



# Human Trafficking: Bleak Reality or Conspiracy Theory?

Nicole Kiser

**W**hat does human trafficking look like to you?

Is it a child, locked in a room, hidden from the world and used in ways we can't even imagine? Is it the dangerous adventure of Liam Neeson in the movie "Taken" where he vows to find his daughter's kidnapper? Is it certain world figures recently exposed for their exploitative actions while abroad?

Those situations are happening — don't get me wrong — but what if I told you most trafficking cases in Florida were domestic issues? These are not the "kidnapped in a white van and shipped away from your family" kind of situations.

Human trafficking is the young girl who is harassed online by a predator in another state, coerced into sending nude photos of herself for the predator's profit. It is an

immigrant working in a factory for \$2 an hour. It is the child whose parents are strung out on drugs and use whatever they can to get money for their next fix — even if that means selling their child.

All of these situations happen right under our noses, making reporting issues extremely difficult. This is a criminal enterprise that thrives on threatening people into silence while sitting just inside the shadows, remaining hidden from the world.

### **What is human trafficking?**

There are two types of human trafficking: sex trafficking and labor trafficking. The former is when a victim is forced to perform sexual actions such as prostitution or pornography. The latter is when victims are forced or coerced into involuntary servitude or slavery usually found in an informal workplace such as a home. Of the two, sex trafficking is the more commonly found and reported form.

In a conversation I had with Dr. Laurie Lawrence, Professor at Florida State University at Panama City, she brought up an extreme example that painted a vivid picture. In her words: “If you offer a starving man \$2 to build an addition on your house, and he agrees, technically this is trafficking.” The vastness of this issue presents challenges to reporting rates.

There are multiple reasons the reporting percentage is low. Victims could be trapped in situations where they can't escape, preventing reporting. A victim could be fully aware of what is happening, and fully capable of reporting, yet is either petrified of the

consequences or threatened into silence. People surrounding victims may not know the signs of trafficking to even think about reporting a potential trafficking situation.

### **What is the current human trafficking situation in Florida?**

According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, 680 cases were identified in Florida, and 1,172 victims were involved in these cases in 2023. (Note: there are often cases with multiple victims present in the same case.)<sup>1</sup>

Since 2007, there have been 7,472 total cases with 17,467 victims. To put it into perspective, Florida is third in the United States for human trafficking cases, behind California and Texas.<sup>2</sup>

According to the Florida Department of Children and Families annual human trafficking report, the Florida Abuse Hotline received 2,137 reports of human trafficking from October 1, 2023 – October 1, 2024.<sup>3</sup> 1,592 of those reported were cases involving children. To break it down further, of the 2,137 cases, 91.95% (1,965) were coded as commercial sexual exploitation, and 82.6% of reports stated the children involved lived at home with parents or a caregiver. The other 8.05% (172) of the 2,137 cases were categorized as labor trafficking.

Of the 2,137 cases, 80.67% (1,724) were female survivors, and 17.55% (375) were male survivors. 1.78% (38) of reports marked gender as unknown/not specified. There are currently 4.08 cases per 100,000 people in Florida.<sup>4</sup>

## What are the misconceptions surrounding human trafficking?

**Misconception #1:** The most common type of trafficking is where the child is kidnapped and sold to the highest bidder.

The experts I reached out to all said the same thing when asked about the misconceptions surrounding human trafficking: it's not what is portrayed in the movies. Are situations like those that movies portray actually happening? Yes, but we need to reorient ourselves to think about the problem locally. The domestic issue of human trafficking looks a lot different than the international issue.

I reached out to Erin Collins, Executive Director at the Florida Alliance to End Human Trafficking, and asked her about common misconceptions she wished people knew about human trafficking. Her response: "Human trafficking takes on many forms. Victims can be any race, age, gender, ethnicity, or come from any socioeconomic background. It's not like what is portrayed in entertainment. Do people get kidnapped by people in windowless vans? Sometimes. But the majority of victims tend to know their trafficker because some type of relationship has been cultivated through grooming (ex. a personal relationship, potential job, etc.)."

When we think of human trafficking, we often picture the "white van" rolling up to a child walking home from school. However, Dr. Lawrence shared an analogy dispelling this idea, "we put the white van in our kids' hands every day through their cell phone," making it so much easier for a trafficker to approach children.

No one is completely safe from bad actors in this arena. Just because you live in a

gated community, doesn't mean you are removed from direct contact with this issue.

I'm thankful for my father who impressed upon my sister and me the extreme importance of having high "situational awareness" — a term that used to induce eye rolls from an annoyed teenager who thought she was so worldly. However, now extreme situational awareness is forever an active practice everywhere I go. I am lucky to have a rightfully overprotective (and former military) father who's bought me multiple cans of pepper spray and impressed on me the importance of being safe online. Even with all my vigilance, there is still a chance I could be trafficked.

**Misconception #2:** Human trafficking isn't as big of an issue as we think.

After the premiere of Tim Ballard's harrowing movie, "Sound of Freedom," news outlets painted the awareness campaign as right-wing propaganda used as a scare tactic. To be clear, human trafficking is a very real issue. There are survivors all around the world and in Florida who will serve as testimonies for why we actively need to face this fight.

