



Hiding in the Shadows

The toll of
human trafficking
in Madison.

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When you think of the term “human trafficking,” what comes to mind? Perhaps you envision a flyer posted in a gas station bathroom or airport, with a number to call or text if you’re being held against your will. Or maybe it feels like a far-flung problem that you’ve heard about in passing, but it’s not really happening *here* — is it?

The stark reality is that human trafficking, which is defined as the illegal trade of humans against their will for the purposes of sexual exploitation or forced labor, *is* happening in our area — and a number of experts and nonprofits can speak to its prevalence locally.

“Human trafficking occurs in cities, suburbs and rural areas; it is a statewide issue,” says City of Madison Police Department (MPD) sensitive crimes detective Shannon Siirila.

The issue is significant enough that Wisconsin law enforcement agencies, including the MPD, the Wisconsin Department of Criminal Investigation and the FBI office in Madison each employ a full-time detective to work human trafficking cases. Siirila adds that just recently, the Dane County Sheriff’s Office also added a full-time human trafficking detective.

The goal of human traffickers is to take advantage of individual vulnerabilities to exploit others for monetary gain.

“Trafficked individuals are under the control of another,” explains Siirila, “[and are] coerced to engage in commercial sex or labor for money or something of value through force, fraud and threats.”

It’s a complex issue, says Diane Hanson, founder of United Madison, a cause marketing nonprofit that has studied the issue and held a panel discussion with local experts on the topic this past April. United Madison chose the topic for a multifaceted public service campaign (unitedmadison.com/trafficking) because of its increasing presence in Madison.

According to Hanson, there are

multiple ways that traffickers exert control over someone who is being victimized*. In the beginning, a person who has been victimized is led to believe that the trafficker is taking care of them and fulfilling their needs, providing food or shelter, for example. As the relationship evolves, traffickers will use control tactics such as threatening the person’s family members, access to addictive substances or stealing their identification documents to keep the trafficking relationship going.

The caveat is, much like sexual assault, experts agree that it’s an underreported crime, and current statistics don’t reflect the “real” numbers. Even more difficult is that some people being victimized don’t *realize* they’re being trafficked. However, as people who work with human trafficking survivors can testify, it’s a much bigger problem locally than most people recognize — and it extracts a profound toll on people caught in its grips.



Shannon Siirila

**The terms “people being victimized” and “trafficking survivors” are used interchangeably throughout this story. Human trafficking experts note the term “victim” isn’t the preferred terminology, but this is still evolving. The word “victim” is used in direct quotes throughout from anyone who was interviewed and used that term.*



Susan Alan-Lee

"It's a Problem in Our Own Community"

Detective Siirila has a friendly face, yet authoritative presence. She's dressed casually, in a black top and blazer, with her badge showing. It's clear that in her 24 years on the police force, she's seen it all — and not much can throw her off.

During an April 2022 panel discussion in Madison on human trafficking, Siirila talks about a case that she worked six years ago. She was investigating the sexual assault of a teenager in Madison, which was also a human trafficking case. After describing the extremely sad twist of events in the case, Siirila pauses and becomes visibly upset, shaking her head. (Siirila says out of respect to the victim's family, she prefers BRAVA not share more detail about the case.) She looks at the audience, simply stating that human trafficking is happening — right here in our city. Siirila says the case still haunts her today.

"[That case] was life-altering," says Siirila when we speak to her again in late July. "And unfortunately, we

have so many cases like that. People don't realize what a problem we have. There wouldn't be a full-time detective working for the city if [human trafficking] wasn't such a problem."

Susan Alan-Lee, forensic nurse examiner at UnityPoint Health — Meriter in Madison, agrees. "It's convenient to think of trafficking as something that only exists somewhere else and only happens to someone else," she says. Alan-Lee says that UnityPoint's forensic nurse examiner

"It's convenient to think of trafficking as something that only exists somewhere else and only happens to someone else."

— Susan Alan-Lee

program serves anywhere between 450-650 patients in Madison — though patients may be from outside of the area as well.

