

ORANGE COUNTY HUMAN TRAFFICKING TASK FORCE

2025 HUMAN TRAFFICKING VICTIM REPORT



9TH EDITION





MISSION

ORANGE COUNTY HUMAN TRAFFICKING TASK FORCE

The Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force (OCHTTF) is a multidisciplinary collaborative effort of law enforcement, victim services, prosecution, social services, NGOs, health care, faith-based organizations, and the community to combat human trafficking in Orange County, California. Since 2010, the Anaheim Police Department and Waymakers has continued to work in partnership to co-chair the OCHTTF. Today, this collaboration includes 13 lead agencies and 60 governmental and community partners to address the following areas:

- PROTECTION
- PROSECUTION
- PREVENTION





HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Human Trafficking is the deprivation of a person's liberty in the form of forced labor or commercial sex. It does not require any movement of the victim, and a trafficker may control the victim through the use of force, fear, duress, coercion, menace, or the threat of harm, or if the person exploited in the commercial sex act is under the age of 18.

Note: reference California PC 236.1 and federal 18 U.S.C. § 1590-1591 for legal definitions

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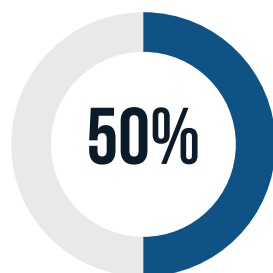


2023 & 2024 VICTIM DEMOGRAPHIC

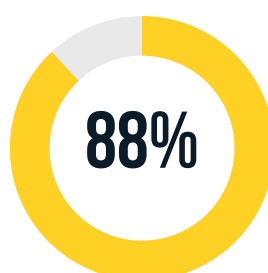
	Labor Trafficking	Sex Trafficking	Labor & Sex Trafficking	Total Victim
Female Victim	25	339	8	372
Female Minor	0	188	0	188
Female Adult	25	151	8	184
Male Victim	15	23	1	39
Male Minor	1	17	0	18
Male Adult	14	6	1	21
Total Victim	40	362	9	411

In 2023 and 2024, a total of 411 victims of human trafficking were assisted by the County of Orange Social Services Agency, The Salvation Army and Waymakers combined. This includes all victims of human trafficking: labor/sex trafficking, female/male, adult/minor, and foreign/U.S national. The combined data removed any duplication of numbers if a victim was assisted by more than one organization to provide more accuracy.

