

## With Super Bowl on its way, South Florida is a hotbed for human trafficking | Opinion

As businesses and sports fans in South Florida gear up for one of the largest events to take place in Florida this year, the Super Bowl, local, state and federal law enforcement agencies, as well as human trafficking task forces and coalitions, are also making preparations.

The Super Bowl is often named the largest day of the year for human trafficking. While large events such as the Super Bowl may cause a spike in human trafficking in the city the event is taking place, the Super Bowl does not earn the title as the largest day of the year for human trafficking.

In fact, “... sex trafficking happens during the Super Bowl with the same frequency as it does every single day, in every single city in America,” according to the Polaris Project, a nonprofit that battles human trafficking.

On average, there are 20 million to 40 million men, women and children enslaved in this lucrative and illegal industry. These modern-day slaves are victims of labor and sex trafficking.

Nearly half of sex trafficking victims in the United States are U.S. citizens who have been coerced or forced into this life.

The demand for purchasing sex is evident during large sporting events, such as the Super Bowl, partly because the buyers, or Johns, are not in their city of origin and feel a sense of anonymity.

The celebratory nature of these events can also lead people to engage in these activities. Johns may believe they are merely purchasing sex, but in reality they are exchanging money for a sexual act against someone's will.

Human trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery in which traffickers use force, fraud or coercion to control their victims to engage in commercial sex acts or labor services against his or her will. A minor cannot consent to a sex act; therefore, anyone under the age of 18 engaged in these activities is considered a victim of human trafficking.

Who are the buyers and sellers (traffickers)? Buyers can be anyone. On average it is the middle-aged, married, white male with children. Age, gender and ethnicity are no boundaries for traffickers. There are four types of traffickers: gang, pimp, familial and renegade — all of whom will take advantage of the influx of buyers during Super Bowl.

Florida ranks third in the nation for reported calls to the National Human Trafficking Hotline (888-3737-888). We believe that is a direct reflection of the education and awareness efforts from the nearly two dozen human trafficking coalitions and task forces in the state.

Attorney General Ashley Moody is leading the charge with the Statewide Council on Human Trafficking. Charles Bender, Place of Hope CEO, sits on the council's board as a direct service provider.

“Human Trafficking is the ultimate form of exploitation,” Bender said. “We produced a documentary, ‘Invisible,’ because people need to know it is happening in plain sight. This film helps us get out there and let people know what is happening here and beyond.”

At Place of Hope and the Coalition, we have been working tirelessly to increase awareness by educating the community that human trafficking is not only street-based prostitution or kidnappings, and it is not smuggling. Traffickers are relying on the public being naïve.



Jamie Bond, director of advancement & development, Place of Hope Treasure Coast; 2020 chair-elect, Human Trafficking Coalition of the Treasure Coast (Photo: CONTRIBUTED PHOTO FROM JAMIE BOND)



Attendees hold candles at the Take Back the Night rally Tuesday night, Oct. 22, 2019, in downtown Lancaster. The rally was part of an evening of events at both Ohio University Lancaster and downtown to mark the annual Take Back the Night event. The speakers, march and rally were intended to raise community awareness about domestic violence, rape, assault and human trafficking. More than 40 people attended the rally downtown and organizers said more than 60 attended the events at OU-L.  
(Photo: CONTRIBUTED PHOTO FROM JAMIE BOND)

Our local agencies are working together along with law enforcement and Homeland Security Investigations to increase visibility of the hotline and red flags. This year, the Super Bowl is in Miami and next year in Tampa. With the Interstate 4 and Interstate 95 corridors and other easy-access highways, South Florida is a hotbed for human trafficking.

Know the signs: Visit [Polarisproject.org](http://Polarisproject.org) or email me to learn more.

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