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## Santa Barbara County Sounds Alarm that Human Trafficking Is Happening Here

With vulnerable girls increasingly exploited for sex and drugs, DA's Office takes leadership role with task force to reverse the trend



From left, Santa Barbara County District Attorney Joyce Dudley, Chief Deputy District Attorney Mag Nicola and Victim-Witness Assistance Program director Megan Rheinschild are part of a Human Trafficking Task Force battling the increasing problem of girls being forced into prostitution. (Lara Cooper / Noozhawk photo)

By Lara Cooper, Noozhawk Staff Writer | @laraanncooper | Published on 02.22.2014 10:40 p.m.

22

COMMENT

The words "human trafficking" may conjure up images of vulnerable victims from far-flung countries, but Santa Barbara County officials warn it's a growing problem here. In fact, they say it's particularly insidious because many of the cases they're seeing are minors being trafficked for sex.

The problem is growing at such a rate that the **District Attorney's Office** recently formed a Human Trafficking Task Force to aggressively tackle the issue. The group

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includes more than 70 members representing law enforcement, the courts, nonprofit organizations, colleges and churches.

On Friday, **Noozhawk** sat down with three officials instrumental to the task force — **District Attorney Joyce Dudley**, Chief Deputy District Attorney Mag Nicola and Megan Rheinschild, Victim-Witness Assistance Program director — to talk about the community’s challenge.

According to Dudley, prostitution has long been a problem locally. In the late 1990s, she prosecuted several high-profile cases, including that of Patricia Cota, who ran a prostitution ring called

“College Cuties.”

As law enforcement would raid the operations, immunity was given to the prostitutes and their clients in exchange for details. The information enabled authorities to shut down the operations and successfully prosecute the pimps.

“That was our goal,” Dudley said.

More recently, when the District Attorney’s Office started hearing about Asian massage parlors operating in the county, “we figured we would approach it the same way,” she said.

What they discovered was something much different. Prostitutes would no longer talk about the people for whom they were working, and Dudley and her team didn’t understand why.

Slowly, the picture became clearer.

One woman shared her story with a **sheriff’s** deputy, explaining that she had been living in Asia and was told she could come to the United States to work and send money back to her family.

She was working seven days a week in a local Chinese restaurant to pay back her travel expenses, when, Dudley said, the individual who had brought her to the United States said “you can pay us back sooner if you have sex with a few people.”

“They were initially labor trafficked and then they became prostitutes,” Dudley said.

Whenever the woman and others like her tried to get out of their predicament, they were told their families back home would be killed.

Dudley’s office also began to realize that it wasn’t just people from other countries who were being trafficked in Santa Barbara County. The victims were homegrown, too.

Trafficking can include sex trafficking, in which someone commits a commercial sex act by force, fraud or coercion, or in which the person isn’t 18 years old.

The biggest problem the task force is seeing now is sex trafficking of domestic minors, meaning Americans under age 18, usually girls.

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Girls from Oxnard, Los Angeles, Bakersfield and even Santa Barbara were involved in local sex trafficking, Dudley said.

Dudley approached Rheinschild, who already was aware of the problem, and suggested she create a task force, which quickly grew to dozens of members.

“It became pretty clear to me that there was already a sex trafficking problem in our community,” Rheinschild said. “You’re talking about a population of girls who have an abusive history, have been in foster care or group homes.”

They also can be associated with gangs or with people who are grooming them for prostitution and begin by forging a relationship with them based on their vulnerabilities.

“They say ‘I love you, I’m going to do this for you, come with me,’ and then it evolves from there,” Rheinschild explained.

Although human trafficking is the biggest category of organized crime in the world, the extent of its presence locally is alarming. Within her work, Rheinschild noted, she felt she had a good handle on what was going on in the community. When she began looking closer at the issue, she said, “I was blown away.”

Rheinschild learned that girls will arrive in Santa Barbara County with a pimp, who will post an ad on a website with a cell phone number.

“They’ll just take calls for a couple of days and roll in and roll out,” she said.

Santa Barbara is a desirable location because it’s a wealthy community, a travel destination, and has a relatively small law enforcement jurisdiction, she said.

Dudley said the people in charge of the girls are a mixture of locals and out-of-towners who move up and down California, often stopping where there are large events like conventions.

If it were up to Rheinschild, the word “prostitution” wouldn’t be part of the discussion. Although it initially might look as if the girls themselves made the decision to participate, she said, “10 times out of 10, it’s this really manipulative web of someone who’s controlling the money, movement, who they talk to.”

