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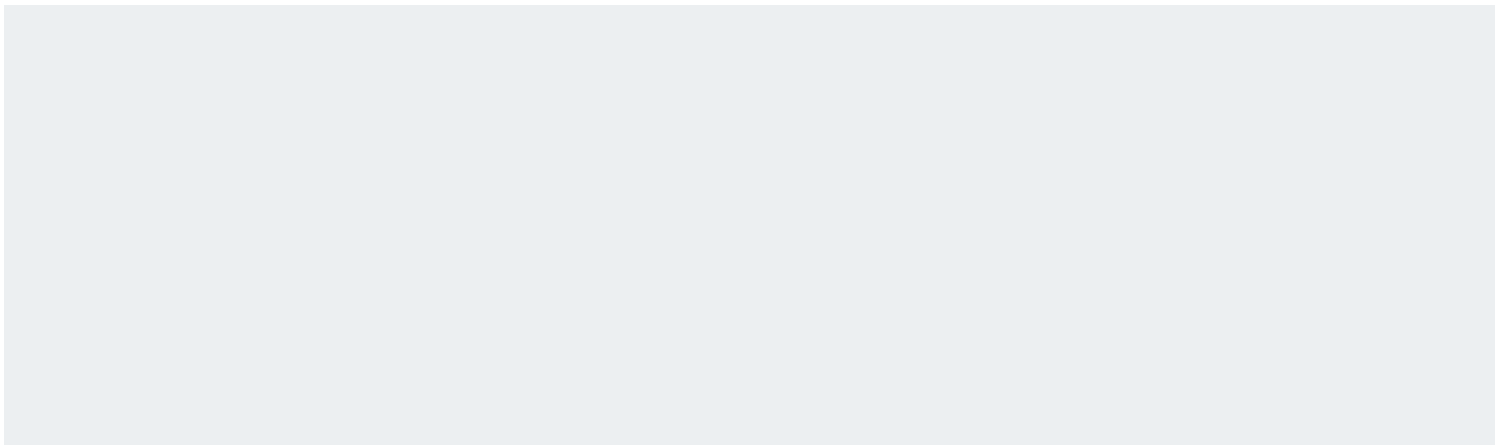
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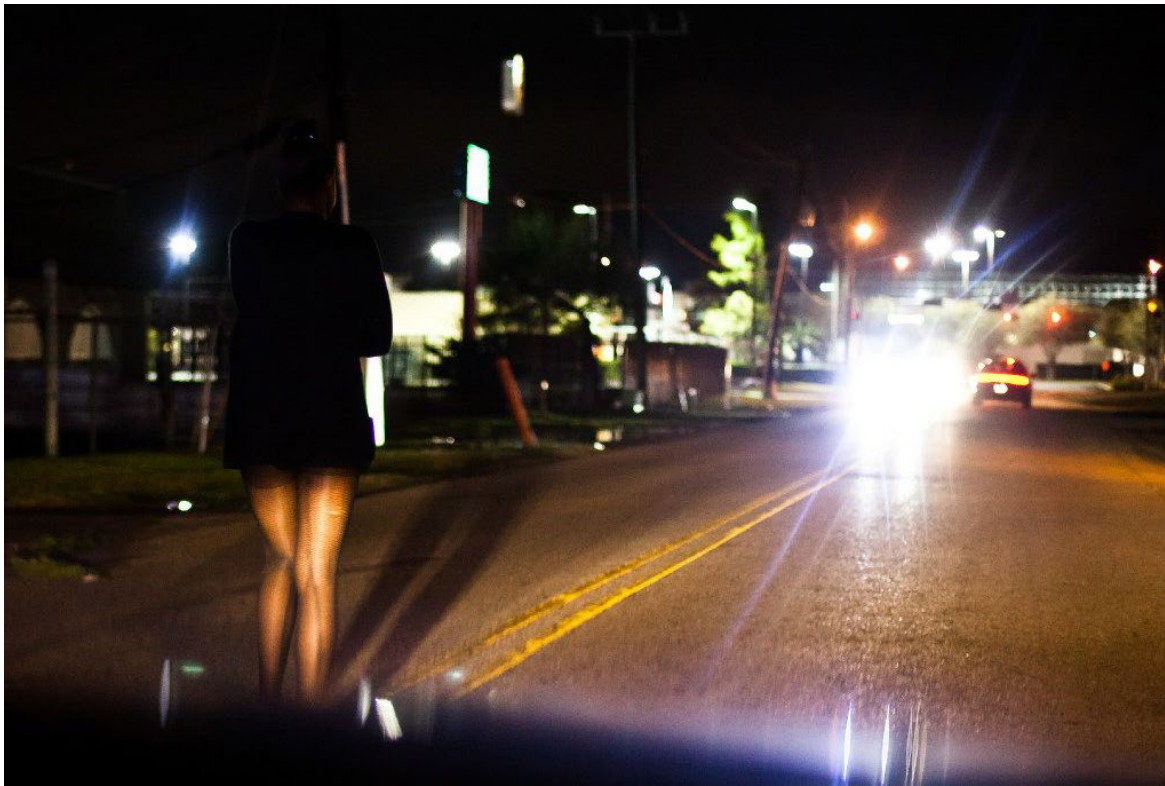
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OPINION  
COMMENTARY

