

Human trafficking in the heartland

Hidden labor, sex trade alive in Wisconsin

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MADISON — One morning, Laura woke up a little sluggish — not fast enough for her boyfriend, Michael. So he stabbed her in the calf.

Eleven years later, Laura, now 30, still bears a deep, nickel-sized crater there.

The two met on State Street in Madison. He took her to Albuquerque, N.M., where he used violence and psychological intimidation to coerce her to sell her body for money. Both names have been changed for Laura's protection.

Laura says she worked for three months as a prostitute for Michael, who exerted control over her by feeding her drug addiction and exploiting the emotional scars she carried from childhood abuse. One time he sold her sexual services to a man for a bag of drugs, she says.

“Basically Michael claimed he owned me,” Laura says. “I was always so scared.”

Laura finally escaped during a trip to Texas, nearly losing her life in the process as Michael, high on crack, crashed their car. She took the chance and ran away.

Laura is a survivor of human trafficking. She recounted her story at Project Respect, a Madison nonprofit that helps sex workers. The details of stories like hers are difficult to corroborate, director of Project Respect Jan Miyasaki says. But Miyasaki, who's been working with Laura for about seven years, says Laura's story is credible and follows a typical pattern.

Human trafficking is a little-recognized crime that involves controlling or attempting to control a person by force, fraud, debt bondage or coercion for sexual exploitation or forced labor.

Instead of physical bonds, a battery of psychological tactics often restrain victims, says Miyasaki. They can be lured by offers of a job, a meal or a place to stay, access to drugs or a relationship — then are manipulated by traffickers until they feel trapped.

Common trafficking victims include immigrants, the drug addicted, poor and abused.

Young people with nowhere to live and no means of support also are vulnerable to exploitation.

Milwaukee Police Detective Dawn Jones, one of two officers on the federally funded Milwaukee human trafficking task force, says trafficking is “a huge problem in Wisconsin.”

Jones often sees juveniles who are pimped out and foreign nationals caught in forced work situations. She says awareness of the crime is growing in the state, but some mistakenly believe it happens only in foreign countries.

“Human trafficking is a crime that communities and individuals need to recognize is a truly offensive assault on basic human rights and is much more pervasive than commonly believed,” says JoAnn Gruber-Hagen, founder of the advocacy group Slave Free Madison.

In her work with local women in the sex trade, Miyasaki says she sees between 50 and 75 cases a year involving force, fraud or coercion.

Miyasaki is among the experts and advocates who say that since enacting a state law against human trafficking in 2008, Wisconsin has done little to expose situations in which which hundreds of state residents, including children, live as virtual slaves.

Advocates say Wisconsin lacks money for data collection, education, law enforcement training and victim services that could bring more cases to light. The state’s major federal grant for trafficking victim services recently ended. There has been just one conviction under the new state law.

Federal law also bans trafficking. Since 2006, eight people have been convicted in four federal cases for labor, sex or child sex trafficking in Wisconsin. A few cases are pending in state and federal courts.

Fitchburg case highlights danger

In a recent incident, Lt. Todd Stetzer of the Fitchburg Police Department says a 15-year-old runaway was taken to Milwaukee and Atlanta and forced into prostitution.

On July 17, the Fitchburg girl was recovered, along with her 10-month-old son, in DeKalb County, Georgia, by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. Police found her by tracking her cellphone and putting up posters in the area with the teenager’s picture.

Stetzer says the ordeal began two months earlier after the young woman was introduced to a man who offered to take her on a trip to Atlanta. Upon arrival, the man allegedly took her to a hotel and told her she had to prostitute for him.

When she refused, the man allegedly traded her to another pimp, who advertised the teenager on the classified-ad site, backpage.com, as a 25-year-old providing “adult services.” Stetzer says a clerk at the hotel alerted police after seeing one of the posters.

The girl is back in Fitchburg receiving counseling, Stetzer says, and her son is in temporary foster care. Police continue to investigate the case.

