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Human trafficking is targeted in Arizona

Law enforcement, non-profit groups aim to raise awareness

by **JJ Hensley** - Feb. 20, 2011 12:00 AM
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Human trafficking is not human smuggling.

But law enforcement and civic groups say it is a problem nationwide, and more Arizonans will hear that message as experts try to increase public awareness of the problem.

What is it? Simply put, forcing people against their will to work for others' profit. It could be a prostitute walking the streets for a pimp. It could be a cowering immigrant toiling in a sweatshop in a state of indentured servitude.

A massive effort to alter public perception of the nature and extent of the problem is under way. But it is complicated by the fact that human trafficking is often intertwined with - and hard to distinguish from - the more commonly recognized problems of illegal immigration and prostitution.

Many victims are like "Chantel Rice," a young Phoenix woman who became a prostitute at 16 at the behest of her boyfriend and ended up working the streets of several West Coast cities, moving up to Phoenix strip clubs before pulling out of her downward spiral.

There Rice discovered she was not alone.

"A lot of the girls either started dancing or seeing clients outside the clubs at a young age, like 15, 16, 17," Rice said. "It's really sad, and all too common at this point."

The Arizona Republic has agreed to use Rice's pseudonym rather than her real name in order to protect her identity. Police, attorneys and advocates hope they can persuade the public to recognize girls like Rice as trafficking victims rather than as prostitutes, hastening efforts to identify and help them.

That new view of an old problem is gaining currency in unlikely places around the Valley - student groups, churches, even Girl Scout troops.

Even so, public sentiment is slow to change because:

- Clearly defining the problem is difficult. Most evidence is largely anecdotal, and years of inconsistent data collection makes it tough to quantify.
- The victims themselves are often unwilling to seek help or identify themselves as victims, let alone cooperate with law-enforcement agents trying to jail their alleged oppressors.
- Law enforcement and the general public can sometimes view the victims as criminals rather than people needing help.

Faced with such complacency, advocates have taken to delivering a message with shock value: that girls as young as 13 are apt to be picked up at shopping malls and thrust into a life of prostitution.

While there are cases to illustrate that alarming message - Phoenix detectives say they've seen victims as young as 8 - the reality is more complicated.

Identifying the victims

Identifying victims, particularly minors, can be frustrating for law enforcement. Without proper training, they often do not recognize signs of involuntary servitude. Instead, they see victims as runaways, prostitutes or the working poor.

And that's how trafficking victims are taught to think of themselves - as isolated and dependent tools at someone else's disposal, unable to fend for

themselves and unlikely to find any help. That powerful psychology is how a pimp controls a young prostitute - not so much with guns as with head games.

When police do identify victims, they are not always cooperative.

"Many times we get a juvenile in custody for the first time, and it's 'F-you cops,' " said Phoenix police Sgt. Clay Sutherlin of the Phoenix Police Department's human-trafficking task force.

In recent years, police have focused more time on getting girls to speak frankly. They've also focused on getting others in law enforcement to view the girls as human-trafficking victims instead of simply as prostitutes. That victim-focused approach is starting to pay off, with more girls going into diversion programs and more police officers making sure they have a chance to get there.

"Even our biggest, toughest vice detectives, they're on board," Sutherlin said.

As police perspectives change, advocates say the next steps are to educate the public and align state laws with federal statutes that target traffickers.

But hurdles remain.

With indentured-servitude cases, for example, authorities often don't know they have a trafficking case until the victim winds up in trouble somewhere else. Like everything smuggled through Arizona, indentured workers or sex slaves don't necessarily know either their final destinations or what lies ahead for them.

If stopped in Arizona, they might not identify themselves as victims of anything. It's only when they get where they're going and are pressed into service that they realize their predicament, said Matt Allen, special agent in charge of Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Arizona.

"All of a sudden, the person who is being smuggled doesn't become a trafficking victim until they get to Detroit or wherever," Allen said.

If victims do not recognize themselves as such, it is harder for police to identify and help them.

Amira Birger, 25, a former teen prostitute, never crossed paths with police in her two years in the sex trade. It took years before she recognized herself as a trafficking victim.

Her plight began at age 16 when a friend took Birger to a swingers club. A day later, she was taken to the apartment of a man they met at the club. Then she was shuffled to another home where she was forced to sleep behind a couch for two weeks without showering or changing clothes.