Typically, patients are seen by a forensic nurse examiner if they are a victim of a crime or sexual assault — or suspected human trafficking. Alan-Lee says that UnityPoint sees people who have been trafficked "monthly." In fact, she says that 50% of people who have been victimized encounter the health care system while being trafficked. It could be that they have contracted a sexually transmitted disease, or are simply in poor health due to lack of resources from being under a trafficker's control.

During the human trafficking panel discussion, Alan-Lee recounts how a local trafficking survivor kept getting dropped off at the ER close to death several times. It turned out the person being victimized had type 1 diabetes, and they would "work" for a while under their trafficker without getting proper medical attention. Then they would become so ill again their



trafficker would drop them off at the ER to obtain medical attention. The person would be nursed back to health, leave the hospital and the cycle would begin again. (Alan-Lee says every time this particular person being victimized came in, staff did share resources with them about how to obtain help, if they wanted it.)

Due to what she sees on a daily, and monthly, basis, Alan-Lee confirms: “It’s now coming to light that human trafficking is not somebody else’s problem — it’s a problem occurring in our own community that we need to face.”

A Shadowy Enterprise

In 2019 the Bureau of Justice Statistics registered 614 national prison admissions for a trafficking offense. In Wisconsin, The Human Trafficking Hotline (humantraffickinghotline.org) reported 337 contacts in 2020 with 97 trafficking reports on file. Most people being trafficked are women, and most of the cases involve sex trafficking. But again, experts agree these statistics are woefully underreported.

So if the problem is so significant, why do the numbers fail to capture the scale of this crime? For one, Siirila says that many cases are actually reported as something *other* than human trafficking, but upon further investigation, may turn out to be a trafficking case.

“Everybody wants stats [on this], but it’s difficult to do this because it may go under . . . being identified as something other than human trafficking. But if you’re working these cases [like we are] — you *know* it’s underreported,”

she explains. “In some cases [this is] because of threats made to the victim by the trafficker. [For example] if a police officer is answering a disturbance call, the victim may be fearful to talk to the police, and as a result it will be unreported, or reported as something other than human trafficking. But the number of trafficking cases is not an accurate reflection [currently] due to so many variables.”

Jan Miyasaki of Madison’s Project Respect, a nonprofit that assists trafficking survivors, says that a 2017 change in Wisconsin law means that some human trafficking cases are being identified and tracked, but these statistics do not come close to representing the true stats.

“Even with the new law, there is no mandated, centralized reporting on human trafficking,” says Miyasaki, which she says remains a significant impediment to understanding the true scale of the issue.

“There are so many barriers to understanding the true scale of

Sex Trafficking is Happening in Madison

When you see someone you think of as a “sex worker”, consider this:

- Most people in this industry are not given a choice.
- They are forced by traffickers or pimps to comply. If they don’t, they are severely abused and loved ones are threatened.
- There are many barriers to overcome and options are limited for those who want help.
- Learn what you can do to help at unitedmadison.com/trafficking



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SEX TRAFFICKING
Voices for the vulnerable
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trafficking locally,” agrees Hanson, “but we do know that there are 150-200 ads placed every day [online] selling sex here in Madison, and most of those involve an individual being forced or coerced.” (Essentially, a trafficker is selling the “services” of the person being victimized in the ad.)

Hanson says that increasingly, health care settings are a crucial place to identify people being trafficked. She says that new screening measures are being developed and tested in local health care settings with the goal of understanding the scope of the issue so resources can be best utilized to support those being victimized. With some simple changes to patient evaluation protocols and interview questions, clinic and inpatient health care staff can identify more people who have been victimized. Staff can then connect them to health care resources, such as a forensic nursing team, for further assistance.

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— Diane Hanson

“There are so many reasons sexual violence and trafficking goes unreported,” says Missy Mael, co-executive director of the RCC Sexual Violence Resource Center (formerly known as the Rape Crisis Center, or RCC) in Madison. “In some cases, the survivor doesn’t even realize that what they are experiencing is trafficking at all. They think they are in a romantic relationship with someone who is giving them love and attention and fulfilling basic needs that parents or

other caregivers might not have been previously filling.”