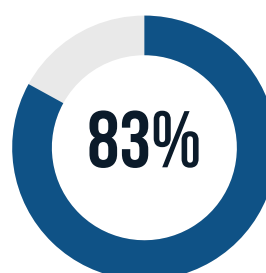
Minor Victims



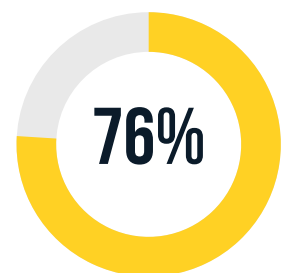
Sex Trafficking



U.S. Victims



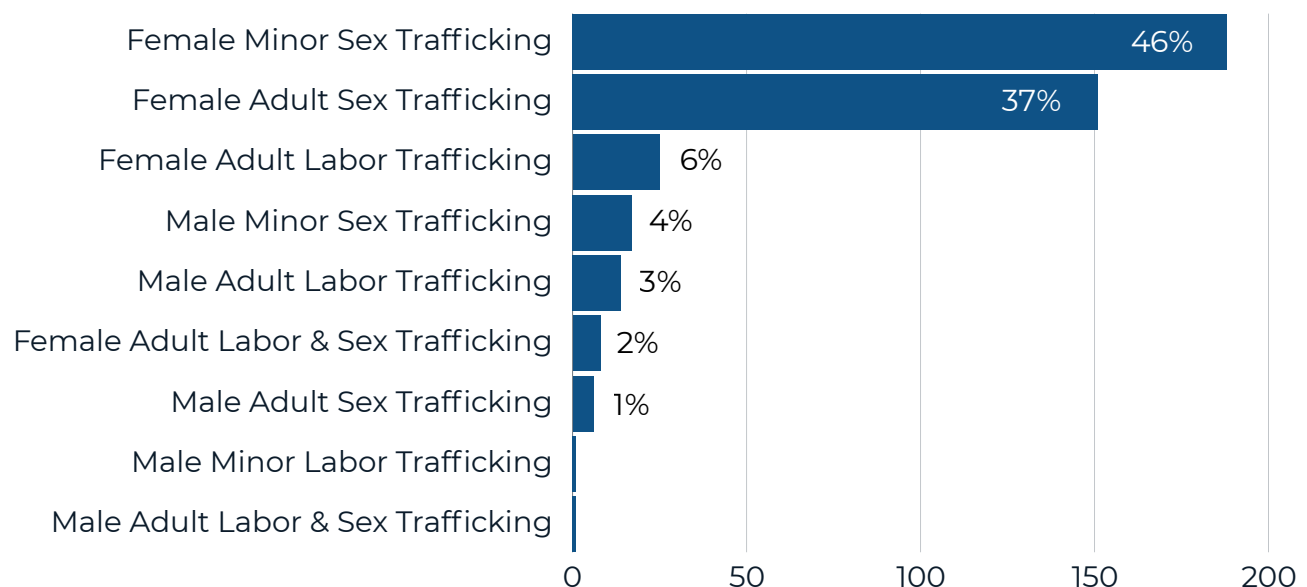
New Victims



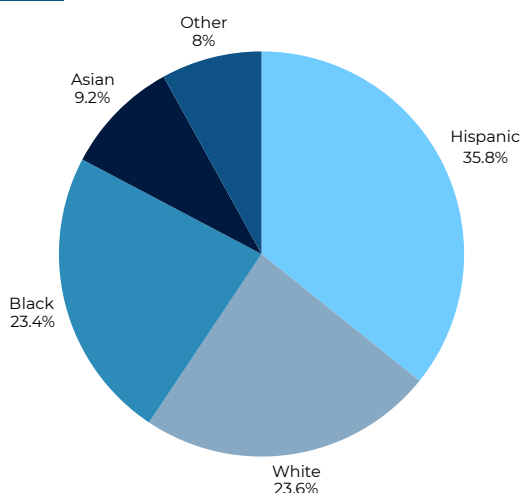


2023 & 2024 VICTIM DEMOGRAPHIC

The chart below shows the breakdown of the 411 victims of human trafficking by gender, age and type of trafficking who were assisted in 2023 and 2024.



RACE: ALL HUMAN TRAFFICKING VICTIMS



AGE: MINOR SEX TRAFFICKING VICTIMS

14 YEARS OLD AVERAGE AGE

The ages of the minor victims of exploitation and sex trafficking assisted in 2023 and 2024 ranged from 6 to 17 years old.



STORIES: SURVIVING TO THRIVING

Waymakers received a call from the National Human Trafficking Hotline about “Destiny” who escaped from her trafficker the day before and was wandering the streets. Her father moved out of state and no longer speaks to her. Her friends all use drugs. She was working on sobriety and wanted to stay away from people who use substances. Destiny suffers from PTSD and shelters have not worked for her in the past due to this condition. The on-call advocate arranged a two-night emergency hotel stay at a safe location in Orange County. At the time of the call Destiny was at the local Social Services office. The advocate offered a Lyft ride to the hotel, but she declined and chose to take the bus instead. Food was delivered in addition for help with clothes and information for shelters supporting human trafficking survivors longer-term. The next morning two other victim advocates met with Destiny in person to provide additional resources and began working on plans to support case management services.

“Maria” entered the United States when she was 8 years old to live with her father in Los Angeles. She struggled in her home life with an abusive stepmother, being in and out of foster care and an emotionally absent father. She was first trafficked in the 9th grade by an adult female neighbor. Maria developed a friendship with this neighbor and grew to trust her. Her neighbor offered her a babysitting job and other work. She was vulnerable and eager to be independent of her father and stepmother. Unbeknownst to Maria, her neighbor drove her to her first sex buyer and ended up under the neighbor’s control, trafficking her to different men for commercial sex. She was eventually able to escape, but not without the effects of trauma. She was trafficked a second time by a man she met online with whom she began a relationship. Her living situation was unstable and he offered her a place to stay. Moving in with him was not what Maria expected. There were other women living in the home, but they were not allowed to leave their bedrooms. Within two days of moving in Maria was forced into prostitution and had to walk Figueroa St. in Los Angeles or Holt Blvd. in Pomona, all night, every night. Maria’s trafficker locked her in the home when she was not working and there were men armed with guns watching the home. With the help of a woman in the home she was able to escape and took refuge at a friend’s house. She went to a shelter in Los Angeles and connected to Gems Uncovered for additional support. Out of fear of being found due to the location of the shelter Maria was referred to The Salvation Army ATS (Anti-Trafficking Services) in Orange County. At the ATS Guest House, Maria felt safe, at peace and received case management services. She completed her T-visa application, addressed her trauma in therapy, joined survivor support groups, focused on her educational goals, found and maintained employment, applied for human trafficking victim benefits through CalVCB, and built community again. Maria describes the ATS experience as “heaven on earth” and remains steadfast on her future goals.