# Texas is getting serious about stopping sex trafficking, but we need more resources

A key finding is that the crime of minor and youth commercial sex trafficking does not vary much by region. Where there is vulnerability, there will be exploitation. What differs among regions in Texas, however, are the services available.





To make money for her pimp, Sarah, 16, had sex with the men who responded to ads he posted online. (Callie Richmond / The Texas Tribune)

By Bruce Kellison|Contributor and Melissa I.M. Torres|Contributor  
9:23 AM on Apr 8, 2019



When Florida prosecutors charged New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft with soliciting sex services from a day spa, they shed light on an elaborate trafficking ring that lured immigrants to the United States from China with promises of employment as restaurant workers but forced them to work as sex slaves.

Closer to home in Texas that same month, state officials withheld an annual subsidy of \$25 million to the Circuit of the Americas because managers failed to submit a required plan to address potential sex trafficking at the racetrack.

These headlines show that authorities are getting serious about stopping sex trafficking. But more needs to be done to protect the most vulnerable in Texas from being exploited. As a state, we need to adjust the way we address victims who can be resistant to receiving some services.



New research on human trafficking extends much of what we already know to be true about child commercial sexual exploitation: Traffickers exploit the most vulnerable young people every day in our neighborhoods far more commonly than at major events.

The most at-risk minors and youths include those with a history of child abuse or maltreatment, those who have run away from home or who are homeless, those who have extreme economic need, or a combination of these factors. In a recent study, researchers at the University of Texas at Austin asked 466 at-risk youths between the ages of 13 and 27 in three regions in Texas about their life experiences in commercial sexual exploitation.

Survivors' experiences, in their own words, illustrated how complex the crime of commercial sexual exploitation can be, and how harmful the concept of an "ideal" victim is for service providers. Perpetrators can be intimate partners, family members, strangers or pimps. The exploitation itself can range from survival sex as a minor, to selling sex for drugs, to pimp-controlled commercial sexual exploitation.

ADVERTISING

A key finding is that the crime of minor and youth commercial sex trafficking does not vary much by region. Where there is vulnerability, there will be exploitation. What differs among regions in Texas, however, are the services available.

Some regions have well-integrated levels of care that range from drop-in centers for homeless youths, to shelters and residential centers for identified victims. Other regions, such as the Rio Grande Valley, lack accessible resources and need greater cultural competency to understand the experiences of at-risk youths in the area.

We must strengthen the safety net for at-risk youths. Prevention programs should focus on healthy relationship education and training for youths, because almost every instance of sex trafficking starts with a relationship gone wrong, whether it be family, romantic or confidant.

We also must prevent trafficking from its starting point. Early intervention should focus on offering services that are sensitive to the needs of survivors of violence and abuse who have faced many types of trauma, and it should include their family in any assistance that navigates their intersecting needs. This should involve a variety of services, from housing and education, to health and mental health, to legal assistance.

ADVERTISING

Continued training is needed among service professionals to close gaps. Those gaps include the differences in how service providers define commercial sexual exploitation of a child and which services are needed versus how the minors themselves define their experience and their needs.

The state was right to withhold money from Circuit of the Americas. Preventing child sex trafficking at major sporting events can bring attention to the issue, but more resources spent on the most vulnerable youths across the state can create a safer and healthier Texas for them.

*Bruce Kellison is the director of the Bureau of Business Research and co-directs the Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault at the University of Texas at Austin.*

*Melissa I.M. Torres is a human trafficking researcher in the Bureau of Business Research at the University of Texas at Austin.*



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Bruce Kellison|Contributor

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Melissa I.M. Torres|Contributor

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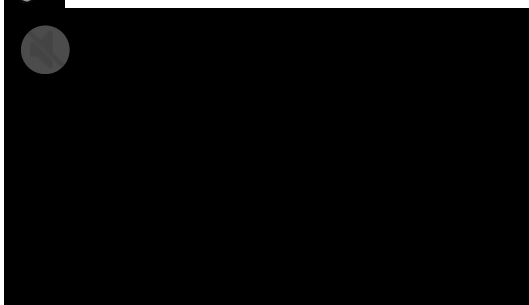
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