Sex Trafficking in Oklahoma

A look into Demand and the Online Networks of Commercial Sex Purchasers



Madison McNiell, MSW

David A. McLeod, PhD, MSW

ANNE AND HENRY ZARROW SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

KNEE CENTER FOR STRONG FAMILIES

The UNIVERSITY *of* OKLAHOMA

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"Human Trafficking" has become a buzzword which may conjure images of a girl in chains sitting in the corner of a room or action scenes of the popular movie Taken. Is this what human trafficking looks like though? What causes it? What contributes to it? This community report will attempt to answer these questions as they pertain to the state of Oklahoma and the common beliefs and misconceptions circling not only in the United States, but Oklahoma as well. Can the occurrence of human trafficking be summed up to highway systems and abductions from retail parking lots? According to Oklahoma's Commission on the Status of Women , "Oklahoma's central location is believed to play a major role in trafficking cases; with its three major interstate highways, I-35, I-40, and I- 44, Oklahoma cities are on major human trafficking routes throughout all ports, north, east, and west, providing a crossroads to human trafficking," (Human Trafficking, 2017). In recent years facebook posts have gone viral describing individuals who have been "almost" human trafficked out of retail parking lots. This study will provide information to combat the mythology of those beliefs and to highlight the real factors that drive sex trade in Oklahoma.

Literature

Commercial Sex can be defined as, "... the exchange of money or goods for sexual services. It always involves a sex worker and a client, and it frequently also involves a third party," (Overs, 2002). When individuals think of the commercial sex industry, they may think of the red-light district in Japan, prostitution, or even escort service ads in Las Vegas. It is also widely known that prostitution is illegal in most of the United States. On June 25, 1910 the Mann Act was passed as one of the first major laws in the United States ruling prostitution or commercial sex as illegal. Today prostitution is illegal in 49 states of the 50 states in the U.S.A, with Nevada being the only state to have legalization in some counties (Prostitution Pro. Con, 2013). The Underground Commercial Sex Industry is estimated to make a total of $39.9 to $290 million dollars a year in the United States (Dank et al., 2014).

Over the years research has increased the understanding of the commercial sex industry and its relationship to the internet. In the 2018 there was estimate of 363,844,662 population size in North America (Internet World Stats, 2019). Among this population size 345,660,847 are estimated to be internet users, resulting in 95% of the population using the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2019). With the amount of internet users, the convenience, and ability to connect to

almost anyone it is not a surprise the Internet has become the tool of choice by many looking to sell and purchase sex and the marketplace of commercial sexual exploitation (Shared Hope International). Shared Hope Internationals reported a Google search revealing 2.2 million websites with the search terms, 'escort service' in English only," (Demand). The internet is flooded with escort ads. One study revealed an estimate of 150,000 new escort ads are posted to the internet every day. (Thorn 2019). The Internet has, "reshaped, expanded, and repackaged the availability of all types of sexual services over the past decade," (Sanders 2008, 63).

What does this have to do with sex trafficking, though? It is estimated there are 40.3 million victims of human trafficking worldwide (Polaris, 2017). A study that took a closer look and examined advertisement of survivors of sex trafficking reported internet trends revealing from 2004 to current day, 75% of survivors of human trafficking reported the internet was used to advertise themselves (Thorn 2014). This is a nearly doubled increase compared to the 38% of survivors of sex trafficking reporting they were advertised online before 2004 (Thorn 2014). This research revealed a 61% decrease in the amount of sex trafficking survivors who were advertised on the streets in times past. (Thorn 2014). Survivors reported not only were they advertised online but traffickers would have the survivors write their own ads and even trained survivors to give specific indicators to advertise that the survivors were underaged (Thorn 2014).

In recent years awareness has grown in the public eye on the internet being used as a tool to sell victims of sex trafficking; specifically, Backpage.com. Backpage.com has been scrutinized in studies and even the documentary I am Jane Doe. In one study it was reported after a week analysis over 54,000 ads were posted in the United States under the dating section of Backpage.com (Sold in America: The Buyers, 2018). After multiple investigations, on April 6th, 2018, Backpage.com was shut down by the FBI due to the sex trafficking taking place on their website. (Dumas, 2018). Between 2006 and 2017 it was reported by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, that Backpage.com was involved in 74% of all reports received of online child sex trafficking (Sold in America: The Buyers, 2018). Yet even with the efforts to shutdown Backpage.com, escorts ads are still rampant on the internet and many are seeing this as an opportunity to expand their market, "According to software firm Marinus Analytics, Backpage had around 133,000 sex ads posted on its site the month before the operation was closed. The researchers examined existing U.S. escort websites and tracked them from mid-

September to mid-October, finding that there were roughly 146,000 sex ads online during that time period," (Dumas, 2018).

