

## Tennessee takes action against underage sex trafficking

By Liz Wood , News  
Editor

For victims of human trafficking, slavery in the U.S. is alive and well, and, despite improvements, Tennessee is no exception.

The Protected Innocence Challenge, a comprehensive study which grades states on its laws to respond to domestic minors forced to engage in sex trafficking, graded Tennessee with a 93.5, or A, for human trafficking in 2013, up from its score of 79.5 in 2012 and 73 in 2011.

Two notable changes behind the state's improved score are the amending of the patronizing prostitution law which significantly increased the penalty for buying sex with a minor and a new law requiring the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation to update its website upon a missing child's recovery.

However, incidents of sex trafficking still surface to the tune of 94 each month in the state, according to the latest statistical report from the TBI.

Most female victims average between the ages of 12 and 14 while boys are even younger, averaging between just 11 and 13 years of age.

On an average day, a sex-trafficking victim will sleep with 7 to 15 men with quotas range from \$200 to \$1,000, all being kept by the trafficker or pimp.

### The Polaris Project

Knox County is among four counties in Tennessee that has experienced over 100 incidents of sex-trafficking, along with Shelby County, Davidson County and Coffee County.

Karen Karpinski, director of education for End Slavery Tennessee, a Nashville-based organization committed to a slave-free Tennessee and the restoration of survivors of human trafficking, said any place with a large number of people passing through regularly is bound to experience human trafficking.

"I think all of our major cities – Knoxville, Nashville, Chattanooga, Memphis – have a large number of trafficking issues," Karpinski said. "Most are located on main interstate systems, and any time you have a situation with a lot of people coming into your city, you're going to have trafficking.

"We know that it is a growing problem. Worldwide it is the fastest growing criminal activity in the world, and the US is certainly not exempt from that. We are one of the larger countries in the world for trafficking, and the numbers only continue to grow. The only statistic we see going down is the age of the victim that is involved."

Ryan Dalton, policy counsel at Shared Hope International, said extreme responsiveness in Tennessee legislature to data revealed by the Protected Innocence Challenge has resulted in an improved score for the state.

"Human trafficking is a hidden crime," Dalton said. "It happens in places where people can't see it. It's cloaked from law enforcement. Putting numbers on it allows us to develop policy and make an aggressive criminal justice response to human trafficking. The last three years we've been able to drill down on our anti-trafficking law and make some serious improvements."

Dalton said that addressing the issue at a legislative level is central to decreasing its incidence.

In Tennessee, trafficking a person for a commercial sex act and promoting prostitution can send an offender to jail for eight to 30 years or 15-60 years if the minor is under 15 or if the offense occurs near a school, library or park.

Fines can be as high as \$50,000.

Apart from organizations in the state aiming to combat sex-trafficking, citizens have also taken on the issue.

The Freedom Cyclers, a group comprised of four UT students, chose sex-trafficking as the focus of their 2,400 mile bike ride from California to Georgia this summer, and rose about \$10,000 while spreading awareness on the issue.

Jeff Maier, a senior in accounting who was one of the Freedom Cyclers, recalled spreading awareness of human trafficking and discussing the issue with people the group encountered as the most rewarding aspect of the trip.

Resolving such an important issue, Maier said, can begin with awareness.

"If no one knows about it, then it's never going to get stopped," Maier said. "I can't imagine being one of these people that is being forced to have sex several times a day. That's one of the worst things I can imagine going through. It's just important to end the problem."

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