

HELIOPOLIS

Shreveport News and Culture

Editor’s Note: Warning! The information in this article may cause you to feel the urge to hurl insults at the author or this paper, but as members of a rational society, we must confront the realities of the world in which we live before we can make it better.

Disclaimer: Brittany Turner is the coordinator of the [Sex Worker’s Outreach Project: Shreveport-Bossier City Chapter](#) and serves on the Board of Directors for the [Sex Worker’s Outreach Project: USA](#).

About the Author

Brittany Turner

Brittany Turner moved to

In the past year, local broadcast and print media have covered numerous stories regarding the perils of sex trafficking in Shreveport, without exercising due diligence to accurately assess the reality of this problem or the efficacy of anti-trafficking programs. This coverage often excludes key stakeholders from the conversation: sex workers themselves. Instead, the coverage frequently relies on inaccurate data and anecdotal evidence, corraling those who have chosen to work in the sex industry under the umbrella of “trafficking victims,” effectively silencing the voice of many sex workers. Due to the misinformation that is circulating, it is important to define the differences between trafficking and sex work.

Sex work can be described as work associated with the sex industry, including, but not limited to; pornography, exotic dancing or “stripping,” pro-dom/pro-sub, erotic massage, burlesque, erotica, sex shows and e-sex, and any other work of a transactional nature that includes sexuality as a key component. This may include paid transactions, as well as “survival sex;” interactions that provide the worker with housing, food, clothing, drugs, health and hygiene products and services, or any other item or service with some tangible value.

On the other hand, trafficking generally refers to an individual who is compelled to provide services as a result of force or coercion. Trafficking occurs in many industries. The ACLU has collected data demonstrating that agricultural, factory, hospitality, and domestic work encompass the highest percentage of trafficked persons in the United States. Sex trafficking, while a very real concern, represents a small fraction of those forced into industries prone to trafficked persons.

Shreveport in 2012. She has worked as a Records Manager and Special Projects Librarian with the Shreve Memorial Library. She serves as an adjunct professor for the University of Alabama and owns a firm dedicated to addressing issues of cultural heritage protection in libraries, archives, museums, historical societies, and other special collections.

Sex workers come in all shapes and sizes. This photo spread created by the New York Times features everyday people who participate willingly in sex work. Click the image to see the article they wrote.

In the State of Louisiana, as outlined in [La. R.S. 14:46.2](#), the legal definition of trafficking is complex and, in some instances, fails to differentiate between force and choice. This proves problematic, as it blurs the lines between those who are engaged in the sex industry as a result of their own agency versus those who are working against their will. In addition, the legal definition further obscures the reality of sex work by mandating that any individual under the age of consent will automatically be regarded as a trafficking victim. Similarly, “harboring” or “transport[ing]” an individual who can be considered a trafficked person under this legal definition may result in criminal charges.

Absent from these regulations is a recognition of human agency, as well as the nature of work. Indeed, the focus of many in our community on “sex trafficking,” rather than the larger issue of human trafficking that plagues numerous US industries, demonstrates a lack of awareness that is consistent with those engaged in the “rescue industry,” whose primary goal is to “help” those engaged in the sex industry, whether by force or by choice. Anti-trafficking activists decry their belief that sex work is inherently exploitative and coercive, with some feminists equating sex work with “bodily invasion” or what Gloria Steinem refers to as “commercial rape.” Conversely, sex worker rights advocates maintain that sex work is work, arguing that sex workers have chosen their profession for the same reasons that anyone chooses a job: pay, schedule, available employment, workplace environment, economic need, and personal fulfillment. Sex workers have weighed these factors against those associated with other employment and have made a choice; these are not individuals who are “forced” or “coerced” into their profession any more than those who have chosen medicine or teaching or food service or any other paid employment.

The idea of purely free choice with regard to employment is impossible in a capitalist society; beyond the independently wealthy, all workers balance personal fulfillment against economic needs. We have created a false definition of consent, imbuing sex

work with our own moral values as an industry that is inherently predatory, yet there are few who receive such inherent gratification from their employment that they would choose to engage in work without compensation. Sex workers exercise their own agency in light of their unique circumstances when choosing employment, as do all workers. To automatically conflate these workers with trafficking victims is a fallacy and forces them into situations that further limit their personal and professional choices.