Efforts have been made to understand the underground commercial sex industry in different states, major cities in the United States, and even internationally, but there is little research to none over the commercial sex industry in Oklahoma. A focus on the role the Internet has played in the commercial sex industry has increased in recent years, but little exists in regard to assessing on the side of demand. Noor Tagouri states, "There's one factor in the sex trade that's usually ignored: the buyers. Their money fuels the demand for sex," (Sold in America: The Buyers, 2018). This project adds to research focusing on uncovering the demand for sex but brings in a unique voice to reveal the demand for sex in Oklahoma, the perception Oklahoma Citizens in human trafficking, and how this relates to sex trafficking taking place in Oklahoma.

Victims of the Commercial Sex Demand

Human Trafficking is an underground crime taking place all over the world including the United States. It is particularly problematic in its study due to the difficulty to give completely accurate statistics due to the under reporting of the crime. Underreporting can occur due to human trafficking being misidentified as another crime, due to victims not reporting out of fear for their safety, and other reasons such as the trafficker never being identified and caught. In 2000 the Trafficking Victims Protection Act was passed and Human trafficking was/is defined federally as, "... a crime involving the exploitation of someone for the purposes of compelled labor or a commercial sex act through the use of force, fraud, or coercion," (National Human Trafficking Hotline, 2019).

Human trafficking can be broken down into two types; labor trafficking and sex trafficking. Sex trafficking is, "the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purposes of a commercial sex act, in which the commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age (22 USC § 7102)," (National Human Trafficking Hotline, 2019). According to the International Labor Organization there is an estimate of 40.3 million victims of human trafficking globally (Polaris, 2017). The International Labor Organization estimates there is about 4.8 million victims of sex trafficking globally (Polaris, 2017). Since 2007 The National Human Trafficking Hotline has identified over 34,700

cases of sex trafficking in the United States (2019). This is not including the hotline calls operated from local state organizations/nonprofits throughout the United States but represents the National Human Trafficking Hotline's statistics.

Between 2012 and 2018, the National Human Trafficking Hotline identified an increase from 473 cases of human trafficking in Oklahoma, to 678 identified at the *High* level. Cases categorized as '*High'* contain a high level of indicators of human trafficking. The National Human Trafficking Hotline has reported a total of 1,636 calls from Oklahoma, and this is not including Oklahoma's local organization. The Dragonfly Home, Oklahoma first and only state certified crisis center for human trafficking survivors, has reported a total number of over 3,000 hotline calls since their certification in 2016 (M. McNeill, Personal Correspondence, April 12th, 2019)

Human trafficking is taking place in Oklahoma and the effects of this trauma not only require immediate response, but years of follow-up services as well. Victims of sex trafficking may suffer from physical injuries due to the abuse inflicted upon them, but even hidden psychological wounds requiring longer trauma informed care, "Victims of human trafficking may suffer from anxiety, panic disorder, major depression, substance abuse, and eating disorders as well as a combination of these," (Treating the Hidden Wounds, 2008). Many victims even develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Treating the Hidden Wounds, 2008). Services required to truly advocate and support the long term effects of the trauma endured by the survivor of human trafficking can range from, but aren't limited to, court advocacy, specialized case management, emergency shelter, food, clothing, legal assistance/legal advocacy, children's services, mental health counseling/therapy, document and/or ID retrieval, transportation, substance abuse support and recovery, vocational training, assistance with victim crime compensation, resume and job placement assistance, parenting and life skills class, immigration document assistance, SANE (sexual assault nurse examiner) exams, and assistance with victim protection orders (The Dragonfly Home, 2019). The one-time decision of a contributor to the commercial sex industry contribute to the long-term trauma these survivors have to carry every day for a crime done against them.

