

Human trafficking: As awareness grows, calls triple to national hot line

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Awareness about human trafficking in the United States has grown extensively, with the annual number of calls to a national trafficking hot line more than tripling – from about 5,800 calls in 2008 to nearly 21,000 in 2012.

During those five years, calls as well as e-mails – ranging from labor trafficking victims seeking help to truckers calling in tips about young girls being prostituted – generated information on more than 9,000 cases of trafficking. (Some of these cases were later confirmed, while others met a series of criteria indicating trafficking.) Involving more than 19,000 possible victims, the cases were analyzed in a report released Thursday by the Polaris Project in Washington, which operates the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) Hotline.

Among the cases, 64 percent involved sex trafficking, 22 percent involved labor trafficking, and nearly 3 percent involved both.

“Human trafficking is happening in every state, all across the United States ... and this report is just showing the tip of the iceberg,” says Bradley Myles, CEO of Polaris Project. To bring resources to bear on the problem, the anti-trafficking field is “dependent on the community to be the eyes and ears and to tell us when they see something suspicious or ... know about a survivor.” He adds, “It all starts with a call.”

Federal law includes in its definition of human trafficking: children in the sex trade, adults age 18 or over who are coerced or deceived into commercial sex acts, and people forced into various forms of labor or services.

The Polaris report is considered one of the most extensive sources of information on human trafficking in the US. Many cases of domestic human trafficking go unreported, and “we are in the infancy of human-trafficking data collection,” says Bridgette Carr, director of the Human Trafficking Clinic at the University of Michigan Law School in Ann Arbor.

Among the cases analyzed in the report:

- US citizens were victims in 41 percent of the sex trafficking cases and 20 percent of the labor trafficking cases.
- Among sex trafficking cases, 42 percent involved pimp-controlled prostitution. In many of those cases, the victim initially thought the pimp was an intimate partner, a dynamic that pimps often exploit to recruit and control their victims.
- Children were victims in 33 percent of sex trafficking cases and 20 percent of labor trafficking cases.
- Among calls from survivors, 20 percent were seeking emergency help to escape or other crisis support.

- The states with the highest number of reported cases were California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Illinois.

Behind the numbers are people like Daniel – who came to the US on a temporary work visa and found himself and his co-workers unable to leave an abusive employer because of the remoteness of the farm. (He's an example offered in the report, with a pseudonym for confidentiality.)

Some of these farm workers' passports had been confiscated, Daniel said, and he worried that if he could get away, his visa, tied to his employment there, would become invalid. After calling the NHTRC and deciding he was willing to report it to federal law enforcement, he was able to leave safely and get help from an attorney. A large-scale investigation by the Department of Labor prompted the employer to pay back wages to many of the workers, Polaris reports.

In a recent Minnesota case reported in the Minneapolis Star Tribune, four out of five people tried so far have been convicted for operating a sex trafficking ring in St. Paul, Minn., targeting young girls and women, including some with cognitive disabilities. In addition to verbal threats, one of the men convicted used rape to maintain his control, the prosecutor said.

Among those who have grown more aware of sex trafficking are truckers like Larry (so-called in the Polaris report), who called the NHTRC when he saw young girls knocking on cab doors late at night at a busy truck stop. That prompted a call to local police, who were able to take the girls into protective custody. Later, another caller from the same truck stop provided information about people potentially controlling the sex trafficking there.

Since a Truckers Against Trafficking awareness campaign in 2009, more than 160 cases of potential sex trafficking have been reported by truck drivers to the NHTRC.

Trafficking survivors have been referred through the hot line to services ranging from emergency shelter to mental health treatment. Some have received back wages or been reunited with families after years of abuse, the report notes.

On the federal level, a bipartisan group of senators and representatives supports the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act, a bill that would increase penalties and give more resources to help victims and law enforcement.

Many states and cities have boosted efforts in recent years to root out human trafficking and assist victims.

The increased calls reported by Polaris "reflect the reality happening on the ground," Professor Carr says, with more action from state attorneys general and other state and local groups. "It's a wonderful trend, and I hope it continues because there's a lot of work to do," she says.

Discussions in some states about setting up their own hot lines concern Carr, however. There's a

possibility that a move in that direction would mean “we won’t get comprehensive data about trafficking trends across the nation,” which are supplied through a national hot line like the one run by Polaris.

If you need help or want to report suspected trafficking, call the National Human Trafficking Resource Center Hotline at 888-373-7888.

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