

Florida's Human Trafficking Problem

By Bhaktirani Price

Florida is one of the leading states in the nation for human trafficking, ranking third for calls into the National Human Trafficking Hotline.

According to (<http://myfloridalegal.com/> ([Links to an external site.](#)), Florida law defines human trafficking as a form of modern day slavery. The Legislature finds that victims of human trafficking are subjected to force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of sexual exploitation or forced labor. Victims can be young children, teenagers and adults.

The National Human Trafficking Hotline reported that there were 866 contacts and 466 human trafficking cases reported in Florida last year.

Professor Roberto Potter, who's a criminal justice professor and program director for the Center for the Study of Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery at the University of Central Florida, says, "We have so many events in Florida. There is a belief that traffickers follow events and set themselves up quickly around sporting events, business conventions, and so forth. We're such a big draw for those kinds of things and we believe that is one of the things that contributes to our trafficking issues in the state."

The NHTH is the main resource used to measure the impact of human trafficking from state to state, but the numbers could be higher than estimated because these statistics are dependent on what's being reported.

Potter explains some factors as to why the actual numbers could be different than what is being recorded, "One of the biggest problems we have is that we don't have good measures of activity. So, if you look at filings for court prosecutions, some counties are going up and some counties aren't even registering anything because they tend to treat it as some other type of crime to make prosecution easier."

For a variety of reasons, victims don't report their own trafficking. It's up to individuals, advocacy groups, and law enforcement to report these crimes.

Professor Terry Coonan, the executive director of the Florida State University Center for the Advancement of Human Rights and associate professor of criminology at Florida State University, says, "They either don't see themselves as victims or they don't feel safe doing so."

He adds that stigma against immigrants plays a role in low rates of reporting. "One of the downsides is the current anti-immigrant sentiment that's being very much exacerbated around the country. Trafficking victims are far less likely to self-identify or to call law enforcement out of fear of deportation," he said.

Human rights advocates believe promoting awareness, debunking common misconceptions, and changing policies will bring us closer to a solution.

Potter believes common misconceptions can come from what we see onscreen. He refers to the popular "Taken" movie series as an example. "I think the thing we want to

really get away from is the notion that most of this is somehow a big stranger abduction sort of thing and really start looking at how home grown it is.”

Coonan also had something to say about the movie series. “Forget everything you learned about human trafficking from the movie “Taken” because that’s not the most typical scenario. We don’t have to worry about our daughters going to France for the summer. What we should be worried about is who our daughters are in touch with through social media on their cell phones. That’s where a lot of the recruiting is now happening.”

He expressed his hope for future policies. “I hope that our Florida legislature at some point passes a law that would require training on human trafficking for middle school and high school students. The bill has been in front of the legislature and has never passed. My feeling is if we train our kids about HIV and AIDS, and the dangers of tobacco and alcohol, why aren’t we training them about human trafficking? I think our health curriculum would be the logical place for that to happen.”

Professor Jani Nairruti, an associate professor of social work at Florida Gulf Coast University, an advocate of women and children rights, and a producer of human trafficking documentaries, wants the media to report on the issue the right way.

Nairruti believes that media needs to do a better job at creating news stories on human trafficking. “Journalists will just go to anybody they can get ahold of trying to get a story or a statement. I know of faculty and community members who have little to no information in terms of the depth of the issue and they make really interesting statements sometimes. This isn’t advertising or marketing. This is public service. There is a need for research.” she said

She mentions how victims can seek help. “This year, the state of Florida has mandated training for health care professionals which is an excellent move. I recommend reaching out to the school nurse or the E. R. nurse and ask for them to accompany you to the radiology room, to the bathroom or to show you where the bathroom is. Something like that. That would be a time hopefully, where the trafficker is not present. A relatively non-threatening situation where you could actually disclose and share your story.”

If you suspect that you or someone you know is a victim of human trafficking, call the Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888 or text 233733.