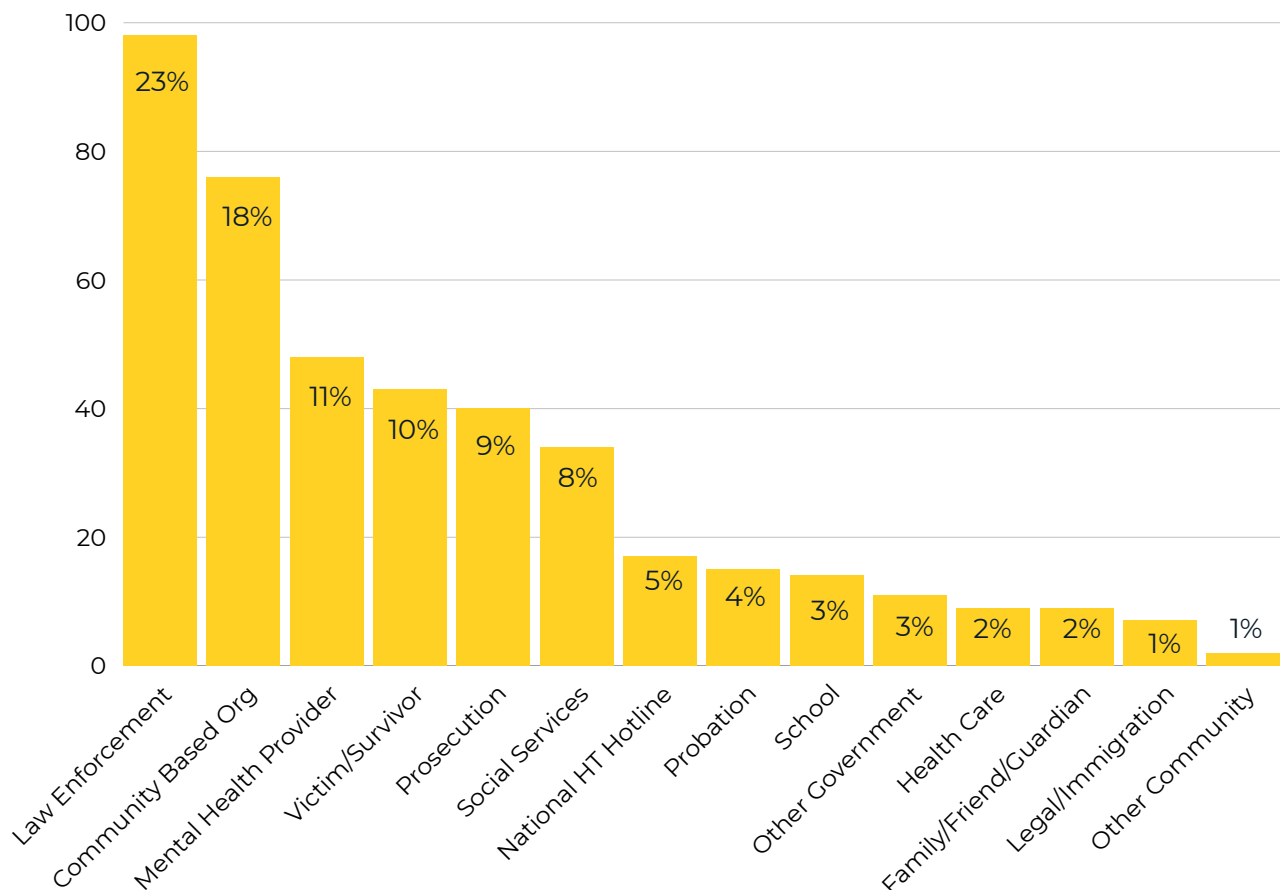


VICTIM ASSISTANCE REFERRALS

In 2023 and 2024, a total of 423 referrals for victim assistance were received.

50% Referred by government organizations

50% Referred by non-government organizations



The data is a combination of County of Orange Social Services Agency, The Salvation Army and Waymakers.



STORIES: SURVIVING TO THRIVING

“Anthony” is a mild mannered man in his 30s. He loves sports, his family, and to learn. He was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) in his early 20s which was the first crossroads that changed his life. Anthony’s partner, “Valerie”, is a confident and energetic woman in her 30s. She loves baking, cooking, traveling, and exploring new places. They finished their Bachelor’s degrees in Mexico and applied to work in the United States through a H-2B visa believing they were going through the correct process of entering the country legally to work. Anthony and Valerie worked on a pig farm in Ohio in harsh weather conditions, long hours and abuse.

When they arrived to the jobsite it was nothing like what was promised. They experienced the bitter cold with limited resources to get the right kind of clothing for the winter. The work hours were long, wages less than promised and they found out that their living space would not only be shared but payment for use of the space was taken out of their paycheck without prior notice or consent. Anthony ended up in the hospital a handful of times. Valerie experienced various levels of emotional abuse and sexual harassment.

They decided to flee to California where Valerie had family. After some time in California, they reached out the National Human Trafficking Hotline and was connected with The Salvation Army’s ATS (Anti-Trafficking Services) in Orange County. The Salvation Army’s ATS program was able to provide shelter at a safe home. An ATS case manager assisted with social services advocacy and resources for victims. They enrolled in school at the local community college to begin ESL classes. Their case was referred to the Public Law Center to assist with a T-visa application for victims of human trafficking. Anthony and Valerie were able to find employment, stable housing and moved out of the guest house to continue and thrive in their independent living in November 2024.

Anthony’s goal is to one day obtain a Master’s degree in biology to study MS. Valerie’s goal is to obtain a Master’s degree in social work or getting a law degree to help support other victims and survivors of human trafficking.





MISSING AND EXPLOITED CHILDREN

Between 2017 and 2024, there were 477 child victims of exploitation and trafficking identified and reported to the County of Orange Social Services Agency with data on the location of origin. 24%, or 1 out of every 4 of the victims were missing children from 21 counties outside of Orange County and 18 states outside of California. The majority of the cases involving children from outside of the county/state involved cases of child sex trafficking.