Alan-Lee agrees. “Traffickers are often good at what they do,” she says. “Traffickers make their victims feel like no one else understands them and the only way to survive is to stay with the person who is abusing them. Then there are all the logistics needed to establish a [post-trafficking] safe life: housing, a job, transportation, medical care. Victims of trafficking face an uphill battle.”

Those who are being trafficked often feel a heavy burden of embarrassment and self-doubt, making them less likely to come forward.

“Victims feel a lot of guilt and shame. Victim-blaming, along with abysmal conviction rates, makes it seemingly hopeless for survivors,” says Mael.

Finally, people who have been victimized fear for their personal safety and the safety of their loved ones. “Victims may be fearful to report to the police due to the trafficker’s threats,” says Siirila.



Diane Hanson

This fear is grounded in reality; the days and weeks after a person who has been victimized attempts to break free of the cycle of trafficking is a dangerous period. Simply put by Hanson, “victims can have a target on their back.”

A Problem With Deep Roots

“Trafficking is a market-driven criminal enterprise with a renewable commodity — humans,” says Kelly Olson, support services director with the Damascus Road Project in Oshkosh, a nonprofit that assists trafficking victims statewide. “Trafficking [yields] maximum revenue with minimal financial investment, [so it is a crime that has] a low probability of being caught.”

Typically, traffickers prey on vulnerable people. “Victims are often survivors of childhood sexual trauma, economic instability, drug addiction, low self-esteem or worth, homelessness, runaway youth, those with mental health issues, in foster care or have gang involvement,” says Olson.

“Traffickers use drugs, alcohol and

psychological manipulation to make sure their victims stay. Some victims are convinced that their abusers are the only people in the world that love them because they’ve been told over and over that they are worthless and their families don’t want them and won’t accept them anymore,” says Mael.

Detective Siirila says people being victimized may experience a phenomenon known as trauma bonding. Here, “a strong emotional connection develops

between the victim and perpetrator during an abusive relationship due to an imbalance of power. The victim may be intensely grateful for any small kindness from the abuser and denies or rationalizes violence or injury.”

When working with people being

“Traffickers use drugs, alcohol and psychological manipulation to make sure their victims stay.”

—Missy Mael



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Dana Pellebon and Missy Mael, co-executive directors of the RCC Sexual Violence Resource Center

trafficked, Olson says it's critical to be aware of and sensitive to the victim's unique psychological state. "These victims experience complex trauma at a rate similar to a wartime veteran, they deal with trauma bonding and more. Often they do not self-identify, let alone realize their status as a victim of a horrible crime."

"I Didn't Know Myself At All"

Holly Harris had what she describes as a very normal childhood in Portage, Wisconsin. But the absence of her biological father (he left after she was born) caused emotional trauma for Harris. Eventually, her mother remarried, and her stepfather legally adopted her when she was eight years old. But the void of her biological father made her question her self-worth and she felt like she never belonged in any social situation. She felt, she says, extremely alone.

To fill that void, Harris began practicing promiscuous behaviors at an early age. By 16 she moved out of her home and into an abusive boyfriend's

home, cutting all ties with her family. After leaving this abusive relationship, Harris met a man online who told her that she could make money quickly by purchasing cell phones in her name and selling them on the black market. As a seventeen-year-old living on her own, the offer was seductive.

Before long, the man told Harris that there was another way that she could make even more money: by moving to Madison and having explicit pictures taken of her. Harris recalls that she left Portage for Madison that very night,

"Often [trafficking survivors] do not self-identify, let alone realize their status as a victim of a horrible crime."

— Kelly Olson

with only a few duffle bags of personal possessions. She would never return.

The months that followed were a blur for Harris. She was sex trafficked, raped and essentially lived as a prisoner in her trafficker's Madison home. She lost contact with the outside world. She says she internalized extreme anger. She had never been a violent person, but she found herself wanting to hurt others.

After months of living this nightmare, Harris cashed a bad check, and her trafficker stepped up to take the charges for her. With her trafficker in jail, Harris finally had some space to step back from her current situation and consider her options. One day, she says she reached a mental tipping point where she was done selling her body for someone's else's profit. She went to the jail and told her trafficker she was done.