Evaluation Plan

In order to gain a greater understanding of the demand in Oklahoma, a research project

sponsored by the Knee Center for Strong Families in the Anne and Henry Zarrow School of Social Work at the University of Oklahoma replicated Lara Jenson's study from Chicagoland area named *Our Greatest Hobby*. The primary investigator collected and analysed information from the *USA Sex Guide Oklahoma* forum boards in order to gain a greater understanding of who is purchasing sex in Oklahoma and how this contributes to human trafficking. This research consists primarily of mainly data collected from the forums; *Tulsa Massage Parlors, Tulsa Escort Services, OKC Street Walker Reports, OKC Massage Parlors.* In total *n*=644 posts from 1,237 postings were analyzed. This included 107 posts containing information on (1) context, (2) visiting members, (3) justifications for purchasing sex, and (4) law enforcement. All data were collected between the dates of July 6th, 2018 and August 17th, 2018. Grounded theory was used to identify themes emerging from the data to give an insight over the demand for sex in the state of Oklahoma.

Findings

The research collected from the USA Sex Guide revealed exactly 98 forums have been created on the USA Sex Guide in the Oklahoma section. This section is broken down by topics within cities, as seen below.

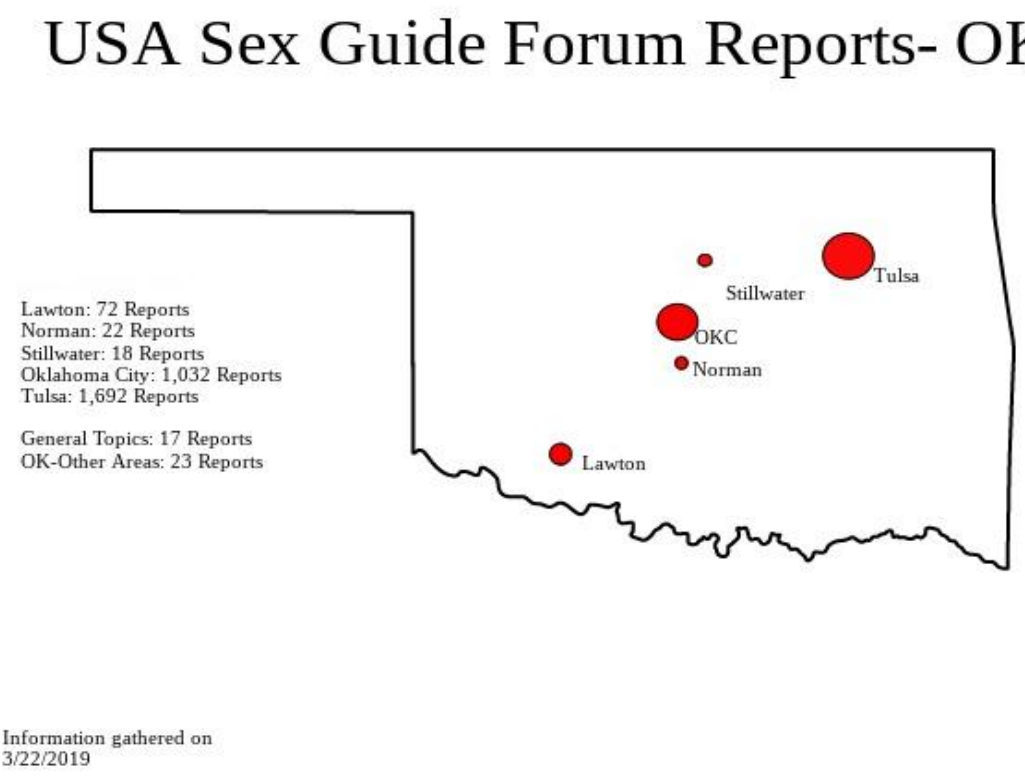
- General topics -14 forums
- Lawton -15 forums
- Norman-14 forums
- Oklahoma City- 14 forums
- Stillwater- 18 forums
- Tulsa-14 forums
- Oklahoma Other Areas- 14 forums.

Within these forums a total of 2,876 reports were identified. General topics receiving 17 reports, Lawton receiving 72 reports, Norman receiving 22 reports, Oklahoma City receiving 1,032 reports, Stillwater receiving 18 reports, Tulsa receiving 1692 reports, and Oklahoma *other area*s receiving 23 reports. When examining the data from the USA Sex Guide, in the first wave of coding, the researcher identified **three primary themes** from the information given through

the 107 posts examined. These themes were labeled, "Objectification," "Human Trafficking Signs," and "Knowledge of Human Trafficking."

