



Analysis: Despite reputation, no proof Portland is a hub for child sex trafficking

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Nikole Hannah-Jones, The Oregonian

By

NO IMAGE



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Jamie Francis/The Oregonian

A man and 14-year-old girl are questioned by police after they saw him pick up the girl along Southeast 82nd Avenue. The girl, a freshman in high school, told police it was her first day working the streets and that the man had agreed to pay her for sex. The episode illustrates a real problem but one difficult to track. Though Portland has gained a reputation as a national center for child sex trafficking, no one really knows if the problem is worse here than elsewhere because so little evidence is available.

Portland Mayor Sam Adams stood before reporters and officials in November to decry how Portland has become "**stained**" as a national hub for juvenile sex trafficking.

As he spoke, aides passed out a news release with a startling statistic. Portland police, it read, see an average of two cases of child sex trafficking each week.

The problem: It wasn't true.

Sgt. Mike Geiger, supervisor of the Portland police sex crimes unit, said police don't track such statistics.

"I am not sure where that is coming from," he said. "That's an unreliable number."

It turns out the belief that Portland is a hub is unreliable, too.

In the span of two short years, the city known as one of the nation's most livable has become a magnet for national media reporting on child sex trafficking. With cameras rolling on 82nd Avenue last year, **Dan Rather** dubbed the city "**Pornland**" in a documentary. "**Nightline**" declared Portland the "epicenter for child prostitution," and "**World News With Diane Sawyer**" called the city a "hotbed of sex trafficking."

But as hundreds gather in Portland this weekend for the third-annual **Northwest Conference Against Trafficking**, with talks by **U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden** and actress **Daryl Hannah**, an examination by The Oregonian reveals that no

one really knows if the problem in Portland is any worse than anywhere else.

Quick Take: Is Portland a hub for child sex trafficking?

Oregonian reporter Nikole Hannah-Jones talks about her story on Portland's reputation as a sex trafficking hub of children.

While a single case of a child in the sex trade is tragic, little data is kept locally on the depth of the problem, and the figures cited nationally crumble under scrutiny.

"We look at all the numbers that have been put out from various sources," said **David Finkelhor**, director of the **Crimes Against Children Research Center** at the **University of New Hampshire**, "and they are all just extremely speculative."

FBI stings

So how did Portland get a reputation it doesn't deserve?

It started when Portland joined 28 other cities in the FBI's Innocence Lost stings against child sex trafficking in February 2009. **Portland was participating for the first time**, so when police found seven underage prostitutes - second only to Seattle's 10 -- it caught the media's attention.

The story proved too good to pass up, and it goes something like this: This picturesque city's rampant strip clubs and permissive attitude toward sex allow wide-eyed suburban girls to be swept into prostitution. Portland's location on the Interstate 5 corridor makes it a prime location to move girls up and down the West Coast.

Fuzzy data and definitions -- lumping under the "trafficked" label not only girls forced into the trade and moved place to place but runaways who sell sex on their own -- fueled the frenzy.

But neither the federal government nor the state of Oregon track child sex trafficking or prostitution. Multnomah County and Portland police don't either. The only local data come from the state Department of Human Services, which tallies Multnomah County youths whom someone reported as being involved in sex for sale.

Even **Oregon FBI** spokeswoman Beth Anne Steele said the stings were never meant for city-to-city comparisons or to determine the prevalence of trafficking.

For one thing, stings go down differently in different cities. They may last one day in some cities, three in others. Police find girls as part of months-long investigations in some places, and find them online the same night in others.

"We try to stay away from rankings," Steele said. "It is a horrible problem that lots of cities share, and Portland is no worse or better than others."

"In the public eye"

Another **FBI sting in October 2009** produced just four girls in Portland. But the storyline stuck, in part because advocates pushed it to draw money and support to their cause. National media arrived, and politicians clamored to do something.

Multnomah County cited the first sting and the city's legal sex industry to land one of three \$500,000 federal grants to fight the commercial sexual exploitation of minors, including setting up a system to track cases. In its application, the county said it's "particularly attractive to traffickers," leading to a "particularly high prevalence of sexual exploitation of children."

Multnomah County Commissioner **Diane McKeel** put sex trafficking at the top of her agenda and was a major force behind a **sex trafficking bill by Wyden**, expected to pass this year, that would provide up to \$7 million to local governments that show they have a problem and an additional \$900,000 for a Portland shelter.