The months that followed were anything but a story of redemption. Harris fell in with a gang and was involved in a shooting on Madison's east side. She went to prison, where she continued to feel rage and self-loathing, spending most of her time in solitary confinement.

While incarcerated, Harris had an epiphany that would change the course of her life. She recalls that she kept seeing the same women in and out of prison and realized that this, too, would be her fate if she didn't make changes. She knew she would either become a career criminal or die if she stayed on this path.



“I don’t hide. I’m not scared anymore.”

— Holly Harris

After serving her six-year sentence, Harris was released, and relocated with her family out of state to get a fresh start. (Many trafficking survivors choose to move for safety and/or start a new life elsewhere.) Harris entered the residential program with the Selah Freedom Foundation, which is an immersive program for victims of trafficking. She received intensive therapy, group support and lived amongst a holistic community to promote healing. She joined a church and reconnected with her spiritual roots. “I finally felt understood; that I belonged. I was part of a community,” she says.

Now, she owns her own business, volunteers for the Selah Freedom Foundation where she started her healing journey and is a youth leader in her church.

Reflecting on her story, Harris says that she realizes that she was vulnerable



to all of the events that befell her because she lacked self-worth. “I didn’t know myself at all. I didn’t even know what I liked. You have to find *you*. You have to find *yourself*.”

Harris wrote a book detailing her harrowing experience titled “Relentless Survivor” (available on Amazon) which she hopes will educate the public about this complex crime.

When asked how she finds the strength to share her story after all she’s been through, Harris states simply, “I

don’t hide. I’m not scared anymore.”

Heartbreak and Hope

Human trafficking takes a serious toll on those who have been victimized — but it’s also true that survivors can establish a productive life after escaping it, like Harris.

“I never thought I’d write a book [about my experience]. But writing the book really wasn’t about me; I want people to see that nobody is beyond God’s saving grace, and that everybody can be redeemed no matter what they’ve



On the Front Lines: Susan Alan-Lee, Forensic Nurse Examiner

People who are being trafficked can become so isolated that many times they are first identified in a medical setting after a crisis situation. Specially-trained medical professionals are front line workers, working with those who have been victimized helping to collect evidence to build a legal case against traffickers and perpetrators of sexual assault.

One such medical expert is Susan Alan-Lee, forensic nurse examiner at UnityPoint Health – Meriter in Madison. Alan-Lee provides care for survivors, STI testing, safety planning, pregnancy prevention and full-body exams to ensure wellness.

“Victims of sex trafficking are often subject to horrific physical and sexual abuse that have long-term health consequences. Forensic nurses seek to mitigate these consequences by offering medical care to restore bodies to full health, evidence collection to assist with prosecuting abusers and resources to victims for emotional support and safety needs,” she says.

She continues, “It’s certainly challenging to spend so much time with victims of violence, hearing what’s happened to them and seeing their wounds, but it also feels deeply human and important to help

hold their burden.”

The most difficult aspect of the job for Alan-Lee is seeing and helping the children that come in.

“When people come to us looking for certainty, it’s difficult not to be able to give a firm answer — sometimes there is immediate physical evidence of sexual assault, but usually it leaves no marks or changes on the body, especially in children.”

But despite the brutality of this work, for Alan-Lee the reward is profound; to help survivors reclaim their bodies and lives.

done. I never thought I'd be living the life I have now after what I've done," Harris explains.

Several area nonprofits are dedicated to spreading awareness to the public of the issue, assisting those who have been victimized and helping them to establish a healthy and safe post-trafficking life (*see P. 105 for a list of organizations*).

