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Can 'Big Data' stamp out human trafficking?

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Story highlights

- The Human Trafficking Resource Center hotline, based in Washington D.C., collects tips from members of the public
- Its workers gather information from callers, helping to piece together clues to human trafficking trends across the U.S.
- Thanks to high-tech partnerships with firms like Google and Palantir, the hotline has uncovered almost 20,000 cases of trafficking

Washington D.C. (CNN) Behind a locked door in a secret location in Washington D.C., workers are patrolling one of the front lines in the war against human trafficking.

But the people engaged in this battle aren't armed with guns and tanks -- instead their strength is the telephone, and all the information it can provide, to fight for freedom.

This is the home of [Polaris](#), the non-profit company that runs the U.S.'s [Human Trafficking Resource Center](#) hotline. Since 2007, its employees have answered more than 85,000 calls for help.

This year alone, callers have reported [1,345 cases of human trafficking](#) across the country, from California to Colorado, Ohio to Oregon.

"One of the functions of the national hotline is people calling with tips," explains Polaris CEO Bradley Myles, who says the company's independent NGO status means people are more willing to talk.

"Lots of people are comfortable calling a non-profit like Polaris because we're not the government, we're not law enforcement. When they call us, their voice isn't being recorded as part of a federal case."

And while callers' voices aren't taped, those they speak to record every detail of their conversation, in the hope that the information they provide could help save someone from traffickers.

"Every single hotline call that we receive, we need to collect great data on that call," says Myles.

Thanks to a series of high-profile partnerships in the technology sector -- with [Google](#), [Palantir](#), [Salesforce](#), [Twilio](#) and others-- Polaris was able to do just that.

"We built out a whole customized system, with Salesforce's support, of call tracking, data collection," the CEO says.

Now the non-profit is harnessing all of that 'Big Data' to create a [real-time picture of trafficking across the U.S.](#)

And it's an alarming one: the hotline has uncovered almost 20,000 cases of trafficking over 7 years, many involving minors.

Calls are coming in from every corner of the country -- affluent or poor -- reporting trafficking all forms of industry from hospitality to farming, domestic service to sex work.

"What we're able to do, when you have a single national center that's looking at the 60,000-ft view of all of it at once, and piecing all of those pictures [together], you begin to see patterns, you begin to see trends.

"So now we can actually say there are 25 distinct types of trafficking existing in the United States; we can understand this trend, and fight the crime type by type."

And those fighting it aren't just from law enforcement, border control or local authorities.

Of the [more than 5,000 calls to the hotline so far this year](#), about a third have come from members of the community.

Myles says ordinary people like you and I can be the key to saving someone trapped in modern-day slavery, be it in a hotel, store, farm, or brothel.

"What we want people to realize is stay alert, stay vigilant, know that you're probably encountering this stuff more than you think you are," he says. "And know that a national hotline exists.

"You can actually be the thing that makes a difference in one person's life, because you're the one who took the time to notice, and took the moment to make the call."

To contact the [Human Trafficking Resource Center](#) hotline in the U.S., call 1-888-3737-888 or use the Twilio short code "BeFree" (233733) to send a text message.