The sting prompted **Soroptimist International**, a women's advocacy organization, to start the annual conference here in 2009, said conference chairwoman Michelle Bart.

"We knew we couldn't raise money if people didn't know about the issue," Bart said. "We are empowering journalists to have a voice and keep this in the public eye."

Bart speaks at length and with passion about young victims forced to sell sex. She was with a group that played the Diane Sawyer piece -- in which a reporter falsely states that 82nd Avenue holds more than 100 strip clubs and massage parlors-- for the board of commissioners last week.

"More than 200,000 youth have been sexually exploited each year," Bart said. "I believe the numbers that have been reported aren't high enough."

That raises perhaps the most frequently cited number around child sex trafficking -- that 200,000 to 300,000 U.S. youths are at risk of sexual exploitation. The U.S. Department of Justice lists the number on its website. Local law enforcement agencies, McKeel's office and others have repeated it, and everyone from UNICEF, CNN, The Oregonian and the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children have printed it.

The figure is problematic on two fronts. One, advocates often cite it as the number of children in the sex trade -- not just the number at risk of sexual exploitation. Worse, the figure is based on faulty statistics from a **2001 University of Pennsylvania study** by Richard Estes and Neil Weiner.

The study took data from an earlier study by Finkelhor, the University of New Hampshire researcher, that counted

the number of runaway youths. The Pennsylvania study's authors then came up with a percentage of these kids they believed to be at risk of sexual exploitation of any kind based on interviews with fewer than 300 teens. It was, Finkelhor said, a guess.

This study is also the source for another commonly cited statistic -- that the average age that a child enters prostitution is 12 to 14. Finkelhor has created a fact sheet disputing these and other false child prostitution figures.

"If there are numbers that make it sound large, people want to use it because it is much more problematic to tell people we really don't know," he said. "I don't think there are credible numbers on this." Finkelhor also said no studies have proved a link between Portland's legal sex industry and its illegal one.

Some still stand by the national figures. "I am comfortable with the numbers," McKeel said.

Others have grown wary of the spotlight.

"Portland is not the hub," said Portland police spokeswoman Lt. Kelli Sheffer. Sheffer said that since the rush of national stories, she has "declined any other stories from major publications on trafficking." She said the number of adults arrested on suspicion of trafficking is "very low," though she did not provide statistics despite repeated requests.

Esther Nelson, case manager for exploited youths at the **Sexual Assault Resource Center** in Portland, said where the city ranks is a good question but shouldn't be the focus. Nelson's organization received some of the grant money Multnomah County won.

"I don't think any city that is looking can't say they have a problem," Nelson said. "But this is a problem (here). It could be anyone's daughter."

Contrast with Seattle

The facts that are known also do little to bolster Portland's image as the epicenter.

Seattle has counted more youths involved in the sex trade than Portland has and found more underage sex workers in the FBI stings. But it hasn't garnered the same attention.

"We're on the same (I-5) corridor," said Sister Susan Francois, anti-trafficking coordinator for the **Intercommunity Peace & Justice Center** in Seattle. "Whatever problems Portland has, we will also have."

Multnomah County began tracking reports in 2008 of children believed to have been involved in the sex trade -- whether they'd been trafficked, pimped or worked on their own.

Looking at data going back to 2007, officials have identified 165 youths who fit that definition, and currently have 69 open cases, said Miriam Green, community services manager for the **Oregon Department of Human Services** in Multnomah County. All the youths came in contact with an authority in the county, but some came from other parts of the state.

By contrast, the city of Seattle tallied 238 children involved in the sex trade in 2007 alone. And in Multnomah County, child abuse calls -- 2,500 a month -- far outnumber those on minors in the sex trade.

But Green offered the county's data with a caveat: "These numbers are only as good as a child (involved in the sex trade) coming to our attention, us recognizing it and making the mandated report," she said.

Steele, the FBI spokeswoman, said that where Portland ranks is irrelevant.

"Anytime you are trafficking in young children, any society should be disturbed by that," she said. "No child should be subjected to this, and no child should ever have to sell themselves on the street."

Meanwhile, a similar FBI sting in November barely made a blip in the media. Law enforcement officers found 16 underage girls in Seattle. In Portland, over three nights, they found three.

-- **Nikole Hannah-Jones**; On **Twitter**

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