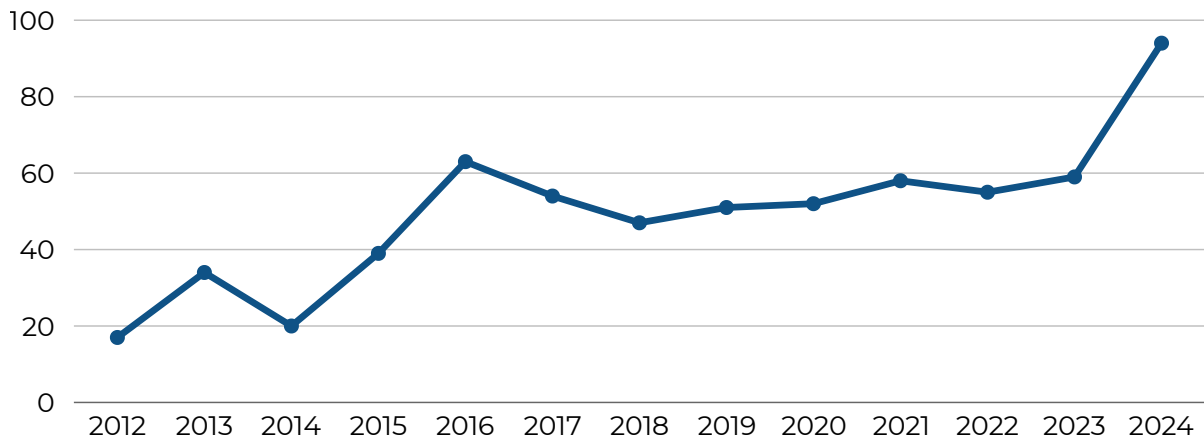




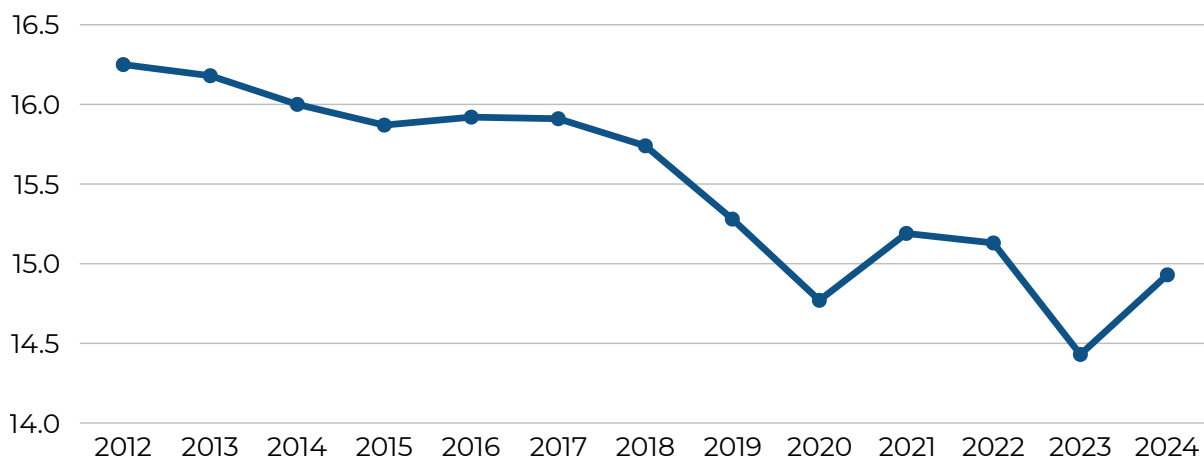
CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

The data collected between 2012 and 2024 of exploited minor victims shown in the following graphs are courtesy of a collaborative pilot project between the County of Orange Social Service Agency (SSA) and Dr. Jodi Quas at the University of California, Irvine, designed to improve understanding of exploitation and trafficking of minors in the county. Support for the pilot was provided by Orange County Board of Supervisors Vice Chair Katrina Foley, Fifth District. Social Service Agency (SSA); Unfounded reports excluded.

Number of Minor Victims Reported to SSA



Average Age of Minor Victims Reported to SSA





PROTECTION AND PROSECUTION

UNITED STATES VS. LESLIE ANTHONY BAILEY

In February 2022, Leslie Anthony Bailey, 33, of Wilmington, exchanged messages with a victim on a social media platform. The victim told Bailey she was in a treatment facility for fentanyl addiction and was experiencing withdrawal symptoms. Bailey offered to pick her up and provide her with fentanyl.

On February 5, Bailey picked the victim up from the facility, took her to buy fentanyl pills, then brought her to his then-residence in Long Beach, where he provided some of the fentanyl pills. The next day, Bailey drove the victim from his Long Beach home to an area in Anaheim that is known for prostitution. Bailey told the victim he expected her to engage sex acts for money and that she would provide him the money she earned from those acts. Bailey also told the victim he would provide more fentanyl to her after she completed the sex transactions. After the victim engaged in approximately four or five sex transactions, Bailey gave her more fentanyl pills and drove her back to his Long Beach residence.

On February 7, Bailey prevented the victim from leaving his home and threatened to beat her up if she attempted to leave again. Later that day, he again drove her to Anaheim to engage in prostitution, after which time he provided her with more fentanyl.

On February 8, the victim asked Bailey to drive her back to the drug treatment facility in Los Angeles. Although he promised her that he would do so, Bailey instead drove the victim to a remote area in the Angeles National Forest, ordered her out of the car, punched and kicked her, and then raped her. Ultimately, Bailey left her there and drove away.

Bailey further admitted that in March 2023 he used social media to recruit another victim to work for him as a prostitute. In March and April of 2023, this victim worked for Bailey as a prostitute in Los Angeles, Orange, and San Diego counties. Bailey admitted that at times, he used force and threats of force to exert control over her.

The Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force, Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department investigated this matter. This case was prosecuted by the United States Attorney's Office, Central District of California.





PROTECTION AND PROSECUTION

In 2023 and 2024, the Orange County District Attorney's Office's H.E.A.T. (Human Exploitation and Trafficking) Unit filed 85 cases against defendants charged with pimping, pandering, and human trafficking.

PEOPLE VS. MANUEL GARCIA CARTER

On September 18, 2024, the Anaheim Police Department detained a female for prostitution. During her interview, she told officers that she was working under the control of the Defendant Manuel Carter. The Victim stated that she met the Defendant when she was 16 years old in Los Angeles after he began messaging her on Instagram, and that he introduced her into the life of prostitution making her work on Figueroa St., a popular prostitution "track" in the City of Los Angeles. The Victim told officers that she was prostituted out in Orange County and made approximately \$1,000, all of which she was forced to give to the Defendant. She stated that the Defendant would only feed her once a day, threatened to choke her and forced her to stay in the hotel room with her phone's location setting turned on. He would often not allow her to stop working and forced her to have unprotected sex with the buyers of prostitution. She further reported that in the past when the Defendant was incarcerated, he would demand that she pay him for "catching dates" while he was in jail and had her phone taken away by him when he got out of jail. The Officers later found digital evidence that corroborated a pimp-prostitute relationship between the Victim and Defendant. In his interview, Manuel Carter admitted to meeting the Victim in 2019, but denied knowing she was working as a prostitute or to receiving money from that work.