The "objectification" theme represents comments made that reduce the individual to an object. The theme "Human Trafficking Signs," represents statements either identifying information of the individual having a vulnerability (runaway, doesn't speak English) or demonstrating potential signs for human trafficking defined by Oklahoma first and only state certified Human Trafficking Crisis Center, The Dragonfly Home; accompanied by individual, evidence of controlling or dominating relationship (excessive concerns about pleasing a family member, romantic partner, or employer), fearful or nervous behaviors, substance abuse/addiction, sleep deprived, under the age of 18.

The theme "Knowledge of Human Trafficking" represents comments made in regard to an acknowledgement of the girl being under the control of someone else (abusive boyfriend, pimp, handler) or the comment about their own personal knowledge of human trafficking. In the initial coding of this information 63 posts out of 107 were identified to be "Objectification," 12



of the 107 were identified to have “Signs of Human Trafficking,” and 11 of the 107 were identified to have “Knowledge of Human Trafficking.”

First Wave Coding

Theme	Percentage of people who mentioned this.	Direct Quote
Objectification	58.87%	"Young sexy chocolate drops with tight bodies...Remember good chocolate melts in your mouth and **** is some fine ASS chocolate."
Human Trafficking Signs	11.21%	"I have had a time or two when I got to know a provider and knew they had a shitty 'behind the scenes' life. I have $150 (all I had) about 15 years ago to a gal to get out of the hobby, move out of state, and start over. Saw her six months later at a different shop and she showed me a scar on her lowerleg from the fight when the 'boyfriend' caught her trying to get her stuff and leave. Whether that's right or wrong, and whether I was taken for $150 or not, I just couldn't let myself get emotionally involved with folks who existnece couldn't coincide with mine beyond that occasional hour of personal bliss."
Knowledge of Human Trafficking	10.28%	"I've wondered if 'slavery' has been broadened to include of age ladies who get pimped into drugs and sex and can't get out...a small town girl with a pimp caught in a cycle maybe she can't get out? have I ever seen ladies on the stroll that were too close to 18 to even offer a ride? you betcha. Do i think that bp/cl makeit easier for **** stuff to happen? you betcha, if bp goes away will the problem? no way. On a lighter note, lots of ladies strolling sunday afternoon."

Once this step was completed the entire sample of posts n=107 were split into two categories; (1) posts containing information about the women involved, “pimps”/”handlers” and/or their personal experiences and (2) all other posts [law enforcement, rules of the website, conversations among the members]. Of these 70 posts were identified and selected into category one. Doing this increased the percentage of posts containing these coding themes. The “Objectification” coding increased by 31.13%, the “Human Trafficking Signs” coding increased by 5.93%, and the coding for “Knowledge of Human Trafficking increased by 5.43%.

Second Wave Coding

Theme	Percentage of people who mentioned this.	Direct Quote
Objectification	90.00%	"Young sexy chocolate drops with tight bodies...Remember good chocolate melts in your mouth and **** is some fine ASS chocolate."
Human Trafficking Signs	17.14%	"I have had a time or two when I got to know a provider and knew they had a shitty 'behind the scenes' life. I have $150 (all I had) about 15 years ago to a gal to get out of the hobby, move out of state, and start over. Saw her six months later at a different shop and she showed me a scar on her lowerleg from the fight when the 'boyfriend' caught her trying to get her stuff and leave. Whether that's right or wrong, and whether I was taken for $150 or not, I just couldn't let myself get emotionally involved with folks who existnece couldn't coincide with mine beyond that occasional hour of personal bliss."
Knowledge of Human Trafficking	15.71%	"I've wondered if 'slavery' has been broadened to include of age ladies who get pimped into drugs and sex and can't get out...a small town girl with a pimp caught in a cycle maybe she can't get out? have I ever seen ladies on the stroll that were too close to 18 to even offer a ride? you betcha. Do i think that bp/cl makeit easier for **** stuff to happen? you betcha, if bp goes away will the problem? no way. On a lighter note, lots of ladies strolling sunday afternoon."

