

The Daily Tar Heel

URL: <http://www.dailytarheel.com/article/2013/03/513420ab1de89>

Current Date: Mon, 04 Mar 2013 14:02:26 -0500

North Carolina ranks as top-10 state for sex trafficking

By [Claire Bennett](#) | The Daily Tar Heel

Updated: 14 hours ago

Every week Abbi Tenaglia visits [Emma's Home](#), a restoration and rehabilitation house she founded that hosts girls who are victims of what is often an unseen crime in North Carolina — sex trafficking.

The girls, who are between 12 and 17 years old, go to Emma's Home in search of opportunities to learn, grow and experience a family-like environment many of them have never had, said Tenaglia, who is a director at the Durham-based Transforming Hope Ministries.

“Some part of the girls wants to be healed, but they still have some attachment to their trafficker because they didn't see them as a trafficker — they were a boyfriend or someone who they thought cared about them,” she said.

The Polaris Project, a national organization that raises awareness and compiles data about human trafficking, [ranks](#) North Carolina as a top-10 state for human trafficking, which includes both labor and sex trafficking.

The rankings are based on the number of calls the project's hotline receives from each state. Calls range from responding to incidents to providing general information.

Megan Fowler, spokeswoman for the project, said national statistics concerning human trafficking victims do not paint the full picture because of the nature of the crime.

Fowler said many cases are unreported because some victims of sex trafficking do not realize they are victims. Sex traffickers manipulate victims into believing that they are participants because of personal choices, she said, not because it has been forced upon them.

“It's a very hidden crime,” she said. “One where not a lot of data is being collected and one where there is widespread misunderstanding of what sex trafficking is and looks like.”

Sen. Thom Goolsby, R-New Hanover, introduced a bill in the N.C. General Assembly last month that aims to toughen the penalties for sex trafficking in the state.

If [Senate Bill 122](#) is passed, convicted sex traffickers would be required to register with the state as a sex offender and wear a GPS tracking bracelet.

Congress also recently renewed the [Trafficking Victims Protection Act](#), which includes programs to assist victims, as a part of the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act.

But the direct interaction with victims occurs at the local level, where organizations such as Emma's Home and the Asheville-based [Hope House](#) work to support victims.

“Our goal is never to see how many girls we can get in and out of the house,” Tenaglia said. “I would rather invest our time in each girl so that they are never re trafficked.”

The homes teach life skills such as cooking, maintaining a healthy lifestyle and working with other people.

They also provide therapy for the residents who suffer from severe post-traumatic stress disorder, said Emily Fitchpatrick, founder of Hope House and On Eagles Wings Ministries.

“It takes a long time,” she said. “It's not something you can overcome in just a year. We try to stabilize them and offer them a home-like environment.”

Hundreds of thousands of the 20.9 million victims of human trafficking worldwide are in the United States.

Caitlyn Dixon, president of the UNC Campus Y group Carolina Against Slavery and Trafficking, said North Carolina attracts sex and labor trafficking activity because of the presence of a strong agricultural community, major interstates and military institutions.

The Senate bill and a soon-to-be-filed “Safe Harbor” bill, which prevents children under the age of 18 from being charged with prostitution, will be essential in addressing the problem in the state, Goolsby said in a statement.

“This adds to the severity of the punishment and makes sure the punishment carries on after release when they have to register as sex offenders,” said Sen. Ellie Kinnaird, D-Orange.

Goolsby said the state should work to eliminate its connection to sex trafficking.

“The war against sex trafficking has begun,” he said. “For the sake of our children, we will win this war.”

Contact the desk editor at state@dailytarheel.com.

Published March 3, 2013 in [N.C. General Assembly State](#)

Powered by  **WORKS** Solutions by The State News