

## Confusion and Contradiction in Law Enforcement Views on Sex Trafficking

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On June 18, I attended a public forum on human trafficking in Washington County (Oregon) sponsored by Respect for Life, a Catholic anti-abortion group. Main speakers were both representatives of the law enforcement, Tigard detective Yonsoo Lee and Multnomah County detective and deputy sheriff Keith Bickford.

Lee was to discuss domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) while Bickford would focus on trafficking involving “foreign-born” victims, but they both ended up addressing almost exclusively about young people trading sex. (This division between DMST and “foreign-born” trafficking reflects a larger re-organization of law enforcement units, as I have explained before.)

Detective Lee, who is also a deputized federal agent with the FBI, advised the audience that his presentation was PG-13, and surely enough he showed a series of online escort ads and other images with semi-explicit pictures of women, for no apparent reason. “We here in suburbia don’t often see human trafficking, but it is happening behind closed doors,” Lee stated.

Lee said that he was “pretty weary” of statistics, but nonetheless cited the oft-repeated (and thoroughly debunked) figure that “the average age of entry into prostitution is 12-14.” “From our experience, it holds true” he said, because he has encountered some girls who started trading sex at ages as early as 10 or 11. However, it was clear from the way he was discussing “our experiences” that these very young girls are anomalies, which makes it implausible that the “average age” can be anything close to 12.

He then admitted that the average age of girls (minors) he actually encounters (as opposed to the age at which they supposedly began trading sex) is about 16, which further makes us wonder how all these 10-14 year olds avoid encounter with the law enforcement for so many years before they finally come to his attention. The only plausible explanation is that the “average age” figure is totally wrong.

The most interesting part about Lee’s presentation was about how the law enforcement identify online sex ads that might involve trafficking. According to him, the law enforcement looks for ads for different girls that share the same contact information, user identifier, or other characteristics that indicate that they are not working alone. He also searches for older ads by the same poster, because sometimes people are less sophisticated when they begin using the internet for advertising, and there might be more identifying information in earlier ads.

Another example Lee gave is an ad found in an escort board that uses another provider (sex worker), not clients, as a reference. On boards, providers and clients both use references to avoid dealing with the law enforcement, but a new provider would not have any references, so she may ask another provider she knows to vouch for her authenticity. But, to Lee, this indicates that she is not working alone, which means it might involve trafficking.

This tactic is worrisome because the fact that someone is not working alone does not necessarily mean (and usually does not mean) that that person is being trafficked: it might be someone who is helping out the individual, or multiple individuals working together. Some sex workers choose to work with others for their safety, and may be forced to abandon this safety measure if doing so makes them more vulnerable to be targeted by the law enforcement.

“Where do victims come from?” Lee said that of 38 girls identified in connection to a brothel raid, four were former Tigard High School students. They are recruited online via social networking sites as well as outside schools and at shopping malls, Lee said.

Detective Keith Bickford followed Lee to discuss international trafficking, which is supposed to cover both labor and sex trafficking, but quickly narrowed down his talk to sex trafficking involving gangs and drug cartels (I’ve discussed the shift in the anti-trafficking discourse to treat trafficking as a primarily “gang problem” before). He told the audience that he had recently spoken with custom and border control agents in Arizona, who warned him about the “coming storm” of the emerging alliance between gangs and cartels.

“Cartels are very well funded, and very well armed,” said Bickford, pointing out that cartel members are connected even to some foreign diplomats. “A foreign consulate can be a cartel member... Mexican Consulate here in downtown Portland: Who knows?” he said. “Cartels have terrorist type of mentality,” he continued, referring to how they infiltrate educational and political systems.

An audience member raised his hand and asked if cartels also traffick “our children” to Mexico. “Yes, I’ve seen quite a bit of it,” Bickford responded. I don’t really have any prior knowledge about this, but I have a hard time understanding what profit motives Mexican cartel might have to take extra efforts and risks trafficking U.S. children to Mexico when they could easily exploit Mexican children: it just seems implausible to me.

I have seen Bickford speak several times before, and it was surprising that he spoke with so much hyperbole and fear-mongering. While I disagree with many of his stances, I had always thought he was one of the more rational, even compassionate member of the law enforcement (for example, he often stresses the need for the law enforcement to work with undocumented immigrants rather than targeting them, coming very close to publicly advocating for comprehensive immigration reform). I worry that he drunk the cool-aid during his trip to Arizona where he was exposed to the extreme elements of U.S. boarder patrol.

All these discussions raised fear among the audience, as exemplified by a father who stood up and asked the presenters if it was safe for his teenage daughter to ride public transit by herself. A law enforcement officer in the audience responded with a reality check: “Washington County is a safe place. There are bad people out there, but we aren’t talking about guys pulling girls off buses.” Yes, only cops do that around here.

Another law enforcement officer spoke out from the audience to point out that “these girls” are

usually not “good students from good families.” “They are coarse, they speak back at us, they don’t want to go to school, and they run away. They like the way it is because they can stay up and party all they want, take whatever drug they want. That’s why they don’t come forward as victims.”

I felt that law enforcement agents are caught in a bind between the view they have traditionally held about young people in the sex trade (i.e. they are teenage whores, delinquents from socially undesirable backgrounds) and the politically fashionable view that dominates the “anti-trafficking” craze (they are innocent young girls victimized in modern-day slavery). These views are contradictory and confusing to those listening to these presentations, but they co-exist in the minds of law enforcement officers through a single common thread, which is the need for further criminalization of people of color, street youth, immigrants, and other targeted communities.

Regardless, many audience members seemed to connect the issue of human trafficking to the larger schema of “culture war.” Several audience members suggested that human trafficking—or rather, the presence of young people in the sex trade—was caused by the “coarsening of the culture,” represented by the “promotion of promiscuity” through sex education in schools. “What role did Planned Parenthood play in promoting promiscuity and sex trafficking?” a retired attorney asked. Another audience member pointed out that materials used in sex ed mentions Planned Parenthood website, which may lead to trafficking. “We need to stop Planned Parenthood,” she said.

In response, both Lee and Bickford failed to confront the misperception that sex trafficking was about promiscuity: Lee said that he did not know enough about sex ed curriculum to comment, while Bickford stated that parents need to be aware what websites their children are accessing (in response to the question about the harms of youth accessing Planned Parenthood’s website). I realize that this was a forum hosted by an anti-abortion group, but I think they could and should have said something along the line of: “I understand that there are different opinions about Planned Parenthood and what it does, but sex trafficking is not about promiscuity. It is about violence and exploitation.”

This association between Planned Parenthood with sex trafficking may seem ridiculous, but ultra-conservatives have successfully shut down community organizing network ACORN under the entirely made-up claims including the allegation that the organization offered assistance to a pimp to traffick Central American women and open a brothel, so it is not far-fetched to say that they are trying to do the same to Planned Parenthood. Anyone who is actually concerned about the well-being of young people in the sex trade need to challenge anti-trafficking campaigns that center religious extremism or law enforcement expansionism.