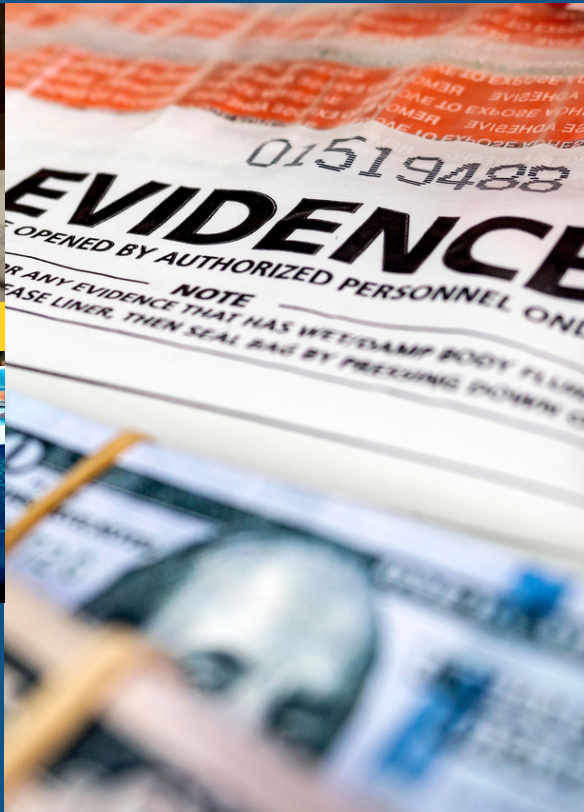
PEOPLE VS. ALEX MATTHEW POLIDORE

On April 28, 2025, the Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force became involved in the investigation of a runaway minor and possible victim of human trafficking from the City of Irvine. The Victim's mother informed investigators that she had left the residence on April 23 heading to the City of Los Angeles and she had found messages on the Victim's messaging account that showed she was in contact with a suspected trafficker. The investigators reviewed the messages with a contact named "Daddy" and its email which was later traced to the Defendant Alex Polidore. The messaging thread contained a large amount of text messages showing not only a pimp and victim relationship, but also pandering texts to the Victim to have her work as a prostitute under his control. On April 29, 2025, the investigators were able to track down the Defendant in Los Angeles and the Victim was found with him. When interviewed, the Victim denied working as a prostitute, but later admitted that she still has "regulars" (sex buyers) with whom she has commercial sex dates. However, she denied the Defendant being her pimp or even having a pimp, and claimed that the Defendant was just a "friend" whom she cares about. The Defendant's photo was found on the Victim's cellphone wallpaper and his contact of "Daddy" was still in her phone. The Victim further claimed that the Defendant had tried multiple times to talk her out of prostitution. In the Defendant's interview, he said that he met the Victim through social media a few days prior and chatted with her via direct messages, but wouldn't provide any other information. The Defendant was convicted of Human Trafficking of a Minor, Pimping a Minor, and Pandering a Minor. He was sentenced to 10 years in the State Prison along with registering as a sex offender for life.





VICTIM IMPACT STATEMENT



The following victim impact statement was read in court by a victim advocate from Waymakers on behalf of the victim.

In the case People vs. Manuel Garcia Carter, the victim wanted to make her victim impact statement in the form of a prayer for the person who caused harm to her (Carter) in the hopes he would take responsibility for his actions, not continue to harm and for God to change his ways for the better of himself and his own future.

A Prayer Over Your Life:

Father, I desire to be free from the love of money. Father, let me not crave earthly possessions, but instead your will and your way only. Help me become content with all my circumstances and satisfied with exactly what I have. Let me always remember to be thankful for the provision you have provided and the blessings you have given me.

Father, thank you for your promise to me. I trust that you will never leave me, fail me, or forsake me. I know that you will never leave me helpless. You will always meet me at my need. I know that I can have comfort and peace, because you have a firm grip on me and my life.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.



PREVENTION AND SCHOOL SAFETY

9,086

YOUTHS PROVIDED
PREVENTION &
AWARENESS EDUCATION
IN 2023 AND 2024

Presentations provided by Higher Ground Youth & Family Services, Global Center for Women and Justice, and OCHTTF Know More, Do Better annual youth prevention conference.



6 CITIES

- Anaheim, Fountain Valley, Fullerton, Huntington Beach, Santa Ana and Westminster

35 SCHOOLS

- 11 High Schools
- 24 Elementary/Jr. High Schools

86% MIDDLE & HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

- 14% Other youths at church groups, probation programs, and colleges

100% STUDENTS SURVEYED VOICED THAT
“**KNOW MORE, DO BETTER**” NEEDS TO CONTINUE

- “I learned to say ‘no’ to anything bad because my voice matters. I have a voice and it’s powerful.”
- “It brings awareness to people and it lets people know that they are not alone.”
- “I enjoyed how everyone was supportive about how we felt about the situations.”
- “We need more awareness for this generation and how to help. Trafficking can happen to anyone.”
- “This event should continue because it was educational and entertaining, especially towards us students.”



PREVENTION AND SCHOOL SAFETY

84%



increase in students affirming:
"I am aware of what human trafficking is and I can define it."

