



ORANGE COUNTY HUMAN TRAFFICKING TASK FORCE RELEASES 2023 HUMAN TRAFFICKING VICTIM REPORT

420 Human Trafficking Victims were assisted by the Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force and first-time data shows 97% of perpetrators have previous criminal records

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Between 2021-2022, the Task Force assisted 420 victims of sex and labor trafficking.
- 63% of the victims that were helped were new victims identified in Orange County.
- Nine out of ten of the labor trafficking survivors were foreign victims.
- 36% of the victims were under the age of 18.
- 97% of perpetrators had prior arrest and criminal history.
- 72% of perpetrators arrested over a five-year period had a criminal history of violence.
- 37% of perpetrators had previously been arrested 10 or more times.

ANAHEIM, Calif. (October 3, 2023) – The Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force (OCHTTF) has released their 8th Human Trafficking Victim Report for 2023, showcasing progress made through both public and private partnerships. Collaborative efforts showed 420 victims received essential support. Read the detailed 2023 Victim Report [here](#).

A collaboration between several professional fields and agencies, the OCHTTF's goal is to eliminate human trafficking in Orange County. The OCHTTF's work is conducted through a victim-centered and trauma-informed approach, involving entities such as law enforcement, victim services, prosecution, government agencies, non-profit organizations and community partnerships. This year's report includes data from several organizations to reflect a wider range of human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation victims who received support in Orange County through task force partners.

Among the 420 victims who received support, the data showed that 38 were for labor trafficking, 10 for labor and sex trafficking and 372 exclusively for sex trafficking. Out of the total victims, 374 identified as female, 42 as male and four as transgender. A significant portion, 36%, were minors. Additionally, nine out of 10 victims of labor trafficking came from a different country.

“This report is not exhaustive for human trafficking in Orange County, but it demonstrates a good representation of the situation and provides awareness to the general public on the support, advocacy, and services provided to the survivors, which empowers them as they re-integrate into society and navigate the various systems such as the criminal justice system,”



said Michelle Heater, program director with victim assistance programs at the nonprofit Waymakers.

Criminal History of Violence Supports the Importance of Recent Legislation for Stricter Penalties

For the very first time, this victim-centric report is providing data and analysis on perpetrator criminal history. This analysis confirms the importance of the newly signed law, Senate Bill 14 introduced by Senator Grove, that will go into effect in 2024 to make the human trafficking of a minor a serious felony crime and subject to the “Three Strikes” law, increasing accountability for human traffickers. Previously, human trafficking was classified as a non-serious crime by California law and cannot be considered a strike under California’s Three-Strikes law. New legislation in California steepens the penalties for human trafficking of minors in California for purposes of a commercial sex act as a serious felony — including under the State’s Three Strikes law — and imposes harsher penalties and sentencing enhancements for individuals convicted of the crime.

California consistently ranks number one in the nation for trafficking cases reported to the National Human Trafficking Hotline. **This law is the important step needed to prevent human trafficking by repeat offenders targeting minors.**

“By making human trafficking of a minor a serious crime, we are creating an important path for protecting the most vulnerable victims,” said California Senator Josh Newman, who co-authored Senate Bill 14. “It also gives us a better understanding of those who continue to commit these types of heinous crimes against children, as well as how they operate, so we can do better at preventing more children from falling prey to this inhumane violence in the future.”

More Arrests, Harsher Penalties

The data presented in this report was collected by two law enforcement entities and the Orange County District Attorney’s Office, who all play a vital role in addressing human trafficking in Orange County. The report covers a five-year period (2018-2022) of those arrested in Orange County, during which 342 individuals were arrested on charges of pimping, pandering and/or human trafficking. Of the combined arrests, 120 were from the OCHTTF, 47 from Santa Ana Police Department Vice and 175 from other Orange County law enforcement agencies. Of those perpetrators, 72% had a criminal history of violence, with 37% having been arrested 10 or more times.



“Over the past decade we’ve established crucial partnerships that help us better understand the approach to identifying human trafficking problems,” said Anaheim Police Chief Rick Armendariz. “With victim-centered training and a trauma-informed approach to investigations, we are able to better understand that trauma and adverse childhood experiences often manifest the pimping and human trafficking dynamics between a trafficker and their victims. We are now able to better identify human trafficking crimes and the perpetrators involved, enabling us to continue to stay vigilant as the lead law enforcement agency for the Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force.”