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Enter the **rescue industry**, those organizations whose purpose is to “save” these purported victims from themselves, often claiming that many are **incapable of recognizing the need for their own rescue**. This industry, sometimes referred to as “**rescue**” or “**victim pimps**” among sex workers, is comprised of non-profit organizations, churches, and government agencies, including local and federal law enforcement. It is this industry that has been **most visible** with regard to the alleged sex trafficking in our community and has controlled the dialogue thus far. The rescue industry frequently relies on **misleading data**, such as the **faulty research** and **biased claims** of **Melissa Farley**, whose **methods and conclusions** have been **consistently proven fallible**, as well as national non-profit organizations like the **Polaris Project** and **Purchased: Not for Sale**.

These groups **peddle their bad data** to **create hysteria** around a problem that, at best, is **grossly inflated**; supporting their work with “**true**” **stories of local trafficking** and common myths about trafficking, such as the idea that the **unique crossroads of interstates in the ArkLaTex region** results in a **high percentage of**

trafficked people or that major sporting events demonstrate a marked increase in trafficked populations.

Despite these catch phrases and flawed statistics being proven false time and again, the rescue industry continues to promote these misconceptions, creating an environment that is increasingly more dangerous for trafficked persons and sex workers alike.

The reasons for working in the rescue industry are myriad, just as the reasons individuals choose sex work are also varied, but there are two common incentives that arise time and again: money and mission.

The anti-trafficking industry is able to take advantage of millions of dollars in private donations, grants, and federal funding to sustain their work. Those with a religious affiliation also have the added advantage of being able to provide missionary services to those they “save,” regardless of whether this service is desired by their clients. For example, The Hub Urban Ministry, established in 2009 as a human services charity in Shreveport, conducts their anti-trafficking work through Purchased: Not for Sale, a “ministry designed to locate, love, and motivate women in the sex industry and victims of sex trafficking. Through outreach, friendship, and biblical community we want to lead women to full restoration in Christ.” This outreach includes providing training seminars and support to law enforcement and area non-profits, such as the FREE Coalition to End Trafficking in NW Louisiana, as well as recruitment visits to dancers at the area’s strip clubs, and the operation of three rehabilitation “safe houses,” which they claim “graduates” an average of three women per year.

The Hub does not directly receive any federal funding. Its [2014 Form 990](#) filing with the IRS, reported they received \$483,833 in contributions and grants, with 50.5% of that funding directed to salaries, other compensation, and employee benefits of the two full-time and one half-time directors. With combined salaries for the three directors reported as \$69,266, the remaining \$175,200 in employee benefits and compensation is not defined. The organization claimed \$260,797 in other expenses alongside \$245,680 in assets, operating at a loss of \$21,442 in that year. The Purchased program expenses for 2014 were \$45,674.

Law enforcement similarly benefits, particularly as Louisiana laws intrinsically bolster statistics of trafficked persons, with charges of trafficking frequently being leveraged against individuals who, in reality, can only be convicted of prostitution or unrelated charges. In 2011, the Bossier Marshall's Office received a \$292,000 grant to support anti-trafficking efforts, and [according to the Shreveport Times](#), Louisiana has received nearly \$3 million in similarly earmarked federal funds over the past four years, as well as additional funding from the state.

While government funding may be directly funneled to law enforcement agencies, these agencies are then free to contract with local nonprofits for services associated with anti-trafficking initiatives. Some collaborative diversion programs, like "[Exit Strategy](#)" [recently instituted](#) in Caddo Parish, further victimize the individuals being "saved" by law enforcement, as sex workers are given the "choice" between imprisonment or participating in a variety of programs that may fail to meet their needs and frequently result in further victimization. To combat the challenges associated with these programs, a new model known as [Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion \(LEAD\)](#) has been developed, in an attempt to [provide services to sex workers and](#)

substance users prior to arrest, but even these programs remain controversial for a number of reasons. Programs like “Exit Strategy” are more universally frowned upon by sex workers, as participation is only available *after* an arrest, resulting in an inherent level of coercion at the hands of law enforcement and the judicial system.