Crime crosses borders

Trafficking can be incredibly lucrative. While a bag of cocaine can be sold once, a human being can be sold repeatedly for sex or labor. Worldwide, human trafficking generates \$32 billion per year, according to the International Labour Organization, a United Nations agency.

Human trafficking is commonly cited as a fast growing crime, but there are few solid numbers. The U.S. Department of State’s 2010 Trafficking in Persons report says there are around 12.3 million trafficking victims worldwide, but other estimates range from 4 million to 27 million victims.

The State Department has estimated 14,500 to 17,500 foreign nationals are trafficked into the United States every year, mainly from Thailand, India, Mexico, Philippines, Haiti, Honduras, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic.

“The crime evolves, and has evolved for 5,000 years. But fundamentally it is a still violation of (human) rights,” says Benjamin Skinner, a Wisconsin native and author of the 2008 book on human trafficking, “A Crime So Monstrous.”

Trafficking case shocks state

The anti-trafficking movement in Wisconsin was sparked by a 2006 federal labor-trafficking case in which two Brookfield doctors from the Philippines were convicted of keeping their housekeeper a virtual prisoner for nearly two decades.

The next year, in 2007, the state Office of Justice Assistance surveyed Wisconsin law enforcement and victims service agencies, estimating there had been 200 instances of human trafficking since 2000. This number is likely low, the report says, given that many law enforcement agencies and organizations contacted were not aware of the problem or how to recognize it.

“By its very nature, human trafficking is a hidden crime,” the report said. “It is our belief that as awareness of this issue grows, so too will the number of victims identified and in need of services.”

In a followup survey in 2008, Margo Kleinfeld, associate professor of geography at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, contacted many of the same participants as the

Office of Justice Assistance and collected detailed information about 80 potential trafficking victims from the previous three years. She warns that her survey was not designed to count cases but to collect demographic information about trafficking in Wisconsin.

Kleinfeld says she got reports of vulnerable foreign and domestic men and women forced to work in restaurants and agriculture or to perform sexual services including stripping and prostitution. About 20 percent of victims in Kleinfeld's study were minors, she says.

"There's this idea that (human trafficking) is not happening here," says Cecilia Gillhouse, executive director of Madison-based UNIDOS Against Domestic Violence. "It is happening, but people don't know."

Gina Allende with UMOS in Milwaukee, which helps migrant workers and immigrants, says her organization has come into contact with 32 potential victims of sex and labor trafficking between 2006 and 2010, primarily people from China, Mexico and Russia.

Allende says traffickers often blackmail victims, threatening to harm their families or steal legal papers and have them deported if they leave or seek help.

Lt. Steve Elliott of the Appleton Police Department says most of the human trafficking he sees involves women forced to work as prostitutes for massage parlors or escort services. Elliott says prostitution is not a victimless crime; he estimates 70 to 80 percent of the women he sees are forced to offer sexual services.

"We often overlook (trafficking victims)," Skinner says, "because they are in the most marginalized communities."

Few trafficking prosecutions

Four years after the Office of Justice Assistance survey was conducted and despite passage of the law banning trafficking, "Not much has happened, not much has changed," says Karina Silver, the office's former human trafficking specialist.

Nationwide, human trafficking cases have been prosecuted under state statutes in 18 states in the past decade. There has been only one state human trafficking conviction in Wisconsin to date: Jermaine Rogers, now 36, of Milwaukee.

According to the criminal complaint filed in Milwaukee County Circuit Court, Rogers lured a woman to a Milwaukee duplex on Oct. 27, 2009, locked her in a room and raped her. Rogers told the victim he planned to take her to Chicago to force her to work as a prostitute.

The woman managed to escape, and Rogers was later charged with five criminal counts: human trafficking, kidnapping, sexual assault, pimping and soliciting a prostitute. He was

convicted last January and sentenced to eight years in prison and five years of extended supervision.

Another state case is pending: Paul M. Ketring, 40, of Verona, is accused of trying to buy sex with an 8-year-old girl for \$50, according to the criminal complaint filed in July 2010. Ketring was charged with child sex trafficking in Dane County Circuit Court. He has pleaded not guilty.