115%



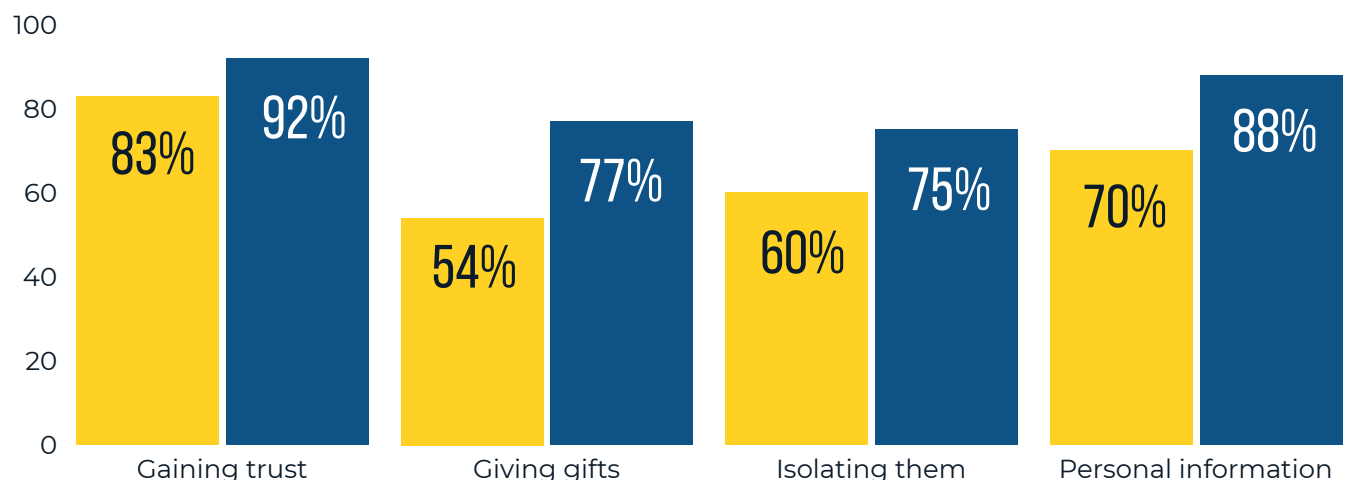
increase in students affirming:
"I know how to report human trafficking or get help from staff, access services, or find programs that can help."

92%



in students affirming:
"I know the possible warning signs of human trafficking."

After completing Higher Ground Youth & Family Services' human trafficking prevention program, the data above shows that the student participants demonstrated strong gains in awareness and understanding of human trafficking in pre-surveys and post-surveys. These results reflect a meaningful shift in student knowledge and readiness to identify and respond to potential risks of exploitation and human trafficking.



After completing the PROTECT curriculum created by 3Strands Global Foundation facilitated by the Global Center for Women and Justice's human trafficking prevention program, the data above shows the results of the pre-surveys and post-surveys of the knowledge gained on how traffickers groom victims. In addition to these results, 97% of the students recognized that it is possible for a friend or family to be a trafficker.



SURVIVOR-LED PARTNERSHIPS

It begins with a story. A story makes people visible. A story brings people together. A story inspires people to act. A story helps people feel they are not alone. A story is a painful reminder of the fragility of being human. A story heals and strengthens others. A story continues to live on as history, present and future. Survivors of human trafficking are also more than their story because it does not end with their survival, but for change. The story of collective change in working together is the story that will be remembered by all.

This section of the report was created by a diverse group of 14 survivor leaders and subject matter experts in labor trafficking and sex trafficking who help function in a survivor advisory capacity for the Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force.

They identified 4 key areas that the anti-human trafficking movement needs to continue to explore and work towards for sustainable change to impact the next generation: **leadership spaces, joy and meaningful connection, policy and funding, and language matters.**



LEADERSHIP SPACES

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

Including survivors of human trafficking in leadership spaces, especially in survivor-led mentorships help bridge a pathway that may feel safer and more trustworthy when it comes to reconnecting with the community again for help. There is an unspoken bond and understanding that is more relatable on how to navigate similar experiences. Survivors help role model for one another and find strengths within each other. Most importantly, they know they are not alone. Leadership spaces can include training, policy, consulting, motivational speaking, and program development. It is a mutually positive benefit in the anti-trafficking movement.

“I met my first survivor 6 years out. I knew I wanted to do anti-trafficking work. I just wasn’t sure what area I wanted to do it. I looked up to her, not only the work she was doing. I looked up to her as a role model of how she carried herself with so much grace and confidence. But she doesn’t let anyone mistreat her. She had boundaries and without me realizing it, taught me how to set those boundaries myself.”

“Being able to share that experience to help other survivors to navigate the different things that I navigated and instill hope that there’s a different life to the other side of that, that they can actually see in person in front of them. I wish I had that as part of my healing journey. I’m very grateful for everyone who helped me. Sometimes I didn’t feel people fully understood when I’d be trying to process something.”

“I would like to see more pathways. I don’t have to be a part of everything, but it would be good to have some sort of reference where I have options and different choices I could take. I chose the pathway of going to school because of my record. No one would hire me. I went through the painful process of why can’t I just come back into the community, back into society working any kind of job. Schools didn’t do a background check, so I went to school and that’s where I’ve been thriving since I got out of “the life.”



“Mentorship in some way has impacted our lives for the better. It’s given us the opportunity to learn, to develop, to grow. Finding our strengths. It was there but it got lost for a bit.”



LEADERSHIP SPACES

"I think survivors can be in any kind of area of leadership. I do think that just because you're a survivor that doesn't mean you should get a certain position. Some positions require schooling. You don't get a pass at everything just because you're a survivor. You have to have certain credibility. Everyone has their own healing journey, but I've seen when people show up and cause more harm and they're not aware of it. Even within survivors, we need more conversations about healing, accountability and checking in with each other. That's why having survivor mentors is important. If you don't have someone call you out about the way you're behaving and it's all about "me, me, me" then it's harmful. You have to have survivor mentors who pat you on the back and encourage you, but also be able to say that's not ok."

