



As a city, Houston is one of the most progressive and culturally diverse cities in the nation. It is one of the primary reasons that people, especially families, choose to leave their current city or country and become a Houston resident.

There are so many hidden treasures that Houston has to offer, that you could spend nearly a year trying to uncover them.

There is also a dark and hidden secret in Houston that is often overlooked and is impacting communities all over Houston, regardless of socio-economic status. That secret is the tremendous increase in the number of teenagers that have become the victims of sex trafficking, prostitution and drug addiction.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Human trafficking is the act of anyone being forced, coerced or made to perform sexual activities, labor or other actions against their will.

Innocence Lost...Teenage Sex Trafficking and Drug Addiction

Written by Jeffrey L. Boney
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There are illegal immigrants that are forced to join this hidden underground society, and while they get the most attention, they aren't the social class that is affected the most. In Houston, it is our teenagers that are being impacted the most, and many of these young victims come right from our own backyard.

The I-10 Corridor is a trafficking route and because Houston has no zoning, sexually-oriented businesses can open up whenever and wherever they want. You can shut one down, due to violations which include underage sex and dancing, but they can go anywhere and open another location in Houston without any problems. There are only a few sexually-oriented businesses that actually operate with the proper licenses; but, for those that do not, there is an abundance of sex and labor trafficking. This is also followed by heavy drug usage.

Underage girls are often found dancing in low-end strip clubs, cantinas and sports bikini bars. When it comes to dancing in these establishments, underage girls aren't even asked for identification to prove how old they are. The philosophy is, if they look good and they are able to dance, they are good enough to be employed. Many girls are also prostitutes and make little to no money for their efforts.

LIVING TESTIMONIAL



Kathryn Griffin-Townsend Grinan knows first-hand about this life, having gone down this road

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herself.

A former cocaine addict and prostitute, Griffin-Townsend Grinan has helped over 1,000 women escape the cycle of sex trafficking, prostitution and drug abuse by founding her organization *We've Been There Done*

That

over a decade ago. Griffin-Townsend Grinan credits rehabilitation programs with changing her life, but admits that dealing with teenagers who have been in the life for some time is a challenge when it comes to rehabilitating them and reintegrating them into society.

"I'm really concerned about the children in every community," said Griffin-Townsend Grinan. "These children come from every area of Houston, not just the inner-city."

She states that the majority of these girls are mostly runaways and that sex traffickers target them, because they are looking for acceptance or someone to love them and take care of them.

A major issue is the decision of many parents to allow their teenage children to move in with older men or women. This is mostly done because many of these adults convince these teenagers that their parents do not love them anymore or will never love them like they can. They then convince the teenagers to leave home and come live with them so they can be a family together.

"They think these older men are their boyfriend who lure them away from home anywhere from 6 months to a year after they meet them," said Griffin-Townsend Grinan. "They brainwash and convince them that they can make a lot of money and that their parents don't want them and that they are doing this to help their new family."

She states that these older men begin to beat them and then berate them, all the while claiming that they love them. They then begin to ask them to get involved in sexual activities as a means to make money to take care of the family and show their commitment and love for them. This is where the vicious cycle begins.

WHO ARE THESE CHILDREN?

The average teenage girl or boy that has run away from home is approached by a sex trafficker within 48 hours. A high percentage of those runaways will be lured into a sexually-oriented business or promiscuous lifestyle within the first two hours of leaving home.

It's extremely difficult to statistically narrow down the percentage of African-Americans that are runaways, because it is such a hidden secret and is hard to track accurately. The average age range of runaways fall between 12 to 17 years of age.

Most think that these teenagers fall victim because their parents are in jail or are drug users. That is not entirely true. Surprisingly, the majority of them come from middle class families.

The normal indicators of these runaways are evident before they even leave the home. Most of them become defiant and don't want to follow the rules of the house. They subsequently begin having trouble in school and then many simply drop out of school. More middle-class Houstonian children are dropping out of school or turning to the sex industry than ever before.