Coding was also done to identify typical misconceptions on human trafficking in Oklahoma, as identified by anti-trafficking professionals. These included (1) that people purchasing sex are from outside of Oklahoma and (2) the highway system is the one if not the biggest contributing factor to human trafficking in Oklahoma. Data were coded that used the language for "highway" or "interstate". Out of the *n*=107 posts analyzed, only one post mentioned the word highway. This is 0.98% of the posts included any information about the highway system and it was in regard to a meeting location.

In addition to this information, the geographic area of Tulsa was mentioned at the highest levels, when controlling for qualitative data related to geographic location. This is a far stretch from the Oklahoma City I-35/I-40 intersection thought to be a major contributing factor to the human trafficking issue in Oklahoma. Data were analyzed how assess how many of these forum members indicated they were traveling. In the first round of coding the researcher coded any forum posts indicating the individual was from out of town, traveling for work, or passing through Oklahoma. Of the 107 posts 9 posts were identified to have information indicating the individual was traveling or passing through, 8.41%. During the second round of coding the researcher specifically looked through these posts for identifying information the individual wasn't just traveling from a different city in the state, but actually from out of state. Of these 107

posts only 4 posts were identified with information where the person identified they were from outside the state of Oklahoma, 3.73%.

Theme	Percentage of people who mentioned this.	Direct Quote
Highway System	0.98%	"...at a place on ** taking a right off of the highway. Anybody run into her elsewhere?"
Traveling Men	8.41%	"I was in Tulsa for the weekend and decided to have another dream at ******...."
Traveling Men who Specified They Lived Out of State.	3.73%	"As it turned out, flights were being delyaed acrossthe board, but how knew. Your town got hotter as the days passed. Would I return? If little sweetie was going to be on the menu, yes."

While this is information gathered from one website, though there are more, and it is giving an indication into what the commercial sex industry looks like in Oklahoma. It looks like men purchasing sex through websites like backpage.com, craigslist, etc. are more likely to be from the state of Oklahoma, and not simply passing through.

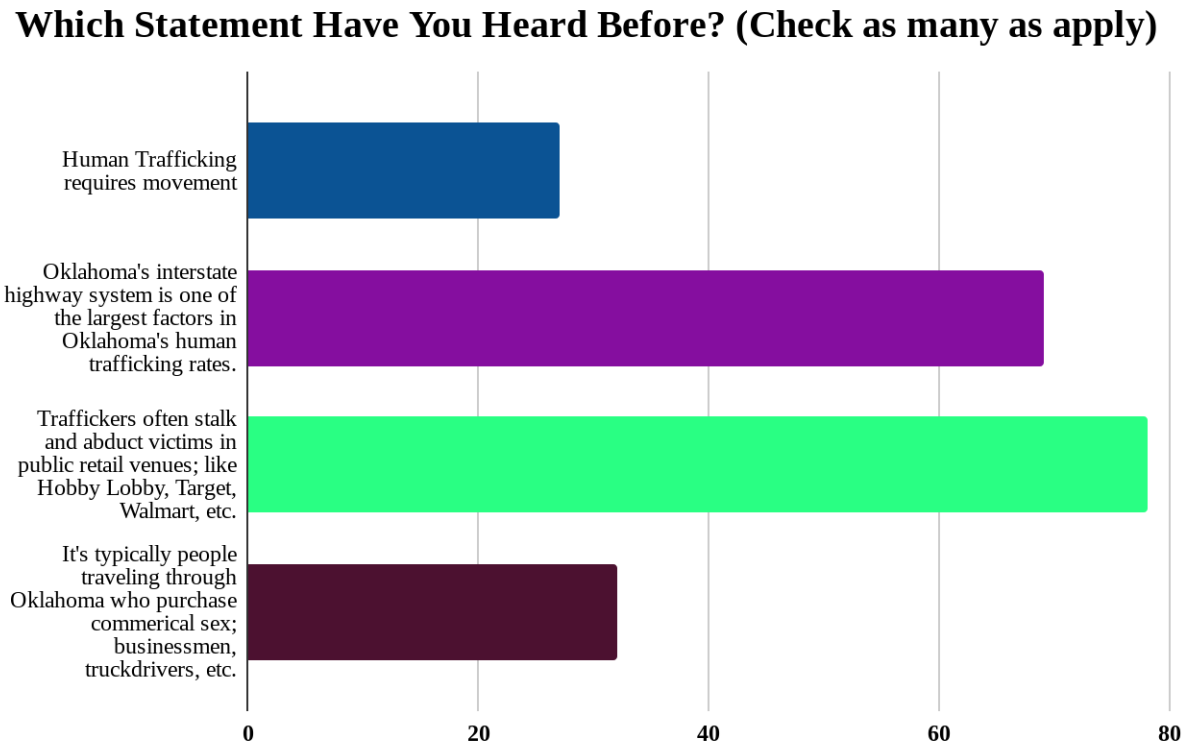
The Perceived Demand by Oklahoma Citizens

