

Providing a voice to the voiceless

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Human trafficking hard to detect, harder to prosecute

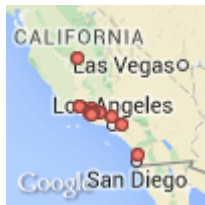
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RAISING AWARENESS—Ventura PD Detective David Ruggiero is part of the recently formed Ventura County Coalition Against Human Trafficking. *Part one of a three-part series*

Ventura County law enforcement is battling a burgeoning crime whose victims are often hidden, unable or afraid to report their abusers, and thus forgotten: human trafficking.



Where's the story?  10 Points Mentioned

“We know it exists; we’ve found human trafficking victims in the county,” Cpl. David Ruggiero, a detective with the Ventura Police Department, said in an interview with the *Acorn*. “(But) right now there are not resources being dedicated to doing human trafficking investigations. If law enforcement isn’t proactively looking for it, it’s going to remain hidden.”

Ventura County, unlike nearby Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties, does not have a full-time task force dedicated to trafficking, but that is changing.

Ruggiero is part of the recently formed Ventura County Coalition Against Human Trafficking, which has been meeting monthly since January to develop a countywide response to human trafficking.

The group is comprised of members of the Ventura County Sheriff’s Office; Simi Valley, Ventura and Oxnard police departments; the Ventura County district attorney’s office; the FBI; Department of Homeland Security; and social service agencies and nonprofits, all of whom sign confidentiality agreements, Ruggiero said.

The meetings may be opened to the public by summer.

Ruggiero, a detective in VPD's major crimes unit, took a one-year leave of absence from the police force in 2013 to help trafficking victims in South Asia. He learned about trafficking not at work, but from his pastor.

Since then he has investigated local trafficking cases and raised awareness of the crime, though he noted that local police departments do not keep statistics that show the number of trafficking incidents discovered in the county.

Last month he spoke at the eighth annual Stop Human Trafficking and Sexual Slavery educational forum at the First Presbyterian Church in Oxnard, hosted by the volunteer organization Soroptimist International of the Conejo, Camarillo, Ventura, Oxnard and Santa Barbara.

"Because human trafficking is a hidden problem, it's not a priority to the county," he said at the forum. "All day long as police officers we're getting calls about stabbings, shootings, domestic (violence), burglaries, and we have to respond. But if nobody's calling about these girls who are being trafficked, it's going to be in the back seat. There's not going to be resources allocated for them. That's the uphill battle for law enforcement with these cases."

What is human trafficking?

Human trafficking involves recruiting, transporting, harboring or receiving a person through force, abduction, deceit or other means for the purpose of exploiting them, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Most cases of human trafficking involve sexual exploitation.

The term "trafficking" does not necessarily mean victims of the crime are moved, Ruggiero said.

"It's basically slavery," he said. "You're putting somebody to work through false pretense, force, fraud, coercion or commercial sexual exploitation."

Minors who are prostituted are also considered victims of trafficking.

When Ruggiero joined the Police Academy in 2003, human trafficking was not even mentioned in California law.

Three years before, in 2000, Congress passed the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, and many states followed suit with their own anti-trafficking laws, including California in 2005. California penal code section 236.1 states, in part, "Any person who deprives or violates the personal liberty of another with the intent to obtain forced labor or services, is guilty of human trafficking."

The Californians Against Sexual Exploitation Act (Proposition 35), passed in November 2012, increased criminal penalties for human trafficking and required police officers to learn to investigate human trafficking cases.

Fighting traffickers

“What we’ve seen (in Ventura County) is mostly commercial sex exploitation,” Ruggiero said. “There may be forced labor cases in the county, but if there is, I haven’t heard about it.

“I think the reason for that is because prostitution is illegal, so it’s on our radar to investigate. But when it comes to forced labor, it just looks like people are working. It’s not something that cops will look at, on the face of it, and be suspicious that a crime is occurring. That’s where more training is required to identify that.”

Ruggiero believes that the 2005 formation of a human trafficking task force in Los Angeles pushed the problem into Ventura County. Soon after the group began cracking down on traffickers, there was a huge jump in the number of massage parlors in the county, Ruggiero said.

“With (the increase) came a lot of commercial sex and a high likelihood of human trafficking going on there,” he said. “As we were looking into it, it was very obvious that sexual exploitation was going on in a lot of these places. The problem is, what are we going to do about it? We don’t have units that are equipped and trained to do anything about it. We are able to work with the LAPD on some cases, but it’s an ongoing problem.”

What needs to change?

“What I hope, No. 1, is that the public is aware that this is happening here,” Ruggiero said.

“No. 2, I really want to see proactive law enforcement resources. We’re going to get officers allocated for whatever the public demands, for whoever is making the most noise, whoever is saying that this is a problem and we need help.”

The national Polaris hotline to report human trafficking, to request information about the issue or to connect with local anti-trafficking services is (888) 373-7888.

Part two of the series will feature interviews with victims of human trafficking.