Girls can be in charge of recruiting new girls from within foster and group homes, and there’s a highly organized system of hierarchy. Rheinschild said one of her cases involved a pimp who was in charge of 60 different girls, all of whom are from the United States.

Many times, the victims will start to have **Stockholm syndrome**.


“They start to identify their pimp as someone they care about and want to protect,” she said. “They perceive the pimp as their boyfriend and protector.”

Many of the young women are addicted to drugs or come from abusive backgrounds, vulnerabilities that can make them a target.

Having access to money is hard to tear away from, and “they think I can’t go back to high school,” Rheinschild said.

The girls rarely get any of the money that they’re making; instead, they’re more

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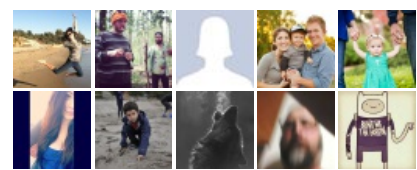
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likely to see it in the form of gifts, like new purses and clothes, she said.

Dudley said many of the girls get on law enforcement’s radar because they’re perpetrators. She said law enforcement may have picked them up for soliciting sex or drugs or stealing or selling things to pawn shops, and then, under questioning, officers may find out they’re being trafficked.

“We don’t prosecute children who are crime victims,” Dudley said, which presents a dilemma, because they’re often released from custody only to find themselves immediately being trafficked again.

“There are pimps waiting around the corner for them when they get out,” she said, adding that there are virtually no county services for such children.

On the task force’s wish list is to create a safe place for victims to turn their lives around.

“Otherwise, they will be trafficked again,” Dudley said. “They’ll be a victim, and many of them will end up dead. It’s black and white.”

Severe trauma and addiction also complicate things. Even if victims have a place to go, they may run from help, so adding mental health and medical treatment are also key.

Getting involved with law enforcement and teaching officers how to ask the right questions also is important, Nicola said. For example, an officer who picks up a girl for another crime could ask questions and find out that she’s being trafficked and connect her to a counselor at the [Santa Barbara Rape Crisis Center](#).

“You have to have a victim-centered approach and be trauma informed,” Rheinschild said.

Neighboring counties are also looking to Santa Barbara County to see what’s working locally.


A high-functioning court just for girls within the juvenile court system, all front-line law enforcement trained to ask the right questions about trafficking, a program running out of juvenile hall stabilizing kids are “three big dreams we have,” Dudley said of the task force.

“It’s really getting the community to focus on the problem and the individual one at a time,” Nicola said. “That’s the goal.”


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**tarracali** · 10 days ago

This article is just another chance for Joyce Dudley to pretend she is actually doing something important. I have never heard of a prosecution in Santa Barbara County of anyone involved in enslaving another human being, which is what "human trafficking" really is. If this really is a problem Dudley is doing a lousy job of convicting the alleged perps. Any person aged 18 or older working as a whore/gigolo in this county is doing so on their own free will. Any person pimping a person under the age of 18 is committing child sexual abuse, not "human trafficking". While pimping a minor is a serious crime I just want to remind everyone that prostitution is legal in Nevada where it is controlled and has been proven to not lead to increases in crime.

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**Kathleen** · 10 days ago

When I was 19, three middle eastern men frequented the store where I worked. They were particularly focused on wooing me and Jasmine, a 17 year old part-time sales clerk. They brought us flowers, bought gifts (which I refused) and repeatedly enticed both of us to go out with them. . These men were all at least 20 years older. I cautioned Jasmine to stay away from them but she was taken in by a man named "Walid". One day "Walid" showed up at the store with a car, he said he bought for Jasmine. She ran outside squealing and happy. I will never forget the smirk he shot me as he walked out behind her, the other two, who never revealed their names, were in a car behind "her new car". I watched as she drove away with "Walid" in the passenger seat, the second car close behind. She never returned. I called her parents who reported her disappearance to the police. A month later the news reported a number of young girls disappearing and four Middle Eastern men reported to have been involved. The reporter said the name "Walid Farud" is suspect of kidnapping young women into sex slavery. I am 55 now and I often think of what might have happened to young Jasmine and how I narrowly escaped her fate. Human trafficking is a plague but prevention starts with teaching our children not to be vulnerable. I have heard, from first hand witnesses, that Wealthy American men and politicians who frequent the Philippines for the sole purpose of having sex with girls who range from age 11 - 15 because it is legal. As long as this disgusting practice is propagated without firm punishment, it will never end.