Birger said her way out from behind the couch was to have sex with men at her pimp's direction, and she moved on to perform sex acts in a massage parlor near 11th Street and Indian School Road.

"A year ago, if someone asked me if I was trafficked, I would have said, 'No,' because I really felt like I was a prostitute," she said. "Then I read one of the girls' stories (about a trafficking victim) and I was like, 'Whoa, that sounds like me.' "

Trafficking statistics

No one is sure how many victims like Birger there are. There are few hard numbers to prove what is now largely anecdotal.

Authorities conservatively estimate there are at least 100,000 teen sex-trafficking victims in the U.S. at any one time.

The Maricopa County Attorney's Office, which annually handles more than 34,000 criminal cases, said only 36 were submitted for prosecution under Arizona's trafficking statutes between 2005 and 2011.

Allegations against a 20-year-old Phoenix man, Al Green IV, demonstrate the problem of relying on statistics to show the impact of trafficking. Phoenix police claim Green complimented a girl at a bus stop and convinced her to become his girlfriend - a common tool for traffickers to insert themselves into a victim's life.

Once in the relationship, Green threatened the girl's family and forced her into prostitution in Phoenix and California, according to police records. Green was arrested in October and charged with five felonies, including kidnapping and transporting a person for prostitution. While his case mirrored some of the worst-case scenarios cited by anti-trafficking advocates, Green was not charged under any of three state statutes designed to prosecute traffickers.

Green's case will never show up in trafficking statistics. And because cities and states identify and treat victims differently, the patchwork of crime classifications makes it impossible to crunch and compare statistics.

For such reasons, reliance on the few statistics available can be risky, said former U.S. Sen. Linda Smith of Washington, who founded Shared Hope International, which crusades for law enforcement to take a unified approach to sex-trafficking prosecutions.

Smith conceded the lack of meaningful data makes her campaign more difficult.

"If we had 100,000 slaves anywhere, we would be marching in the streets . . . if we really believed it," she said.

Awareness efforts

Police and prosecutors largely rely on non-governmental organizations to heighten public awareness and deal with the aftermath, particularly when the focus is victim rehabilitation.

Because sex trafficking has the highest public profile, its victims get the most attention from non-profit groups. These organizations, which vary in size and funding, are hosting more activities than ever in the Valley.

- On Thursday, the Girl Scouts' Arizona Cactus-Pine Council hosts a conference called "Human Trafficking: Keeping Arizona's Girls Safe," focusing on prevention, identification and rehabilitation.

- This week, Catholic Charities will host "Immersion Experience," in which participants have the opportunity to walk through the lives of sex-trafficking victims.

- Smith soon plans to release a report card detailing how well Arizona's anti-trafficking statutes match up with other state and federal laws, and how Arizona can increase prosecutions.

- Streetlight, a Phoenix-based charity that will house sex-trafficking victims, will host dozens of upcoming fundraising, education and outreach events that include concerts, poker tournaments and prayer groups.

- Janet Olson, who runs the Natalie's House shelter, this spring plans to open a new eight-bed shelter in the West Valley for 11- to 17-year-old girls who have been sexually exploited. Olson has worked on the project for seven years, building the home with the help of volunteers.

Girl Scouts' focus on education about trafficking is in line with curriculum focusing on other forms of domestic violence, said Barb Strachan, a Girl Scouts program manager. It falls at the end of a continuum of violence against women and girls that the Girl Scouts is committed to changing, she said.

"Most people look at sexual exploitation and prostitution as a choice. It's lack of choice," Strachan said. "By the time it gets to street-level prostitution, you're looking at a broken, beat-up woman with no soul. If we cannot reach them as children, it's even more difficult."

Anti-trafficking goal

Advocates increasingly focus on images of young girls being snatched from shopping malls and coerced into a sordid street life to jar a largely unsympathetic public into caring about the problem.

Stories like those clearly exist. But girls in Phoenix typically enter prostitution between 14 to 15 years old, and far more often victims have had troubled family lives as well, sometimes suffering abuse or dysfunction.

That does not diminish their status as victims, but it does reduce the public's sympathy, Smith noted, and gives perpetrators cover.

"Making her 'kind of a criminal' means he's not as culpable," she said.

The ultimate goal for anti-trafficking groups is to prompt a sea change in public thinking. If they succeed, the men - fathers, soldiers, business executives - arrested in Phoenix last week during an underage-prostitution sting will be viewed not simply as johns, but as trafficking co-conspirators.

