding dubious "research" as well as enforcement and interventions in the form of raids. In the first four years of the Bush administration alone, [\\$300 million](#) was awarded to international NGOs involved in anti-trafficking work, in addition to what was spent on domestic efforts. In 2010, the U.S. Government spent [\\$54 million](#) funding international NGOs that run anti-trafficking programs, many of which are faith-based. Some very questionable field interventions have been funded. A [report](#) in *The Nation* noted that some leading NGO's, such as the International Justice Mission, have staged interventions in Southeast Asia that make the situation worse for sex workers -- subjecting them to police abuse, deportation, or "long, involuntary stays in shelters."

Beginning with the Bush administration, anti-trafficking policy has largely been driven by interest groups on the far right and left, lobbyists whose mission is the elimination of all types of commercial sex activity. (Much less focus has been placed on other labor arenas.) The State Department's own Inspector General [expressed concern](#) about "the credentials of the organizations and findings of the research that the [State Department's] Trafficking Office funded," and called for much greater oversight and accountability.

A superior approach would discontinue the fruitless practice of "estimating" the number of victims and making unverifiable claims about trends and profits, and instead target enforcement efforts to combat unfree labor in all arenas -- prostitution, agriculture, industry, domestic service -- rather than fighting sexual commerce in general.

