

Girls in foster care are particularly vulnerable

“In recent years, a pipeline from the foster care system to trafficking has gained attention...girls who grow up in the instability of the child welfare system, particularly those placed in multiple homes, are “vulnerable to the manipulation of traffickers who promise to love and care for them. Indeed, some traffickers purposely troll for youth in certain group homes because they are aware of this vulnerability.”

13 sex trafficking statistics that explain the enormity of the global sex trade

Cara Kelly | July 30, 2019



Law enforcement and prosecutors explain the difficulties in bringing charges - and the hurdles in convicting traffickers. Jarrad Henderson, USA TODAY

Sex trafficking is a massive, worldwide problem that can take many forms.

One of the most prolific: America’s multibillion-dollar illicit massage industry.

The prominence of illegal parlors and their ties to sex trafficking drew national attention in February with the [arrest of New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft](#) and hundreds of other men who police say solicited sex acts in Florida spas. In March, [Martin County Sheriff Will Snyder told USA TODAY](#) that the spas involved had “all the trappings of human trafficking.”

Law enforcement has ramped up it’s [sic] tough-on-trafficking language in recent years, touting [raids on illicit spas](#) as proof of crackdowns. Yet, a USA TODAY investigation into recent high-profile raids in Florida found the outcomes don’t match the rhetoric. Only one woman in the [raids that saw Kraft arrested](#) faces a charge related to trafficking. And in other

cases, USA TODAY found instances where business at sex spas returned to normal within months of police activity.

More: [Sex trafficking is behind the lucrative illicit massage business. Why police can't stop it.](#)

The exact number of sex trafficking victims forced to work in illicit massage parlors is unknown. But reporting methods and analysis have improved in recent years, and advocates and researchers largely agree that the problem is growing, to as many as 9,000 illicit spas in the U.S. alone.

“These places have really benefited from being underestimated for decades,” said Brad Myles, CEO of Polaris, a nonprofit that operates the [National Human Trafficking Hotline](#). “I think now there are certain communities finally kind of tapping into the reality that they’ve been underestimated and tapping into the enormity of the challenge.”

Here are 13 statistics that help explain the [scope of the problem](#).

1. There are more than 4 million victims of sex trafficking globally

A study from the United Nations’ [International Labour Organization](#) estimated 3.8 million adults and 1 million children were victims of [forced sexual exploitation in 2016](#) around the world.

2. 99% are women and girls

The vast majority of sex trafficking victims are women and girls, though men, boys, trans, intersex and nonbinary individuals can be victims as well. The International Labour Organization estimates that 99% of the adults and children forced into sexual exploitation in 2016 are female.

3. There is no official estimate of sex trafficking victims in the U.S.

The [State Department releases an annual report](#) on human trafficking with breakdowns for individual countries, though it is largely focused on government actions to address the trafficking and does not estimate the total number of victims. However, in its 2019 report, the State Department found the top three nations of origin for human trafficking victims were the United States, Mexico and the Philippines. It does not break that figure down for sex trafficking alone.

Further reading: [Sex trafficking, prostitution is anything but a 'victimless crime,' experts say](#)

Further reading: [From harmful fetishes to sex trafficking, Robert Kraft case highlights risks facing Asian women](#)

Polaris tracks the number of reports made to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, a figure often used by researchers. In 2018, it received 5,147 reported cases of human trafficking. Of those, 3,718 were related to sex trafficking.

4. 7 in 10 victims were exploited in Asia and the Pacific region

According to the International Labour Organization report, more than 70% of sex trafficking victims were located in Asia and the Pacific, compared with 14% in Europe and Central Asia and 4% in the Americas.

In illicit massage parlors in the U.S., the vast majority of reported trafficking victims are from China, with a notable number from the Fujian province in southeastern China. South Korea forms the second highest group.

5. 1 in 7 reported runaways in the U.S. in 2018 is likely a victim of child sex trafficking

In the U.S., sex trafficking victims include immigrants as well as American citizens. Though there is no official number, advocates and researchers say the number of domestic victims is high.

According to the [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#), 1 in 7 of the more than 23,500 runaways reported to the nonprofit organization were likely victims of child sex trafficking.