During the course of this study, and after interviews with professionals, a common theme came forth from the conversations; "Human trafficking is not because of Oklahoma's highway system(s)." Mike Snowden, Agent-in-Charge Human Trafficking Division at Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics, stated, "Everybody is blaming the highways, and everybody is blaming crazy stuff. 20 years ago, when I was working dope you want to know what we blamed it on? The highways. Oklahoma has a major cartel presence and drug problem because of I-35 and I-44. I used to laugh and say, 'No, we have cocaine here because we want cocaine.' It's all demand driven..." (M. McNeill, Personal Interview, July 25th, 2018).

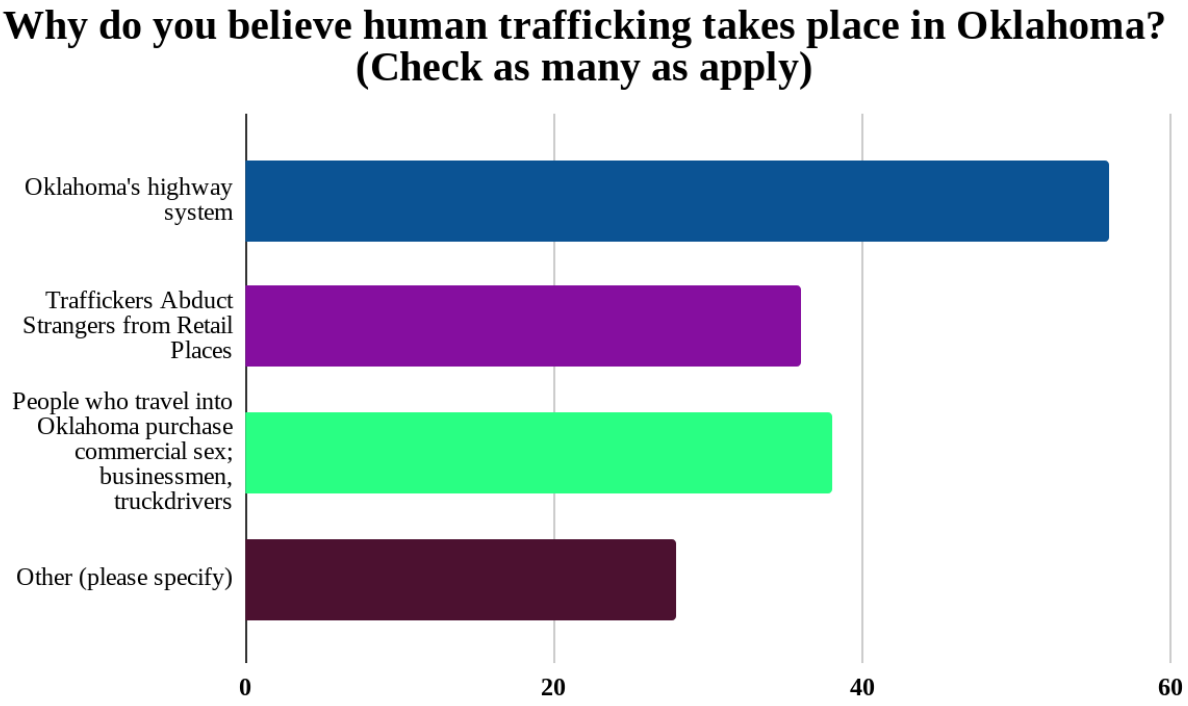
The Dragonfly Home, Oklahoma's first state certified crisis center for human trafficking survivors, dispels this misconception on their website under "Human Trafficking: Common Misconceptions," by stating, "Misconception: The interstate highway system is the largest factor in determining a state's human trafficking rates. It's important to remember that human trafficking exists because there is a demand for illicit sex and cheap labor/products. The demand is to blame for this crime," (The Dragonfly Home, 2019). Yet other website available to the public hold this "said" misconception. Oklahoma's Commission on the Status of Women states on their Website, "Oklahoma's central location is believed to play a major role in trafficking