A lot of the children end up in Juvenile Detention Centers. A lot of them are busted for drugs and the sexual trafficking issue is uncovered by going deep with each individual and understanding their case history. Many of them have become so brainwashed that they don't even realize they are being abused and trafficked.

Those that have low self-esteem and are bullied because of their looks or their weight are targeted by predators. Predators hang out at the malls and lie in wait for those that look vulnerable and appear to have low self-esteem. They approach them and befriend them, telling them they are beautiful and attractive and then buy them nice gifts, or in many cases, they will begin to communicate with them over the phone, by text messaging or by social media outlets. They will continue this "courtship" for 6 months to a year before beginning to break them down emotionally. They begin to tell them how their parents don't love them. Most of the young people that get caught up in sex trafficking become sexually active as early as 11 years of age.

LACK OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Griffin-Townsend Grinan believes that a lot of parents unintentionally set their children up to be targets, or by programming them to become gold-diggers or high class prostitutes by telling them when they grow up they need to marry a doctor or a lawyer. She suggests that parents should not put pressure on their children that way and that they should let their children establish their own identity and not look to have a meal ticket.

They see the celebrity lifestyles on TV and think that people in the videos and TV shows live like that every day. They want material possessions and want to be popular. They are excited about money and don't want to get fame and money quickly and easily.

Parents used to demand, but many parents are not engaged with their children. Parents have to hold their children more accountable. They need to know what is going on in their lives and who they are connected to and hanging out with.

There are many signs that parents tend to miss because they are focused on their careers or many things that keep them away from their children.

One of the major contributors to a lot of these behaviors is molestation taking place within the home or within the family. They are molested by parents, family members, boyfriends, girlfriends and friends of the family. Most of the people that molest these children have been molested themselves. When the children cry out for help and express what is happening, they are oftentimes not believed and ignored. This causes a shutdown and a desire to run away from these problems.

One of the violations on the rise is adult women molesting teenage children. The media has shared countless new stories of adult women and even female teachers molesting teenage children.

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SOCIAL MEDIA

Children under 18 feel disconnected, either because many of their fathers are gone or they have stepfathers that they either they don't trust or have abused them somehow.

One of the newest and best instruments to identify these indicators is social media.

Teenagers are tweeting and posting messages and pictures that have become a huge "red-flag" for anyone that cares enough to pay attention.

Responsible people, especially parents, should have access to all the social media sites and emails of the children they supervise. It is on these social media sites that these disconnected teenagers are tweeting and posting their "real" feelings and thoughts. Online predators are lurking and seeking online teenage victims to add to their stable.

WARNING SIGNS

There are many visible signs that are most common and people should pay attention to.

Some of those signs include:

- Dressing extremely provocative
- Being routinely defiant and rude
- Sending lewd pictures of themselves

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- Low self-esteem
- Head hangs low constantly
- Not interested in doing anything involving their family
- Disconnect from family
- No desire to communicate to family about important issues or problems in their lives
- Fantasizing and having constant conversations about boys or older men
- Expressing their feelings about boys or older men in ways that supersede boyfriend status
- Stealing vehicles to go hang out with friends
- Sneaking out of the house
- Sneaking into clubs or bars underage

Griffin-Townsend Grinan believes that everyone should be concerned with this serious issue, because it is important for everyone to address. She also states that parents should not have the typical response that this could never happen to their child.

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“While it may not happen to your child, it could happen to your friend, co-worker or church member,” said Griffin-Townsend Grinan. “Everybody is looking at this as if it is somebody else’s problem, but we have to start looking at it like it is all of our problem and all of our children.”

Individuals that believe their children or someone they know is a victim of sexual trafficking, they are strongly encouraged to contact the National Human Trafficking hotline at 1-888-373-7888. For more serious infractions, don’t take the law into your own hands, dial 911 and contact the local authorities.

We could all lean on the words from the song “Greatest Love of All” by the late Whitney Houston, as it relates to our children.

I believe the children are our future

Teach them well and let them lead the way

Show them all the beauty they possess inside

Give them a sense of pride to make it easier. {jcomments on}