6. Girls in foster care are particularly vulnerable

In recent years, a pipeline from the foster care system to trafficking has gained attention.

A report from the Human Rights Project for Girls, Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality and Ms. Foundation for Women supports that finding. Titled [“The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline.”](#) the report found that girls who grow up in the instability of the child welfare system, particularly those placed in multiple homes, are “vulnerable to the manipulation of traffickers who promise to love and care for them. Indeed, some traffickers purposely troll for youth in certain group homes because they are aware of this vulnerability.”

7. Profits from forced sexual labor are estimated at \$99 billion worldwide

According to a 2014 report from the International Labour Organization on forced labor, commercial sexual exploitation accounted for two thirds of the profits from forced labor. And forced sex work commanded the highest profits per victim compared to other types of labor like domestic work.

8. Profits are highest per sex trafficking victim in developed economies

Though the number of victims is highest in Asia, the annual profits per victim were highest in developed countries because traffickers can charge more for sex acts. The International Labour Organization estimates annual rates of around \$80,000 per victim in developed countries and \$55,000 in the Middle East.

9. There are an estimated 9,000 illicit massage parlors across the U.S.

Polaris estimates that more than 9,000 illicit spas operate across America. In a [2017 report](#), the nonprofit found that illicit parlors are in business in every state – in suburban strip malls as well as big cities.

According to a 2014 report from the Urban Institute, the number of illicit parlors is growing and they're expanding beyond hubs on the East and West coasts.

10. Profits from illicit massage parlors are estimated at \$2.5 billion

In its report, Polaris calculated the total based on a national average of two women working at each illicit massage parlor, with an average of 12 men visiting each parlor a day spending \$60 per visit, based on commercial sex review boards.

Similar estimates were calculated by researchers who published a [2017 article in the Journal of Human Trafficking](#). Researchers found the industry brought in \$107 million annually in Houston, and extrapolated that figure to \$2.8 billion nationally.

11. Events like the Super Bowl increasingly are monitored for sex trafficking

Efforts to combat trafficking around major events have increased in recent years, [most notably around the Super Bowl](#).

"It's not necessarily about football or the NFL," Courtney Dow, an outreach coordinator for the Atlanta-based nonprofit Dream Center, told USA TODAY before Super Bowl LIII in January. "When groups of men get together, usually trafficking and exploitation increases."

In May, police arrested four men on human-trafficking-related charges following a [sting around the Kentucky Derby](#). Louisville Metro Police said those arrested were from out of town and had responded to online advertisements for sexual acts with minors.

Further reading: [Sex trafficking at Super Bowl LIII in Atlanta: Advocates, players fight against exploitation](#)

Further reading: [Police arrest 4 men accused of promoting human trafficking on Derby Day](#)

Advocates are split on whether events increase trafficking, however.

"We actually think that trafficking is a major issue 365 days a year," Miles said. "The same 20,000 pimps are moving around to where the action is."

12. Prosecutions of sex trafficking are down in the U.S.

The State Department's [2019 Trafficking in Persons Report](#) found the Department of Justice opened significantly fewer human trafficking investigations in 2018 compared to 2017, dropping from 783 to 657. It also reported significantly fewer prosecutions: 230, down from 282.

That holds true for cases specifically focused on sex trafficking. Of the prosecutions, 213 were for sex trafficking, down from 266 in 2017.

13. Victims are still arrested for crimes they were forced to commit by traffickers

The State Department's report found that at the state and local level, victims are still being arrested for crimes they're compelled to commit such as commercial sex work, including child victims.

This comes despite a push for "safe harbor" laws, passed in at least 34 states, which are meant to stop child sex trafficking victims from being prosecuted for prostitution and other charges related to commercial sex. Forty-four states have passed laws allowing survivors to seek a court order vacating, expunging or sealing convictions that resulted from acts traffickers forced them to commit.

Need help? See something?

The National Human Trafficking Hotline is confidential, toll-free and available 24/7 in more than 200 languages.

Call: 1-888-373-7888

Text: "BeFree" (233733)

Chat: humantraffickinghotline.org

Contributing: Ryan W. Miller, Nicquel Terry Ellis, Alia E. Dastagir

Highlighting added | Admin