The OCHTTF conducts investigations in Orange County, both proactively and reactively, to identify both the perpetrators and survivors of human trafficking. The report also shows that 97% of perpetrators had a prior arrest but only 29% served time in prison, while 70% arrested for crimes committed against victims and communities had little consequences or accountability.

First Responders Are at the Forefront of Identifying Victims and Connecting Them to Support

In Orange County, law enforcement remains the primary source for victim assistance referrals. Interestingly, 43% of referrals via the OCHTTF website were from self-identified victims. A recent UCI research study and publication, “Frontline medical professionals’ ability to recognize and respond to suspected youth sex trafficking” found that if properly informed, healthcare providers can be at the forefront of victim referrals. According to several studies, 88% of survivors are in contact with a healthcare professional before, during, or after their period of exploitation.

Community Support and Healing

The Human Trafficking Victim Report not only presents data on survivors and perpetrators, but it also emphasizes the crucial role of community support. Community partners and their work with survivors is highlighted in this year’s report. Supporting survivors in their efforts after their victimization takes an organized and specially trained effort, and the partners highlighted in the report have been exemplary in their dedication to helping others heal. Through sharing their stories and vulnerabilities, survivors also contribute to the development of better resources designed around the human trafficking victim population for the OCHTTF, which not only assists them but also aids in identifying more survivors who are not aware that these services were available. Survivor-led efforts are seen publicly through victim impact statements, a right under



Marsy's Law, where the victims are able to freely express what they feel in their own words. These statements can also be read by the victim in court. Survivor-informed feedback has also helped in the growth and expansion of the OCHTTF to create the Healthcare Subcommittee. The complexity of exploitation and its outcome, especially among youth, is evident. Healthcare professionals can directly impact the recognition, treatment, response, and care coordination of individuals and families.

More Minors Than Originally Expected Were Identified, Prompting Strategic Community Awareness Programs Directed Toward Student Populations

This is the first time the report covers community prevention education and the involvement of youth. A total of 503 minors of commercial sexual exploitation were identified by Orange County Social Services Agency between 2015-2022. The majority of minors involved with sex trafficking come with a long history of prior child abuse, lack of family support and/or involvement in the child welfare system. Their history, in combination with the grooming dangers of social media and relationship connections of predatory behavior online, has an extremely influential effect on child development and behavioral processes.

These statistics drew OCHTTF to engage the Anaheim-based nonprofit, Higher Ground Youth and Family Services, to assist with prevention education so that youth could learn more about the crime of human trafficking and how it relates to abusive relationships, what to look for and how to help. Data captured in the 2022-2023 school year with over 3,300 students showed a 49% increase in student awareness of the signs of human trafficking and a 51% increase in knowledge of how to report human trafficking and access help.

“By furthering education for youth potentially exposed to sexual exploitation and human trafficking closer to home and their friends than they think, we can empower younger people to better recognize the signs to seek help earlier and guide them down a safer and healthier path in life,” explained Lita Mercado, chief program office with Waymakers.

On January 28, 2023, in partnership with 25 local nonprofits, the OCHTTF held the “Know More, Do Better” prevention event which brought together over 350 middle school students from 23 different Orange County schools. During this event, they received hands-on, individualized education, gaining more awareness of human trafficking and the resources that are available. Youth are more empowered than ever to help fight human trafficking. When asked why they matter, one youth responded with “I matter for future generations making the world a better place.” After the success of the event, the OCHTTF was asked to repeat it again for 2024.



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About Waymakers

Every day throughout Orange County, people find hope after trauma. They don't simply survive; they find ways to heal – all with the help of Waymakers, formerly called Community Service Programs. Waymakers' eight model programs guide over 120,000 abused children, crime victims, struggling families, acting-out adolescents and people needing mediation services annually. Waymakers has been sheltering children, supporting victims, counseling families, resolving conflicts and educating communities in Orange County since 1972. Learn more at WaymakersOC.org.

About the Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force

The Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force (OCHTTF) is a multidisciplinary anti-human trafficking effort linked by a network of over 70 organizations including law enforcement, victim service providers, prosecution, nonprofit organizations, faith-based organizations, government agencies and the community. The OCHTTF is committed to combating all forms of human trafficking, recovering victims, prosecuting offenders, advocating on behalf of victims, raising community awareness and strengthening collaborative partnerships. For more information on the OCHTTF and resources, visit ochumantrafficking.com.

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