cases; with its three major interstate highways, I-35, I-40, and I- 44, Oklahoma cities are on major human trafficking routes throughout all ports, north, east, and west, providing a crossroads to human trafficking," (Human Trafficking, 2017).

A survey was done to see if this was true. The interviewer sent out an electronic and anonymous survey on December 19th, 2018 through social media and email. The anonymous survey asked three questions: Do you live in Oklahoma, Which Statement have you heard before [check all that apply] (Human Trafficking requires movement, Oklahoma's interstate highway system is one of the largest factors in Oklahoma's human trafficking rates, Traffickers often stalk and abduct victims in public retail venues; like Hobby Lobby, Target, Walmart, Etc., It's typically people travelling through Oklahoma who purchase commercial sex; businessmen, truck drivers, etc.), Why do you believe human trafficking takes place in Oklahoma: check all that apply (Oklahoma's highway system, Traffickers abduct strangers from retail parking lots, People who travel into Oklahoma purchase commercial sex; business men, truck drivers, etc., other: please specify [blank area for respondents to fill out what they believe]) received 100 responses.



In the survey around 70% of respondents (98) said they have heard “Oklahoma’s interstate highway system is one of the largest factors in Oklahoma’s human trafficking rates,” (Table 1) and 56% percent of respondents stated they believed, “...human trafficking takes place in Oklahoma because of Oklahoma highway system,” (Table 2) Though this is a common misconception- 1 out of 2 people believe Oklahoma’s highway system is to blame for human trafficking.



Unfortunately, this misconception is not unique to Oklahoma. With a simple google search over human trafficking and highway systems articles from other states referenced the highway system as the reason for human trafficking demand. An article over Human Trafficking in Pennsylvania reported, “Pennsylvania, in particular, is uniquely situated and prime for exploitation, in part because of our interstate roadways and highway system…we are a pass-through state’, she said. “It can be easy to bring victims into an area and get out undetected,” (Meyer, 2019). Another journal in Ohio references the highway system playing a role in susceptibility in human trafficking taking place in Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Arkansas,

Virginia, Georgia, Maryland, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, California, Florida, Louisiana, and the District of Columbia (RAND, 2007). In Texas the "vast highway system" is given as a factor to create opportunities for human trafficking to "flourish", (Texas Human Trafficking Prevention Task Force, 2013). In Alabama I-20 was blamed for being "Sex Trafficking Superhighway", (Sims, 2016). The three major highways in Nashville Tennessee are thought to be the reason for human trafficking in Tennessee (Free for Life, 2019). Oklahoma citizens are not alone in believing this about their own state. What if this isn't the cause or real reason for human trafficking?

What the data continues to suggest is that interstate systems are far less connected to these acts than previously thought. What is to blame? Traffickers and purchasers. The Human Trafficking Institute states, "In this sense, we are not forced merely to endure the consequences of human trafficking. Human trafficking is not a naturally occurring phenomenon. It is a choice," (Richmond, 2017). The true reason for human trafficking taking place in Oklahoma is the supply through traffickers and the demand Oklahoma has through their own citizens purchasing sex. Whitney Anderson, executive director of the Dragonfly Home gave us her insight to this common misconception, "So many of us have been feed the popular and false narrative that highway systems are to blame for the issue of sex trafficking. This is a grossly oversimplified, and quite frankly, lazy explanation of a very complex issue. No business, illicit or otherwise, can exist without demand for its products or services. I learned quickly through providing care for hundreds of sex trafficking victim/survivors in Oklahoma, that so many of these individuals are exploited and brutalized- beaten, strangled, raped, tortured- all at the hands of traffickers and sex purchasers right here in Oklahoma. There is a demand for illicit sex in Oklahoma. Period. This means that the very thing we are trying to fight is fed by the deviant appetites of sex purchasers in our own communities," (M. McNeill, Personal Correspondence, April 12th, 2019) As Mike Snowden stated, "if there were no roads in Oklahoma we would have human trafficking. We like to put the boogie man outside. All of our victims are victimized from someone from somewhere else. All of our victims are from somewhere else. It can't be the little girl I interviewed... [from] a middle-class suburban town," (M. McNeill, Personal Interview, July 25th, 2018).