After the film's released, Rolling Stone released an article titled "'Sound of Freedom' Is a Superhero Movie for Dads With Brainworms" followed by the subheading "The QAnon-tinged thriller about child-trafficking is designed to appeal to the conscience of a conspiracy-addled boomer."<sup>5</sup>

The article ends in a dramatic fashion calling for a focus on "bigger issues" facing Americans, but did get one thing right.

*"Now, as in the 1980s Satanic panic, they won't even face the fact that most kids who suffer sexual abuse are harmed not by a*

*shadowy cabal of strangers, but at the hands of a family member.”*

Instead of using their piece to share about the more common forms of trafficking, they chose to do the worst thing for human trafficking awareness — discredit its prevalence until one sentence in the conclusion.

Enough cases have been brought to light to give experts and law enforcement a snapshot of the situation. Yet, Dr. Lawrence estimates that only about 10% of the total cases are being reported.<sup>6</sup> Because human trafficking often goes unreported, it leads people to think human trafficking isn't as pervasive of an issue and distorts the real picture.

### **What are the challenges the fight to end human trafficking is currently facing?**

A major challenge is that while certain industries — like hospitality, healthcare, education, transportation, and law enforcement — engage in some form of human trafficking awareness training, there is so much training on other topics already required in those fields, causing challenges to the retention of information. I talked to a few friends who are educators in Florida, and most said they already have so much training to do without pay that the idea of adding more training onto their plate — even on something as important as how to identify human trafficking — doesn't sound appealing. The training has to be engaging and entertaining enough to encourage professionals to participate and improve knowledge retention.

When I asked the Vice President of Government Relations and General Counsel at the Florida Restaurant & Lodging Association Samatha Padgett what the largest challenge facing this battle was, she said, “Human trafficking is a multi-faceted issue that involves many different sectors, agencies, and factors — Children and Family Services, Mental Health and Addiction, Digital Safety and Vulnerability, Housing, Transportation, Immigration, Hospitality, Law Enforcement, etc. All of these groups and factors play an important role in this issue. The greatest challenge is developing policy that holistically addresses this issue. Without cooperation and policies that recognize the necessity for an interconnected approach, there will be gaps that allow this heinous crime to continue.”

Another challenge is the limits to which law enforcement can charge criminals with trafficking. Often, they have to utilize other charges to convict the offender and prevent further trafficking. So, we have to continue to ensure that law enforcement entities have the resources needed to investigate and prosecute properly.

### **So... what now?**

I understand this piece doesn't paint a very hopeful picture of the fight against human trafficking. This issue is so vast and daunting that it feels like it may never end. However, Florida's approach to this issue is one of the best in the nation. Because of the efforts of many Floridians, traffickers are caught regularly. Many of the professionals I reached out to agree: we're heading in the right direction.

The main purpose of this piece is to provide a more accurate snapshot of the present situation. We can all play a part in the fight to end human trafficking. That comes with participating in training on your own time. If there's one thing you take away from this, I hope it is that human trafficking happens all around us and it's up to the average Floridian to do their due diligence to learn how to identify human trafficking — even when they aren't in a field faced with this issue daily.

Below are a few places for you to learn more about training and resources you can access.

- Florida Alliance to End Human Trafficking Free Training<sup>7</sup>
- Florida Health Resources and Trainings for Human Trafficking<sup>8</sup>
- The Office of Attorney General Ashley Moody, Human Trafficking Prevention and Awareness<sup>9</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

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- 1 “Florida.” *National Human Trafficking Hotline*, <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/en/statistics/florida#year-2023>.
- 2 “National Statistics.” *National Human Trafficking Hotline*, <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/en/statistics>.
- 3 “Human Trafficking of Children Annual Report.” *Department of Children and Families Office of Child and Family Well-Being*, [https://www.myflfamilies.com/sites/default/files/2024-10/Human\\_Trafficking\\_Report\\_2023-24.pdf](https://www.myflfamilies.com/sites/default/files/2024-10/Human_Trafficking_Report_2023-24.pdf). October 1, 2024.
- 4 “Human Trafficking in Florida: Facts, Statistics, Shelters and Prevention Organizations.” *Human Trafficking Courts*, <https://htcourts.org/florida/>.
- 5 Klee, Miles. “‘Sound of Freedom’ Is a Superhero Movie for Dads With Brainworms.” *Rolling Stone*, <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-reviews/sound-of-freedom-jim-caviezel-child-trafficking-qanon-movie-1234783837/>. July 7, 2023.
- 6 Hewson, Harry. “Why Human Trafficking Is More Than Just a Moral Issue.” *Florida State University College of Social Sciences and Public Policy*, <https://cospp.fsu.edu/why-human-trafficking-is-more-than-just-a-moral-issue%ef%bf%bc/>. October 12, 2022.
- 7 Florida Alliance to End Human Trafficking Free Training, <https://www.floridaallianceendht.com/training/>
- 8 Florida Health Resources and Trainings for Human Trafficking, <https://www.floridahealth.gov/programs-and-services/prevention/human-trafficking/resources.html>
- 9 The Office of Attorney General Ashley Moody, Human Trafficking Prevention and Awareness, <https://www.myfloridalegal.com/human-trafficking>