

Misunderstanding the Issue Leads to False Claims

By: Marnie Backer, Executive Director, StolenYouth

We were shocked to read: “[Human Trafficking Awareness Campaigns are Feeding a Dangerous Myth](#).” The author, Michael Hobbes, failed to offer a 360° view of the issue of child sex trafficking. Instead, he politicized a non-partisan issue, selectively included unfair critiques of organizations working to care for and restore dignity for the survivors of these crimes, and excluded solutions that can prevent sex trafficking from happening.

Interestingly, Mr. Hobbes is also based in Seattle, yet he either did not interview or failed to include data and viewpoints from our area’s many effective organizations and agencies working directly with trafficking survivors and addressing the root causes of trafficking (and there are a multitude of effective organizations around the country doing the same). A truly investigative piece would have uncovered models addressing the concerns that the survivors spoke about in his article.

Mr. Hobbes states: “Despite a year-long, high-profile, government-wide campaign against human trafficking, the Department of Homeland Security identified just [428 victims](#) nationwide last year, and the FBI made fewer than [650 arrests](#) for trafficking in 2018.” Had Mr. Hobbes reviewed the latest research on child sex trafficking in his home state entitled, “Commercially Sexually Exploited Children in King County 2019 Update,” conducted by Dr. Debra Boyer, he would have learned that in 2018, there were 473 UNDUPLICATED commercially sexually exploited children receiving services in King County alone (the Seattle Metropolitan area). We know this number is an undercount, as obtaining an accurate count is likely impossible due to the illegal and hidden forms of exploitation involved, and that these youth are generally under the control of others. Furthermore, trafficking arrests and prosecution do not correlate with the prevalence of these under-reported crimes.

Mr. Hobbes asserts that “awareness is no substitute for solutions.” However, without awareness, there can be no prevention. Without prevention, there will not be a long-term decrease in trafficking. Through awareness, fewer children will grow up to buy or sell others for sex – and fewer children will succumb to the grooming behaviors that traffickers use on vulnerable youth. Awareness campaigns have increased the identification of victims as documented by service providers. It is a disservice to not educate and raise awareness, or to ignore the issue because there are other serious problems that “don’t get the publicity.”

Yes, trafficking is often a symptom of broader issues, yet, as a society, how can we stand by and watch these horrific crimes be perpetrated onto youth who cannot

consent to being bought and sold for sex? Mr. Hobbes correctly states that the largest known population of youth vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation are runaways, homeless youth, and children involved with foster care. Our service providers and agencies facilitating prevention and intervention services specifically focus on our known victim demographic. However, it is not only marginalized youth who are vulnerable.

Predators are using the Internet, and Mr. Hobbes fails to address this link to trafficking. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) reported that between 2010-2015, there was an 846% increase in reports of suspected child sex trafficking directly correlated to the increased use of the Internet to sell children. In 2018, NCMEC received more than 18.4 million reports, most related to apparent child sexual abuse images, online enticement, child sex trafficking and child sexual molestation. A local example that Mr. Hobbes could have uncovered is a 24-hour sting conducted last June by Seattle Against Slavery. The nonprofit used technology simulating conversation with an underage youth being sold on the Internet. During this period, there were more than 1,900 potential buyers of this “fictional” youth. Why is this not a crisis that we should raise awareness about and work together to address?

The facts in King County are:

- The average age of a child’s first commercial sexual exploitation is 14.4 years. The average age they first seek services is 16.8 years.
- 41% of these youth have been abducted, imprisoned or moved around for sexual activity.
- 60% of trafficked youth were of color, 31% were African American.
- 90% experienced trauma.

In King County, as with much of the nation, there is care available for survivors and yes, this care needs to reach more youth and be better funded. The good news from Mr. Hobbes’ own community is that arrests of buyers have increased by 28% in one year. In the past six years:

- More than 800 commercially sexually exploited youth engaged in services;
- More than 15,000 unique buyers of sex have been disrupted;
- Referrals to service providers are increasing by 200 youth annually;
- Youth reaching out for services increased from 55% to 95%; and,
- Youth maintaining consistent contact with those advocating for their care, treatment and exit from commercial sexual exploitation increased from 33% to 67%.

We agree that trafficking is often a byproduct of poverty, marginalization and abuse. The system to rescue trafficked youth is not perfect. There are not enough beds and services for rescued youth and too few jobs for youth perceived as “damaged.” However, awareness campaigns are critical as it is through awareness that there will be prevention, that services will evolve, and that survivors can lead productive and fulfilling lives. To state as Mr. Hobbes has that, “None of the lawmakers or nonprofits behind these campaigns can provide any evidence that ‘raising awareness’ of human trafficking is doing anything to address it” is irresponsible and false. We encourage you to not look away but instead, seek out the facts. Though the problem is real, raising awareness and adequately funding targeted efforts is working in King County. It is a collective understanding of this human rights issue and the associated facts that will lead to real and positive change.