When funding relies on data, and the data doesn’t exist, the rescue industry develops creative definitions of trafficking in order to boost their numbers, justify their existence, and gain access to more resources.

For example, a recurring FBI national initiative known as “Operation Cross Country” (OCC) intended to combat sex trafficking, in 2013 resulted in the “recovery” of 105 “sexually exploited children” and 150 “pimps and other individuals.” The “other individuals” were adult prostitutes and those charged with other crimes completely unrelated to sex trafficking. If sex trafficking is so prevalent, surely the FBI’s 3,900 agents and associated law enforcement officers across 76 cities would have a better track record of success, instead rescuing only 1.4 children per city through the work of 37.1 law enforcement officers per child. The reality is that far fewer children are involved in sex trafficking than commonly reported, yet both media outlets and the rescue industry continue to promote inaccurate data.

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Local anti-trafficking stings consistently yield similar results, with few or no “trafficking victims” identified, but numerous adult sex workers facing arrest. In 2013, 529 adults were arrested for prostitution in Louisiana and only 14 minors. Six of the 2013 minor prostitution arrests and 70 of the adult arrests were attributed to OCC. In 2014, the OCC arrests in Louisiana yielded 92 adults and 3 minors. In 2015, three minors and seven adults were arrested as a result of the OCC investigations in Louisiana. Of course, the only entities given unfettered access to these incarcerated individuals are those associated with anti-trafficking initiatives, so there is no way to verify whether the minor “trafficking victims” were legitimately forced into sex work or, instead, made a personal choice to engage in sex work. Criminal prostitution charges limit future employment options, yet it is anti-trafficking sting operations that have funded many of the investigations yielding prostitution and related arrests. Those hoping to leave the sex industry may find other avenues of employment closed as a result of the same anti-trafficking dollars that were intended to provide alternatives to sex work in the first place.

The concept of agency by those engaged in transactional sex work is particularly important when discussing those under the age of 18. For example, homeless youth who have left (or been “forced” to leave) their families as the result of abuse or publicly identifying as a member of the LGBTIQ+ community have few available resources. The lack of a permanent address, reliable methods of communication, adequate documentation, and even access to basic services, such as housing and hygiene, eliminate many traditional employment options. Sex work becomes a viable, albeit perhaps not always ideal, mechanism for sustaining and potentially improving their living situation; it is facilitating survival.

Similarly, sex workers may make the decision to participate in the sex industry as a result of familial economic need, helping to provide additional income for families subsisting far below a living wage. However, those benefitting financially from sex work, regardless of the intent by the worker, may become vulnerable to prosecution as “pimps” or “traffickers.” Putting food on the table

through sex work, for example, may make anyone partaking in the meal complicit in trafficking or prostitution. When we characterize these young people as victims, and criminalize those associated with them, without addressing the underlying issues that contribute to their decision making process, we do a major disservice to sex workers and trafficking victims alike.

Some underage sex workers are not necessarily protected from the justice system, even when meeting the criteria of a "trafficking victim." [Latesha Clay](#), a 15 year old girl in Grand Rapids, MI, was sentenced to nine years in prison earlier this year for armed robbery and unlawful imprisonment. Clay was alleged to have lured men to a hotel room via an advertisement for sexual services on Backpage.com at the behest of two men, one 17 years old and the other 18 years old. The man responding to the ad for underage sex was confronted by the male associates brandishing a fake gun and was "forced" to withdraw additional money from an ATM. The man responding to an ad for child sex faced no charges as a "robbery victim," while Clay is incarcerated.

Even our State Legislature has fallen prey to the sensationalist claims of the rescue industry. Recently, [a bill that raises the minimum age of exotic dancers in Louisiana to 21 years old](#) unanimously passed both houses of the legislature and was

signed into law by Governor John Bel Edwards. This clause was intended to combat human trafficking, yet in reality limits the choices of those who are legally recognized as adults engaging in a legal form of sex work. The legislature provided no data to support the opinion that there is a correlation between trafficking and stripping, with Representative Robby Carter (D-Amite) specifically stating that he “wish[ed] there’s something we could do to make them go to church.” These efforts, while cloaked under anti-trafficking rhetoric, are merely another attempt to enact paternalistic legislation that dictates the morals of some, while continuing to ignore the voices of those legitimately employed in the sex industry.