Discussion

These facts matter because in order to identify human trafficking and to combat it within the state of Oklahoma, citizens need to be sober minded and understand what is happening. It's not Taken, it's our neighbors, it's not just businessmen, it's actually mostly our citizens in our state, "This is 'dating' on steroids with no moral boundaries. In a weird sort of way, it would be easier if this whole mythology about snatching somebody off the street that I've never met before [happened]. That would be easier to prevent, but I have never seen that happen. You talk to the Dragonfly Home and they have never seen that happen. No one has seen that happen," (M. McNeill, Personal Interview, July 25th, 2018). Oklahoma cannot combat human trafficking if it keeps looking over the actual victims. Rebecca Bender, a leading voice in the anti-trafficking movement in the United States, was a victim of human trafficking. She was a victim sex trafficking through by who she thought was someone who loved her in Las Vegas. She states this, "Sensationalism has fueled misidentification in every city. I think the more advocates keep using images of duct taped handcuffed women thrown in dirty mattresses on the corner, I think the more we as a culture keep really marketing the issue of human trafficking incorrectly, the more we'll keep looking past the real victims that walk amongst," (Exodus Cry, 2018). Oklahoma has to look at who the real victims are in order to truly bring healing and help to those who are a victim to modern day slavery. This is not because of the highway. Highways cannot make people purchase sex. Inanimate objects cannot make people purchase sex. Oklahoma citizens purchase sex and not only are contributing the demand but are the force and creators of the demand by partaking. The state of Oklahoma has a culture of tolerance, "A culture of tolerance surrounds the marketplace of commercial sexual exploitation...cultures of tolerance differ from country to country, and sometimes vary within countries or even cities, but the essence is the same: societal acceptance backed by political tolerance. Marketplaces of commercial sexual exploitation require some level of tolerance within the community in order to exist," (Shared Hope International, 2007).

Summary

A solution to ending Human Trafficking is not easy to find. When there is not an easy solution it can be overwhelming. Where does one go from here? After understanding human trafficking is taking place in Oklahoma's own backyard what can one person do to combat this? There is hope and there are things one individual can do. Whitney Anderson, executive director and co-founder, explained what one person can truly do, "Crime requires comprehensive approach and solution. Public education and professional training so people can recognize what this looks like in their community and professional roles, pushing legislatures to see this crime seriously, pushing legislatures to curb demand. Below are a few recommended strategies to address these issues in Oklahoma:

- First; Find a local organization that combats this crime and support it in whatever way they can.
- Second; Educate our youth to help with strategies on how to be safer and educate them on what techniques traffickers use to prey upon them.
- Third; Do your due diligence in researching legitimate organizations state statutes. Look for required licensure or certification," (Whitney Anderson, 2019).

Everyone has their part in ending human trafficking. This may look like educating and bringing awareness to others. This may look like bringing awareness to youth, being a youth mentor who provides a healthy relationship for a child without any or volunteering with an anti-trafficking organization. Though it may look different for everyone there is a solution that never works. Oklahoma must not turn a blind eye to the human trafficking taking place in its own state. Oklahoma is causing the demand for sex trafficking and citizens must respond to this. Gary Haugen, CEO of the International Justice Mission, an organization dedicated to fight against human trafficking globally stated this, "When our grandchildren ask us where we were when the voiceless of our era needed leaders of compassion and purpose, I hope we can say we showed up, and we showed up on time." This is the response Oklahoma needs; to show up and show up on time.

Contact info

- Madison McNeill

  Maddie.e.mcneill@gmail.com
- The Knee Center for Strong Families

  Director – Dr. David McLeod

  damcleod@ou.edu
- The Dragonfly Home

  Office Number: 405.212.3378

  The Dragonfly Home's 24-Hour Confidential Human Trafficking Help Line

  Local: 405.212.3377

  Toll Free: 855.674.4767
- Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drug Control

  Local: 405.521.2885

  Toll Free: 800.522.8031

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