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Modern-day slavery

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If you think slavery---human bondage---is a thing of the past, think again. In 2015, slavery, including generational slavery, continues its sordid existence around the world. The United Nations estimates that more than 30 million men, women and children are trapped in this blight on humanity 365 days a year.

In sheer numbers, India is unmatched with more than 14 million people waking each day as indentured as they might have been in biblical times. But no country has more of its citizens enslaved than Mauritania, a West African nation of four million, where one in every 25 people will be born and, one day, die in the same hopeless existence.

Slavery, which includes children as young as five, occurs in India's embroidery mills, Ivory Coast's chocolate plantations and almost every nation where diamonds are mined.

The most recent UN count estimates that nearly 170 nations---on every continent---have slave populations. They are indentured from Azerbaijan to Zambia, from Dakar to, well, Denver. Yes. Right here. In Colorado. Right now.
In fact, Denver, because of its geographic location, its intersection of two major interstates and DIA, says Anjelica Carnes, is one of the country's most active hubs for both sex and labor traffic.

"It makes it easy to bring people in and transport them," says Carnes, Program Manager for the Colorado Organization for Victim Assistance. COVA, along with local, state and federal law enforcement, works to locate and rescue victims of this human trade.

Sitting in her office, the sunlight softly filling the room, Carnes guesses that there is human exploitation going on in every part of Colorado---going so far as to guess that it's taking place in all 64 counties.

"Foreign nationals are usually the labor traffic," says Carnes in a lilting German accent. "The domestic clients that we work with are usually sex traffic." Of course, Colorado's problem in labor and sex traffic, while significant, is just part of a national problem. It is estimated that there are now more than 100,000 individuals involved in either labor or sex trafficking across the U.S. The number may be conservative.

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Human trafficking sustains a number of businesses---large and small---in the state. According to the Colorado Human Trafficking Fact Sheet, sex trafficking in the state is a $60 million a year industry. Yet, prosecutions are rare.

Labor trafficking, which occurs in the tourist and agriculture sectors, is also pervasive in Colorado. Not surprisingly, labor trafficking is heavily weighted with Mexican, Central and South American workers---casualties of the curse of geography and the promise of hope. Hotel domestics, kitchen help, landscapers and general labor, often work in the lap-of-luxury by day and retire to nightmarish realities at shift's end, with little to look forward to beyond the next day's work.

Farm workers, often in isolated parts of the state, are among the most overworked and underpaid victims of this trade. Often, says Carnes, their visas, cell phones or both, are taken from them leaving them in virtual isolation. Making matters worse is the sight of their children, some as young as five and six, hunched over the same crop and soil.

It may be hard to imagine things being worse in matters of labor trafficking and exploitation, but a single case in Iowa displays depravity at its inglorious worst.

In 2013, a jury awarded 32 mentally challenged men $240 million dollars in damages for years of forced labor. The men, contracted by a Texas poultry company to an Iowa turkey operation, worked for wages that averaged 40-cents-an-hour while being housed in dilapidated, unsanitary bug and rodent infested quarters. Prosecutors proved the men were routinely beaten, sleep-deprived and denied medical attention. One victim, say investigators, had teeth so damaged he could not chew a waffle. Another's hands were infected from being unable to wash the turkey blood off each night. The verdict is under appeal.

"I'm just happy that people are paying attention," says Beth McCann, former Denver Manager of Public Safety and current state legislator, of the problem Colorado faces with human exploitation. McCann, also a candidate for Denver District Attorney, sponsored legislation that added heft to laws on human trafficking and made it easier to prosecute those charged with this crime, particularly those accused of exploiting young girls and boys caught in this web.

Some of those trapped in the sex trade are young runaways---including pre-teens. Others are those who fell out of or escaped from foster care. Most get reeled in by predatory adults who target parks, bus depots or places on the street where young people are known to gather. More often than not, they use the same ruse. "They'll talk to them about where they could stay," says McCann. "So they go and these traffickers put them up, give them food, give them alcohol and drugs and it progresses." The promise of money, she says, rarely bears fruit.

But even if the pimps or traffickers are caught, prosecutions are not guaranteed "because the witness is often young, scared and often with an emotional attachment" to the person who exploited them, says McCann.

Another factor in this sordid equation is that many of these young victims have already been physically or psychologically damaged by the time they arrive in Colorado. "Typically (it's) those children who have been victimized their whole lives," says Adams County prosecutor Christa Landis who heads the county's

Child Victims Unit. Compounding the problem is under reporting.

But reporting guarantees neither prosecution nor conviction. According to a Colorado state government document, between 2006 and 2013 only 38 cases of human trafficking were filed. “Four individuals had two cases, meaning that 34 defendants were charged with these crimes,” reads the report. Only two individuals were convicted.

For many of the young girls, reporting the crime is unthinkable. Experts in the field explain this as the “Stockholm Syndrome.” The condition goes back to a bank robbery in Sweden many years ago where a number of female victims, held for days in the bank’s vault, gradually became emotionally attached with their captors. Many of the young girls she interviews, says Landis, don’t do anything “because they think they love their pimp.”

Then, there’s also “the whole drug component.” Leaving the life also means leaving the source of whatever drugs these waifs or runaways have come to expect or need. For the boys, it’s a different story.

For boys, she says, it is often easier to store the shame than bear the pain. It would mean, says the Adams County prosecutor, confronting “the shame and humiliation” of having performed sex with men.

Landis says not all sex-for-money workers are runaways or victims of pimps or traffickers. There remain plenty of men and women working independently looking for business on streets crisscrossing the metro area.

Pimps and traffickers---for both sex and labor---come in both genders. They also call the shots in English and a variety of foreign languages. The lure of cash money is intoxicating in any culture. It’s a business that can pay big. “With four to six kids under their control,” Landis says, a single sex-trade boss can earn in excess of $30,000 a week.

In the end, with both sex and labor trafficking, it remains a game of cat-and-mouse. “The statutes are not adequate in regard to sentencing,” says the veteran prosecutor. “The worst sentence is eight to 24 years.” And even though a successful prosecution does not ensure a maximum sentence, Landis remains determined to fight these crimes any way she can. She is now filing or investigating more than fifty cases. And each one, she says, takes its toll. “My heart is broken every day.”