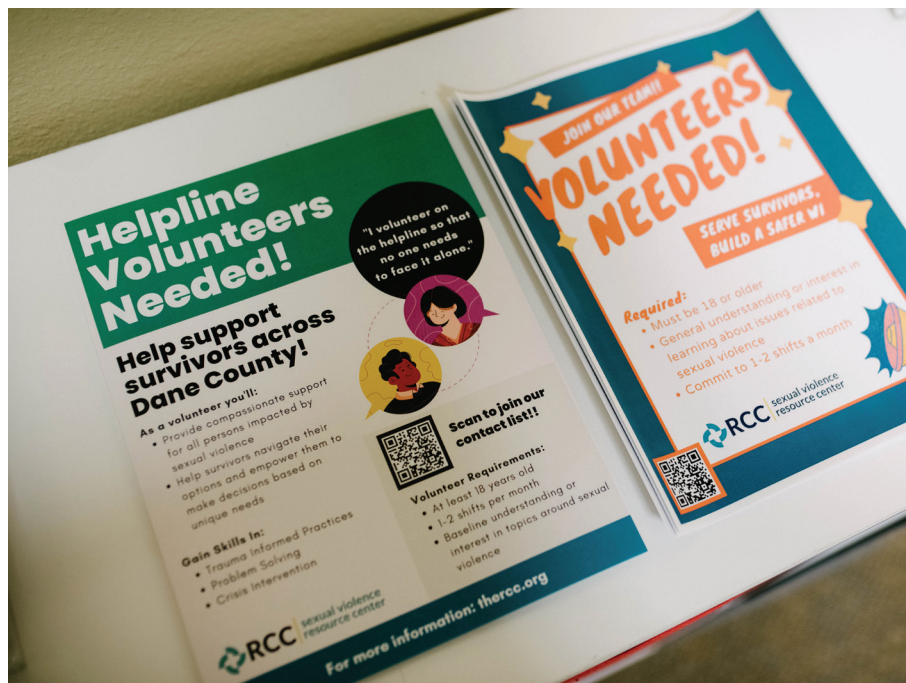
And, these area anti-human trafficking nonprofits work together seamlessly. At the April human trafficking panel discussion, local experts frequently referenced one another's organizations, and how they work together identifying survivors, providing assistance, service referrals, obtaining housing for victims and more.

Project Respect, which is under the umbrella of ARC Community Services, is well-known and respected in the anti-human trafficking space. The organization offers a holistic approach to helping survivors including outreach, advocacy, counseling and crisis management for adults and juveniles who've been victimized by prostitution, sexual exploitation or human trafficking—free of charge. The organization utilizes a holistic perspective when working with trafficking survivors, focusing on building back self-esteem and reclaiming self-empowerment, and encourages them to take pride in each small accomplishment as they rebuild their lives.

UnityPoint's forensic nursing program works hand-in-hand with Project Respect, the RCC and Child

"I wish I would've been taught what trafficking even was ... I thought growing up, 'Oh, that happens in other countries or [the] movies.'"

— Holly Harris



and Adult Protective Services on identifying trafficking survivors and providing information to them on organizations that can provide assistance. The RCC is called to the ER every single time a sexual assault occurs or a trafficking victim needs help. The nonprofit assists the person being victimized through the physical exam and connects them with needed services. What all of this equals is an interconnected safety net for trafficking survivors, if they need it.

Because Siirila says human trafficking is such an issue of concern in Madison, education efforts are also underway at MPD to increase awareness on the force on what trafficking is, and what to look for.

"Police officers are receiving more training on human trafficking. Now, with having a full-time human trafficking detective, more education and training can be done internally within the police department. Also, community awareness is essential," adds Siirila.

Out of the area, but still worth noting, is Damascus Road Project in Oshkosh, which works to protect and empower trafficking survivors statewide; helping them heal, find community and transition to a life beyond trafficking. Since 2017, the nonprofit has helped over 500 people who have been sex trafficked or exploited. The nonprofit employs a

three-part model to combat trafficking which includes education, location of survivors and advocating/direct outreach. Survivors are provided access to professional therapists, transportation, clothing and personal hygiene items, and gift cards for gas and food when appropriate. Kelly Olson, support services director, notes that Damascus Road is frequently contacted by women who are incarcerated for crimes *other* than prostitution or trafficking and helps them to self-identify and connect them to services. They also host a weekly pen pal program, and support the women post-incarceration.

Although the reality of human trafficking is difficult to confront, it's worth being informed about what's happening and knowing that local organizations are dedicated to combatting the problem. It's eye-opening to know that the issue hits far *too* close to home.