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**normajeana** → Kathleen · 10 days ago

They could just as easily have kidnapped her to marry her off to someone in the Middle East- so, perhaps we ought to abolish marriage to protect vulnerable women from being kidnapped and forced into marriages to strangers. The best way to help victims is to stop prosecuting those who are not victims and not predators.

Having sex with minors is an entirely different subject from sex work. And it is wrong for priests to have sex with young altar boys, wrong for teachers to have sex with their students, wrong for the boyfriend of a child's mother to have sex with the child. And since the GOVERNMENT itself reports that 96% of child predators are known to their victims, surely we ought to pay as much attention to those predators as you and your fellow prostitution abolitionists wish to pay to the non violent, non abusive clients, employers and associates of adult sex workers, maybe?

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**normajeana** · 10 days ago

The best way to help any of those REAL victims of human trafficking is to decriminalize consenting adult commercial sex. Despite what the media and the 'victim pimps' tell the public, the vast majority of sex workers are adult and consent. We have chosen sex work for as many reasons as there are stars in the sky. Some of us love the work, others hate it, but find that it still meets their financial needs much better than working at McDonalds or as a secretary being sexually harassed by their boss.

The cost of making arrests of consenting adults could more than cover expenses for helping real victims of violence- like the 346,830 REPORTED violent rapes and sexual assaults in 2012 (nationwide), but because resources are scarce, the police managed to apprehend a mere 4.5% of alleged rapists (15,591).

Many people ask how the police can tell the difference between a victim of sex trafficking and someone who is NOT a victim- well, if they cannot tell the difference between a woman who was raped and one who was not, they they ought not be in law enforcement in the first place.

As for child victims, the 2001 report "The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children

[see more](#)

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**Pete** · 10 days ago

I was so pleased to see this movement and promise to clean up the use of young women forced to act unlawfully and pursue prostitution against their will is hopeful, and refreshing. They're lots of stones to turn, and lots of worms to find when the stones are turned over. I hope District Attorney Dudley, and her task force get positive results and convictions, sending a strong message that human trafficking of any kind will not be tolerated in Santa Barbara County.

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**normajeana** → **Pete** · 10 days ago

Why is child sexual exploitation at the hands of those who are NOT buying the services of children tolerated? Why does the 96% of all child sexual exploitation not generate the kind of 'intolerance' that consenting adult commercial sex does? How many actual sex workers do you know who were forced into prostitution? Because I have been a sex worker rights activist for the past 32 years, since I left my HORRIBLE job working for the LAPD to become a call girl- and I must say that I know thousands and thousands of sex workers around the world- those who work on the street to those who earn \$5,000 in an evening... and the majority of us are NOT forced into prostitution. That is a lie of the prostitution abolitionists from the left and the right, whose political agenda is to 'end the demand' for commercial sexual services, despite the evidence that NOTHING is going to stop those who wish to engage in consenting adult commercial sex- neither the buyer or the seller. And all these laws and nonsense about 'sex trafficking' just harm those whom the abolitionists claim to want to help.

I suggest that anyone who truly cares about victims of sexual abuse, start crusading against those who are actually doing it- the 96% of all predators of children are someone whom the child knows and trusts.

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### WHO CAN'T KEEP THEIR HANDS OFF MINORS

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**Zuma7** · 10 days ago

People in SantaBarbara will go into denial....the cancer is spreading into your city, you just don't want to believe it. Take a good hard look at what is happening around you.

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**normajeana** → Zuma7 · 10 days ago

The 'cancer' is the lies being spread about 'sex trafficking' and NOT sex work- why not work with sex workers to decriminalize consenting adult commercial sex so that there are resources to help the real victims, including those who are forced into domestic servitude (which is the NUMBER ONE destination for victims of HUMAN trafficking)? OR how about the 346,830 victims who reported the violent rapes and sexual assaults they experienced in 2012, but only 15,591 alleged rapists were apprehended- and we do not have any idea how many of them went to trial, were convicted and sentenced to prison. But if you think that it is MORE appropriate to have the police squander scarce resources to pursue, apprehend, prosecute and punish the non violent, non abusive clients, employers and associates of adult women who have, for whatever reason, chosen to engage in sex work, then it is people like you who are the cancer.

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