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## Dozens of Rochester kids acknowledge they've been sold for sex

[Gary Craig](#), @gcraig1 Published 7:16 a.m. ET Feb. 2, 2018 | Updated 6:32 p.m. ET Feb. 3, 2018

Mini-documentary: Stephen Jones has been called "the worst sex trafficker" the Rochester region has witnessed. Olivia Lopez



(Photo: Trial evidence)

In 2014 Rochester's Center for Youth Services received 127 referrals from police, medical officials, and local agencies about kids who could be sexually exploited.

Three years later, that number had more than doubled, to nearly 300.

Last year, 62 of those youngsters acknowledged that they had been sold for sex. And the [Center for Youth's Safe Harbor](#) program, which counsels the children and teens, still has more than 200 open cases.

"This has been going on for a very very long time," said Melanie Blow, the Chief Operations Officer for the [Stop Abuse Campaign](#), which works to halt child abuse.

► **Main story:** [Human trafficking is as close as next door](#)

With strengthened laws against trafficking, activists like Blow say they are seeing some shift in the community's attitudes toward prostitution, and a willingness to understand that many prostitutes, and especially those who are minors, are victims and not criminals.

"It's a much more helpful way to look at it, to look at the victimization that has gone on here," she said.

But activists and some elected officials say New York lawmakers could do more to attack trafficking.

[Shared Hope International](#), an organization that battles sex abuse, recently gave New York a grade of D in its efforts to stop sex trafficking.

Of particular concern to the organization was the treatment of men who buy minors for sex. The buyers are not covered by the state's sex trafficking laws.

The New York laws also require proof that a trafficker exerted "force, fraud or coercion" when trafficking a minor — a threshold not required in federal law.

Two lawmakers — Assemblywoman Amy Paulin, D-Scarsdale, and Senator Andrew Lanza, R-Staten Island — have introduced a bill that would change the state law to mirror the federal law.

IndyStar columnist Tim Swarens spent more than a year investigating a lucrative business where abused children are bought and sold. USA TODAY

"While federal prosecutors do not have the burden to prove that a pimp committed the trifecta of 'force, fraud or coercion' against a child to exploit them into selling their bodies, New York prosecutors do," Paulin wrote in a [recent editorial on lohud.com](#).

Anti-trafficking activist Lauren Hersh said the Paulin-Lanza bill would be instrumental in strengthening New York's laws.

"It's crazy that we require 12-year-olds to go into the grand jury and prove force, fraud, or coercion," said Hersh, the national director of the nonprofit World Without Exploitation.

Hersh said she thinks the state law for buyers is strong enough, if used by law enforcement. Men and women who pay for sex with minors face tougher sentences than other sex purchasers; they can face up to seven years in prison and fines up to \$5,000.

Hersh said she does see changes in attitudes toward sex trafficking, both in societal attitudes and laws.

"People would think that this is something happening to foreign-born people in faraway places," she said. "Now, I think there's an understanding that it's here."

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► **Sex trafficking:** [He sold teen girls for sex so he could have nice shoes](#)

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