But prosecuting traffickers under Wisconsin's law is tricky, according to Madison attorney Jessica Ozalp, writing in the Wisconsin Law Review. Ozalp says state law requires victims to show the trafficking was done without their consent, making such cases hard to prove.

She recommends doing away with that requirement, noting, "Slaves often have to cooperate with captors and abusers to survive."

Determining jurisdiction also can be complicated in human trafficking crimes because victims often are moved across state and even national boundaries.

The penalties for adult human trafficking are fines of up to \$100,000, imprisonment up to 25 years, or both. The penalties are lower than those for other crimes often associated with human trafficking, such as kidnapping and sexual assault.

Children forced into sex

Claudine O'Leary says she has come into contact with more than 100 young people in the past year whom she believes fit the definition of a human trafficking victim, usually American minors involved in exploitative sex work. O'Leary is a community educator who works with minors in the Milwaukee sex trade.

"There are young people ... who are desperate enough, all it takes is a meal at McDonald's (to consent to sex)," O'Leary says.

According to the Polaris Project, a Washington, D.C.-based anti-trafficking organization, the average age for entry into prostitution is 13 for girls and 12 for boys — middle-school age.

Deacon Steve Przedpelski of Franciscan Peacemakers, an organization that does street outreach to sex workers in Milwaukee, says he saw at least 50 minors engaged in sex work in the past six weeks. Human trafficking is "most definitely" happening, he says.

Wisconsin's child trafficking statute has higher penalties than the adult law, with maximum penalties of a \$100,000 fine, 40 years in prison, or both. In the past few years, federal law enforcement also has begun to crack down on child sex trafficking.

The first conviction in Wisconsin for human trafficking of children was in federal court last July, when Todd “King Tut” Carter, then 40, of Milwaukee was sentenced in Milwaukee to 25 years in prison. His son and co-defendant, Nicholas Harrison, then 21, pleaded guilty to child sex trafficking. He’s serving a six-year term.

Carter was a pimp for at least five teenage girls, three of them minors. According to the complaint, he kept the young women working for him through violence and intimidation, once threatening, “I know where your mom and grandma live. I will blow up your grandma’s house.”

In a pending federal case, Derrick Avery or “Pimp Snooky,” then 42, was charged in 2009 with six counts of sex trafficking, two of them child sex trafficking, with the help of his co-defendant, Shamika Evans, then 28. Avery also was charged with eight prostitution-related counts.

According to the complaint, Avery pimped dozens of girls around the country, including Milwaukee, Chicago and Las Vegas, for over a decade. He was so notorious that he was named “Pimp of the Year” at the 1998 Players Ball, an annual gathering of criminals in the sex trade. Avery also appeared in the 1999 documentary, “Pimps Up, Ho’s Down,” and on the Jerry Springer show.

Avery allegedly was brutal to the young women, beating them with pots, pool sticks, belts and alligator-skin shoes, according to the complaint. He also allegedly punished the women and girls with the “hot” treatment by pouring rubbing alcohol on them and lighting it. He once repeatedly stabbed a girl in the buttocks with a knife, leaving large scars, the complaint says.

Avery also threatened to kill one girl’s father if she left him, stating to someone on his cellphone, “I’ll give you \$2,800 to put a bullet in this girl’s daddy’s head.” Avery’s defense? Pimping was just a role he played on TV.

Services lacking for victims

A web of nonprofits, foster homes and battered women’s centers helps trafficking victims, but throughout Wisconsin, these services are already overburdened and are not tailored to meet victims’ special needs, says Marianna Smirnova, human trafficking policy specialist at the Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault, a Madison-based nonprofit.

“Trafficking victims may suffer from an array of physical and psychological health issues stemming from inhumane living conditions, poor sanitation ... (and) brutal physical and emotional attacks at the hands of their traffickers,” according to the national Campaign to Rescue and Restore Victims of Trafficking, a project of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Many victims report feelings of humiliation, shock, helplessness and depression. They can also have serious physical problems; many are beaten, raped or malnourished, the coalition says.