As a result of the criminalized status of certain forms of sex work in the US, sex workers are particularly vulnerable to other crimes, such as theft, sexual assault, rape, and even murder; occurring at the hands of clients, family, friends, acquaintances, and law enforcement officers. Sex workers exist on the margins of our society, and this stigmatization and isolation is compounded for those who are also people of color, transgender, substance users, homeless, or living in poverty. By virtue of already engaging in activities that are both illegal and deemed reprehensible by some in our society, sex workers are faced with a difficult catch-22 when experiencing a work-related crime: do they report the crime and potentially face additional penalties, both legal and social, or allow situations that are dangerous, economically and personally, to be ignored? It’s an impossible choice, one that criminalized sex workers face on a daily basis with sometimes fatal consequences.

*ANTI-TRAFFICKING INITIATIVES
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WITHOUT THE DELIVERY OF REAL RESULTS.

HIPS, a Washington D.C.-based organization focused on harm reduction for sex workers and substance users, collects data regarding violence against sex workers. In 2015, over 120 sex workers were murdered globally. The incidence of violence was higher in countries where sex work is criminalized. Compared to the U.K. where sex work is legal, rates of sex worker violence in the U.S. were four times higher. In D.C., sex workers reported violence by police in 9.1% of interactions and officers requesting sexual services in 17.3% of the interactions. In Chicago, 25% of rape cases involving street-based sex workers identified a police officer as the rapist. Being a person of color or transgender sex worker further magnified the likelihood of experiencing violent crime. One-third of U.S. sex worker homicide victims identified as transgender, and in 2012, 23% of LGBT homicides were connected to sex work. In 2015, over 41 sex workers were killed in the U.S., and while blacks make up only 13% of the U.S. population, they comprise 41% of 2015's sex worker murders (17 total). Similarly, 0.3% of the U.S. population is transgender, yet trans women made up 29% of those sex workers killed the same year (14 total).

Amnesty International, amidst a maelstrom of criticism, recently adopted a **policy** recommending the decriminalization of sex work in order to best protect trafficking victims and sex workers. It is these types of decisions which, while controversial on the surface, address the crux of the issue and the nuances differentiating trafficking from work. Until sex workers are able to exercise their agency without social and legal constraints, there is no meaningful way to ensure that interactions with law enforcement and the justice system are free of the same characteristics that traffickers exert on their victims. Without adequate definition and regulation of the sex industry, sex workers are left without the ability to engage in work with the same protections extended to employees of any other industry.

Anti-trafficking initiatives continue to be tainted by the same bad data and assumptions that result in reduced efficacy, millions of dollars in wasted resources, and self-righteous celebration without the delivery of real results.

Combatting sex trafficking is a laudable goal and few would dispute efforts to rescue a minor child forced into any employment against his or her will. Local efforts are confused, mired in the noble goal of rescuing children, but also a convoluted desire to inflict the personal beliefs of some onto all. Self-proclaimed advocates, and local media in particular, must begin seeking out [alternate sources of data](#) and [information, thinking critically](#), respecting the decisions of others, redirecting resources to where they are most needed, consulting all stakeholders, [questioning data](#) and credentials, empowering sex workers and trafficking victims to [speak for themselves](#), and examining their own bias with regard to the bigger issue of sex work in our society. [Responsible advocacy and reporting does](#) not demonstrate a lack of compassion or condone sexual violence in any form; it embodies harm reduction. We owe it to the victims to question the motives and expertise of those delivering “valuable” services to endangered workers. Demanding increased transparency and accountability from programs that are being supported by public and private funds will only strengthen the ultimate outcome.

Editor’s Note: The original article printed in error that the 2014 Purchased: Not for Sale program expenses were \$40,074, which inadvertently referred to Lovewell Ministry, another program under the umbrella of the Hub Urban Ministry. The actual 2014 reported expenses for Purchased:Not for Sale were \$45,674. In addition, since the time of initial publication, Purchased: Not for Sale was contacted regarding how they quantify success and rescue, among other questions, and declined to respond with specifics, instead saying that their definition of success is “broad”.