"I wish I would've been taught what trafficking even was ... I thought growing up, 'Oh, that happens in other countries or [the] movies.' So I didn't even know it was happening to me," says Harris. "I just thought, 'That doesn't happen in America.' I think [people should be aware] of what to look out for." 🌸

Annie Rosemurgy is a Madison-based writer.



Resources for Survivors of Human Trafficking

Briarpatch Youth Services

There are an estimated 300 youth in Dane County who are homeless every night. The Briarpatch Youth Shelter provides a safe haven and other services to homeless or runaway youth, kids that have been involved in human trafficking or are at risk for trafficking, or youth at risk of separation from their family due to conflict or other reasons.

Opened in 2015, the shelter has eight beds and welcomes young people of all gender identities, ages 12-17. Briarpatch also offers individual counseling, family counseling, case management and a 24-hour help line.

"Briarpatch works hard to help every person who comes through our door," says parent support coordinator Michelle McKoy. "The people we work with are not alone any longer once we get involved." youthsos.com

Every Daughter

Every Daughter is a coalition of women from churches around Dane County who meet regularly to connect with and offer assistance to women who are sexually trafficked and exploited in the area.

Their website lists an array of services they offer to trafficking survivors, such as: regular check-ins to offer encouragement; providing treatment options to address substance abuse and mental health needs; referral and assistance in applying for long-term residential recovery programs; short-term respite care; assistance with completing housing and employment applications; and transportation to appointments.

The group also offers prayer blessings to survivors who are open to receiving them; however, the organization notes that "it is not necessary for a woman to participate in prayer or other spiritual practices in order to be served by Every Daughter." everydaughter.com

Project Respect

Located under ARC Community Services' umbrella, Project Respect is well-connected and respected in the trafficking space in the area. The nonprofit serves juvenile and adult trafficking survivors and assists victims with advocacy, case management, crisis intervention, counseling, service referrals and alternatives to incarceration.

Services are free to clients, and funding for the nonprofit is provided by the City of Madison, Dane County, the U.S. Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime, the Wisconsin Department of Justice Office of Crime Victim Services and United Way of Dane County. arccommserve.com/sexual-exploitation-and-human-trafficking.php

RCC

Serving Dane County since 1973, the RCC Sexual Violence Resource Center (formerly known as Rape Crisis Center, or RCC) provides services to survivors (and their support people) of all forms of sexual violence, including recent sexual assault, past sexual assault, incest (past or present), sexual harassment and sexual exploitation and/or human trafficking. RCC advocates for those harmed by sexual violence by centering survivors, promoting societal change and committing to be an evolving force for social equity.

Co-executive Director Missy Mael says education is a key focus at RCC. "We offer educational programs in middle and high schools throughout Dane County about consent, which is a concept critical to preventing trafficking." Weekly girl groups, gender equity clubs and self-defense classes all arm girls with tools to prevent trafficking. thercc.org

United Madison

United Madison has a two-part mission concerning the issue of human trafficking: to shed light on this stigmatized and underreported crime, and to support community resources around the topic. The nonprofit creates public service campaigns, hosts educational events and does direct outreach to existing coalitions.

Founder Diane Hanson says there are many ways community members can support an anti-trafficking movement. The first step is to educate yourself on the topic. Everyone can have a role to reduce the burden of trafficking, she says.

"Companies can be safe places to hire trafficking survivors, landlords can help by agreeing to rent to survivors and workplaces can offer trainings around this topic." unitedmadison.com/trafficking

Zeteo Community Homes

The Zeteo Community is a group of Christian-identifying people from churches and organizations throughout Madison and surrounding areas whose mission is to serve women and children who have been sexually exploited and/or trafficked.

Founder and executive director Marlene Sorenson says Zeteo recently secured a parcel of land that will be used to build a housing development for female trafficking survivors. (Due to privacy concerns, Sorenson won't disclose where the parcel is located).

Within the housing development, Zeteo's plan is "to provide a safe space, within a loving community, to heal and grow. Using strength-based programming and trauma-informed care we expect [survivor's] lives to be transformed as we will walk with them, assisting them with education, job and life skills." zeteocommunity.org