The only funding specifically aimed at recognizing and combating human trafficking comes from federal sources: a \$200,000 two-year federal anti-trafficking grant to the Milwaukee-based Wisconsin Rescue and Restore Coalition and a \$170,000 Department of Justice grant for the Milwaukee Federal Human Trafficking Taskforce.

The coalition educates organizations about trafficking and refers victims to services. It has doled out grants over the past two years to five Wisconsin victim-services groups. Advocates say the measures, while crucial, fail to meet victims' needs.

Wisconsin's Rescue and Restore grant ended in April and may not be renewed, says Miles Severson, senior associate with Practical Strategies, which administers the grant. The Federal Trafficking in Persons annual \$21.2 million budget was recently cut by nearly 25 percent.

The federally funded task force includes two Milwaukee police officers, including Jones, who investigate trafficking cases and train law enforcement and other organizations throughout the state on how to recognize and respond to the crime.

Says O'Leary, the community educator who works with minors in the Milwaukee sex trade: "If people want to attack human trafficking, we must invest the money that would create comprehensive change."

Perpetrators elusive

Labor and sex trafficking cases often involve a mixture of domestic abuse, immigration issues, assault, prostitution and kidnapping. And the victims and perpetrators are not what one might expect. Among 43 police and service providers who reported details about suspected trafficking cases to the state, nearly half said a family member was the victimizer.

Human trafficking is often seen as an urban issue, but the Office of Justice Assistance report and Kleinfeld's survey both found many trafficking victims in rural Wisconsin. Boys and men are also victims, but most anti-trafficking efforts focus on women and girls, Smirnova says.

Some victims have criminal records, blame themselves, or cope with their situations by claiming it was their choice. Often they do not know the law or even recognize that they are victims, experts say.

Victims themselves are sometimes afraid to come forward. Their traffickers may have forced them to commit crimes, putting victims at risk of prosecution, Ozalp says.

Unlike Wisconsin, Maryland and New York both have record expungement for trafficking victims, which allows them to clear charges of prostitution from their record that were gained while they were being trafficked.

“The problem is, not everyone identifies as a victim,” says Darius Alemzadeh, founder and executive director of Milwaukee-based advocacy group Trafficking Ends with Action. “Not everyone is willing to be labeled as such.”

Adds Miyasaki, “Like domestic violence, people might not understand why women are stuck or what options they face. They often don’t identify as victims, they just accept their circumstances as reality. Law enforcement should be trained to recognize this.”

Trafficked workers harder to find

Alemzadeh says labor trafficking can be even more difficult to identify than sex trafficking. “It’s one of the hardest crimes to prove, unless you find people shackled or tied up,” he says.

Labor trafficking sometimes involves exploitative practices that may be acceptable in other countries but are illegal here. That issue was raised with the only prosecution of labor trafficking in Wisconsin — the one involving the two Brookfield doctors, Jefferson N. and Elnora Calimlim.

In 2006, the doctors and their son, Jefferson M. Calimlim, were convicted in Milwaukee’s federal court for keeping their housekeeper, Irma Martinez, a Philippines native, a virtual prisoner in their home for 19 years.

Martinez was finally freed after authorities were tipped off by the couple’s former daughter-in-law. The Calimlins argued that the arrangement, in which Martinez earned about \$1,000 a year to support herself and her family in the Philippines, was acceptable in their culture.

The parents were given six-year terms in federal prison and ordered to pay \$916,635 for back wages, after which they will likely be deported to the Philippines. Their son got three years of probation, including four months of home detention. In a separate civil lawsuit, the Calimlins were ordered to pay Martinez \$1 million in punitive damages.

Human trafficking is “a complex, emotionally charged issue, and we all need to be involved in combating it,” says Gruber-Hagen, of Slave Free Madison. “We need to decide this is unacceptable.”

Kelsey, a 28-year-old Wisconsin mother of two who was first trafficked by a pimp at 17, told her story on the condition that her name not be printed. She was assaulted while selling sex, but eventually escaped back to Wisconsin.

Her hope in speaking out: “If I told my story, maybe somebody else would see it and get help or educate others,” she says.

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