"The challenges can be trusting survivors with other survivors. There are a lot of survivors who talk the talk, but their walk doesn't align with how they present themselves. It's hard to find survivors who are successfully out of "the life" and leading a life where they can give advice. It's not just about where they came from, but the path that they're going down. It's very important. It reflects the work that you do. It reflects the guidance that you give the new survivors. It's a full 360, not 180. Unpreparedness leaves a lot of room for mistakes. I needed a lot of therapy first myself. There has to be education behind it too. You don't necessarily need a college degree, but you have to be doing the work or in the field doing the work.

Not only listening to yourself, but to other survivors, non-survivor peers and those who came before you because the goal is to work together if we want to make an impact across different people. You have to listen to both book smart and street smart. You can't force yourself into spaces that you're not ready to be in just because your only qualification is that you went through something. When someone hasn't been out of the life for at least three years I know they're not ready. Three years is a long time to have trials and tribulations in going back to "the life". It shows character. In that timeframe you have to build yourself new habits. It takes 21 days to form habits and one day to break it. And if in that timeframe you haven't formed any new habits to a new pathway, it shows you haven't done the work and not really ready for change."

"At the beginning I think survivors had a bad rap because they're in this unhealed space or being thrown into the work too soon. When I first started I did not show up very well. It was because I didn't go deeper into my healing journey, would get triggered and it would show up in different ways. Survivors aren't always invited to the table because of that and one or two survivors, if that's the only experience an organization or public has with the survivor then that's how they're going to see all."

"You can't dream or want something that you don't know exists for you. If you don't know that there are people like you who have similar backgrounds and lives and it's something that you haven't ever been exposed to then how are you going to know that that's something accessible to you? When I come in as a survivor mentor I feel like the girls know that my only role and intention is for them to have a good life and the only reason why I'm saying the things I'm saying. I'm not getting anything out of it for myself. We're able to navigate different spaces and conversations that maybe service providers can't because of professional boundaries that they have to have in place."



JOY AND MEANINGFUL CONNECTION

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

Joy is a constant. Happiness comes and goes. It's important for survivors to find their joy so that it can't be taken away from them. Even when survivors have accomplished many great things in the anti-trafficking movement their joy does not come from their work success. They have found their most joyous moments outside of work and having fun with other survivors, family and friends. The joy of being normal. To be able to connect to dreams again in life often begins in community healing and sisterhood or brotherhood, and you can't do it without genuine connections with people who care about that future too and not treating them like a charity case. It creates an inviting space to grow beyond trauma. To rediscover joy in simply living. It's a daily choice to be present and remain unshaken by circumstances. As survivor leaders, there's a responsibility to set examples for new survivors and not to forget to find something outside of anti-trafficking and survivor leadership work.



"Joy is when I get to have moments with the next generation of children in my family. Seeing them enjoy life as children, and when they come to me for safety as their person in their life."



JOY AND MEANINGFUL CONNECTION

"Happiness is something that's happening in your life. Joy is a true thing that you feel and emulate. It's a part of you. When I'm with my survivor sisters enjoying fun things and laughing together, that is joy. It stays with me. That was not just happiness. Finding that joy is so important in our journey, not only for my future but the future of our shared community. It's not just to go speak, do consulting or build programs."

Our identity and joy doesn't come from this work or our story. Me being a trafficking survivor and being in the anti-trafficking movement doesn't define me. I don't get my affirmations and my self-worth and joy from this. I think it's dangerous if you try to because you'll never be fulfilled. It will never fill whatever void or insecurity that you need to work through. Organizations that help support pathways to joy by creating experiences in life that was once taken away from us, those are the moments when I felt the most joy."

"I might not be able to fix it, but with survivors there is a level of empathy. Thank you for trusting me with your raw, honest transparency and still laugh, have a good time, and making time for each other to have an actual connection. Most favorite moments."



"It's bliss. Something you get to participate in. Just hearing the survivors here share their stories of joy has me smiling and laughing. I can witness it with others and be part of that. Something magical that stays."

"Joy is something that can't be taken away from you. No matter if your parade gets rained on you can still be joyful. Happiness comes and goes, but joy was already there even when your environment changes. When you have joy in you then you're not seeking the validation of others. It's important to know who you are and where you are in your life because if you seek those validations from others then you'll build fake characteristics and it will definitely tear you down."

"Getting together with survivor sisters to celebrate holidays. It's just us coming together to celebrate life and we don't talk about work or human trafficking. But when you're at other events and meeting people, people will start asking you what you do for work or questions related to growing up and you kind of have figure out how to navigate those conversations. So the spaces that I spend with other survivors are really important for these long-term connections that we still need in life as people. We talk about paying the bills, relationships and dating, and trying to go back to school. It's really helpful in my journey because it allows me to be normal and figure out how much of what I'm experiencing was just age-related normal things happening to people and not necessarily trauma related with my trafficking and feeling like I was so far behind compared to everyone else in life. It gives me a window of what normal life looks like because I didn't know what people did for fun when I first got out and trying to understand life outside of a program."

POLICY AND FUNDING

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

Policy work at the county, state or national level highlights the recognition and voice of survivors, something that has been silenced for a long time. The passing of legislation and funding to support the work makes it feel real because it's not about one individual story anymore, but an entire community impacted by it. Policy is only scratching the surface now, but it's inspiring for the future generation to grow up to be changemakers.



"I'm happy to see the increase of survivors in policy work and brought to the table. And also with that, it takes maturity of survivor leaders to start using their voice and being able to have that opportunity. And this is where mentorship comes in to focus on areas of strengths and influence."

