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Main Image Caption:

With sex-trafficking cases on the rise in the United States, a just-concluded week-long sweep of truck stops, casinos, the Internet, and other places identified as likely spots for trafficking sex has led to the rescue of the highest number of exploited children in eight years.

Operation Cross Country VIII, a national effort partnering the Federal Bureau of Investigation with the US Department of Justice and the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, recovered 168 children forced into prostitution in 106 cities nationwide.

Each year, the number of rescued children keeps climbing; in 2005, the first year of the effort, 30 children were saved. Among the victims, the majority are born on US soil, as opposed to those forced into the sex trade overseas.

Overall, the FBI says 3,600 children have been removed from the sex trafficking industry over the last eight years.

"Historically, people in the US thought child sex trafficking happened in far-off places like Thailand and Southeast Asia and not here.... Unfortunately, the hard-hitting fact is that US children are being recruited and controlled and bought by US citizens right here in our own backyard," says Staca Shehan, director of the case analysis division at the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children in Alexandria, Va.

Sex trafficking is a subset of the human trafficking crisis in the US, which also includes labor trafficking, according to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center in Washington. The victims of sex trafficking are predominantly female, and a third are minors. Sixty percent are US citizens.

Based on data from its national hotline, where victims call seeking services like legal assistance or emergency housing, the resource center reports that the total number of potential cases of human trafficking increased 239 percent between 2008 and 2012, the most recent year on record.

Determining both victims and offenders in the sex trafficking industry can be difficult. Advocates for trafficking victims say the increase in "throwaway kids" – runaways who are not reported as missing – is creating a larger pool of potential victims. However, because these young people often fall outside the child welfare system, they are not easily identified.

The ease of mobile technology also plays a role in pushing the commerce of sexual trafficking in the shadows, says Ms. Shehan.

"Buyers no longer have to know what part of town to go to for sex, they can just pull up their smartphone and peruse online and handpick the victim," she says. "The ease in which the Internet is being misused in this crime is potentially making it available to a wider audience."

Reliable data on trafficking can vary wildly. Even though victims are commonly forced into prostitution through coercion, fraud, or the threat of violence, the perception that they are willing criminals, not victims, leads them to shun the help of law enforcement. Police, therefore, often cannot identify women who may be, in plain sight, forced laborers in need of help.

The problem is so pervasive in the fight against sex trafficking that the State Department estimated in 2010 that less than 1 percent of current trafficking victims have been identified.

In June, the Vera Institute of Justice, a nonprofit justice policy organization in New York City, introduced a 30-question screen tool designed to identify victims. The questionnaire is not just available to law enforcement, but also to hospitals, youth shelters, and agencies that serve victims of domestic violence. Laura Simich, Vera's research director, says the tool represents "the first time there is a set of questions anyone can ask ... to identify trafficking experiences."

Ms. Simich says language and cultural nuances are common obstacles in identifying coercion, plus victims often have little or no understanding of their rights or the law.

"They don't self identify because they're scared to death. They don't seek help because they're scared of retaliation, scared of deportation. They basically have no choice, they're enslaved and they're traumatized," she says.

The questionnaire emerged from research that included interviews with 180 women in California, Colorado, New York, Texas, and Washington, which found that 53 percent were trafficking victims. Simich says she expects improved data used in a systematic way will help ferret out victims and expose their captors, as well as help law enforcement better understand the harsh nature of prostitution.

"People are beginning to recognize that most people involved in sex work are not doing it by choice. Many have been forcibly raped or prostituted as minors and have trouble getting out of that life," she says.

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