"To be part of helping to change policy and have funding to support the work not only helps victims, but it benefits our communities as a whole to work towards safer communities free from the fear of violence, and by advocating for those who are coming after us and who are now standing here with us is important. I never thought that policy change could ever be possible. I'm very grateful it has happened and there was perseverance through it all. When we were shot down the first time, I was pissed and crying. It felt like a slap in the face how dismissive the policymakers were at our experience as victims. You are elected people for your people and they weren't for people. I felt defeated like that little girl who was dismissed again as if I didn't matter."

"I feel human trafficking will end. I don't believe it will continue on. It's a matter of when and it's because of people here today and the things that have been done. We're not just letting it go by. We're standing up for it in whatever way we can. There are some policymakers who don't see it in the same way or have any kind of experience about it, which makes it sort of just words so it's hard for them to have compassion about it. That's why we continue to go, share and people will be a part of it. I've learned that people are going to have different opinions about different topics and just because it's different it doesn't mean it stops the work or stop the fight. When we hear from others who are advocating for policy change and how difficult it is, it's a good reminder of where we're at and why we're doing what we're doing because we're all affected by it, even the policymakers."



WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

LANGUAGE MATTERS

Language usage for communication with victims, survivors, peers and the community is not always easy to navigate and agree on the definitions, as the definitions and the interpretations of the terms can be understood and used differently based on the context and setting of how it's being used and from individual perspectives of a variety of different experiences.

For example, it has often been debated whether it's more appropriate to call someone a 'victim' or 'survivor'. The anti-trafficking movement as a whole has leaned towards using 'survivor' because it denotes a strengths-based approach and empowering individuals since 'victim' is often associated with weakness and self-blame. However, within the criminal justice system or legal documentation and records used, the term 'victim' is needed to reference a person and/or the acknowledgement of someone who has been impacted directly by crime or abuse. It is simpler to use the person's name because a name is attached to more than one characteristic and that identity is not pigeonholed into any one substituted descriptive label. However, maintaining confidentiality is also important for their protection and privacy.

Understanding communication skills, via terms, can be helpful to build a more cohesive and safer community where victims and survivors feel welcomed as members and without fear of shame or judgement. As in learning anything new and unfamiliar, these things take time to shift a person's perception or philosophy of what they have been taught about the world around them and how that world functions. Just like two people speaking different languages around the world, miscommunication and misunderstandings happen. It is not often done with malice or ill intention. The main point to focus on is that we are at least attempting to communicate even at all on the importance of addressing human trafficking together. Here are some recommendations by those who have experienced human trafficking as a starting point:

AVOID USING WHEN POSSIBLE

Prostitute - Denotes criminality and identity as a person that may be difficult to unlabel

Sex Work/Sex Worker

Sex Industry - Normalizes the sex trade as a legitimate business

Teen/Child Prostitute - Minors bought and sold in the sex trade is by definition a sex trafficked child or victim

TRY USING THIS INSTEAD

Prostituted Person/Person in Prostitution - Someone being sold and bought by sex buyers through prostitution

Survivor - Individuals who have lived experience in prostitution as a victim and/or moved on in life living other experiences unrelated to the sex trade

The System of Prostitution/The Sex Trade - All forms of prostitution or commercialized sex

"Failed Promises: The History of Legal Prostitution and Sex Trafficking in the Kingdom of The Netherlands", Feb 2025, Coalition Against Trafficking in Women

LANGUAGE MATTERS

“In the first news interview I did that was aired they called me a prostitute. I didn’t notice it until my friend called and asked why they referred to me as a prostitute instead of a victim or survivor. I found myself making excuses to why he did that. Then someone in a powerful position who had my back and encouraged my voice as a survivor called up the news station upset. They apologized and changed the language in the later news segments. It was my first experience around language. I didn’t realize it myself because as a kid my mom told me this is what you do to help with family, and I wanted my mom to love me. I wanted to help my family. Looking back now, for me not even tripping when someone referred to me as a prostitute is crazy. But now, no way you’re going to call me that or a ‘b/bitch’ because that’s what we’re called in “the life” and continuing to feel dismissed as if we’re not human without a name or worth.”

“The reason why language matters and there’s a shift in that is because when you call me a prostitute you’re assuming I’m there by choice. When you say sex trafficking victim it’s clear that I’m a victim of a crime. I don’t have a problem with the word victim. I’m not a victim now. I’m a survivor of something bad that was done to me. But back then I was victimized by it and that should be acknowledged. So when I was part of changing policy and to have experienced first hand the ‘no’ votes to want to continue to protect victims, I heard it as a ‘no’ to me again. It was personal because it said again that victims don’t matter and I don’t deserve justice even today. Victim centered and trauma informed language should also align the same whether you’re an adult or a minor. Just because my birthday crosses over one day into being an adult legally that shouldn’t change how we are treated as victims or survivors.”

“It’s hard to say just one thing. We’re representing a wide range of experiences. It’s hard to generalize into one or two terms on what should or shouldn’t be used. But for all of the positive ones I’ve identified with them. For the negative ones like ‘ho’, ‘prostitute’, ‘sex worker’... I wasn’t a sex worker. I wasn’t working and filing taxes. Language can also hurt us by keeping us away from getting help and services. When it comes to the press, when you spent a lot of time with them, they heard your story, and they still use the same language calling you a prostitute shows there is no real change happening. Because I get excited thinking media is going to help educate others as their platform and instead they’re keeping up the status quo. We don’t need to sit down and come up with a list of all of the negative ones. But we do need to think outside the box and have critical thinking of what this language is that we’re using and doing that affects everyone and everything around us. Continue to come back to this approach as humans and see if it’s positive or not. But it is hard to change our language and what we’re used to.”





THANK YOU



SURVIVOR SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS

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BRINGING IDEAS & INNOVATION
TO LIFE THROUGH COLLABORATION