Hidden in Plain Sight:
Human Trafficking of Women and Girls in Sonoma County
Sonoma County Commission on the Status of Women
Position Paper

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Human trafficking is an often-hidden form of exploitation that affects people across age, race, socioeconomic status, immigration status, and community. It includes both sex trafficking and labor trafficking and can occur without kidnapping, physical confinement, or movement across borders. Traffickers may use force, but they may also rely on fraud, manipulation, debt, threats, emotional dependency, or other forms of coercion. For minors exploited in commercial sex, force, fraud, or coercion does not need to be established.[2]

For women and girls, trafficking can intersect with gender-based violence, economic insecurity, prior trauma, housing instability, discrimination, drug dependency, and social isolation. These conditions do not cause trafficking - traffickers cause trafficking. However, traffickers can intentionally exploit unmet needs, unequal power, and circumstances that make safety or economic stability harder to maintain. Verity, a Sonoma County organization providing sexual-assault and human-trafficking prevention, intervention, and healing services, emphasizes this distinction as essential to preventing victim-blaming and developing effective solutions.[6]

The scale of trafficking in Sonoma County cannot be captured by a single number. Many survivors are never identified, may not initially recognize their experiences as trafficking, or may not seek formal services. Local service data nevertheless demonstrates substantial need. Between 2024 and 2025, Verity served 122 human trafficking survivors, including 12 survivors assisted with housing-related needs or emergency shelter. Across its broader intervention work, Verity answered 1,149 crisis-line calls during the year. Redemption House of the Bay Area reported that it has served 449 survivors and vulnerable community members across Sonoma County and the Bay Area since 2021. It is important to note that these figures represent people who reached out for support. They should not be interpreted as estimates of the total number of people experiencing trafficking locally.

Statewide data provide additional context. In 2025, the National Human Trafficking Hotline identified 1,908 trafficking cases involving 2,841 victims in California. Where demographic information was collected, 1,379 victims were female and 300 were minors. Reports included sex trafficking, labor trafficking, and situations involving both.[5]

To better understand what trafficking looks like locally and how Sonoma County can strengthen prevention, identification, intervention, and recovery, the Sonoma County Commission on the Status of Women convened a public hearing on August 13, 2026. Panelists included **Christina Stevens**, Deputy District Attorney with the Sonoma County District Attorney's Office; **Juana Marquez**, Child Protective Services Social Work Supervisor with Family, Youth, and Children's Services and member of the Sonoma County Human Trafficking Task Force; **Lisa Diaz-McQuaid**,

Lead Human Trafficking Caseworker with Verity, co-founder of Redemption House of the Bay Area, and member of the Sonoma County Human Trafficking Task Force; and **Janice Blalock**, Verity Board Member and member of the Sonoma County Human Trafficking Task Force. Their perspectives brought together prosecution, child welfare, forensic interviewing, prevention, survivor services, community education, and lived experience.

Sonoma County is not starting from scratch. The Human Trafficking Task Force, public agencies, law enforcement, schools, survivor-serving organizations, lived-experience leaders, and community partners have already built significant expertise and infrastructure. This paper builds on that work. It identifies opportunities to strengthen meaningful prevention, support long-term recovery, reduce avoidable retraumatization, and sustain the local partnerships that help survivors move toward safety, autonomy, and healing.

GUIDING QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION FRAMING

The Commission structured the hearing around several related questions: What do human trafficking and Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) look like in Sonoma County? How do grooming and coercion operate? What misconceptions prevent survivors from being recognized or understood? How can parents, schools, peers, service providers, and other trusted adults help prevent exploitation? What happens when trafficking is identified? And what can Sonoma County do to strengthen long-term recovery? The discussion also explored a question that became central to the hearing: How can institutions respond to trafficking without placing additional burdens on the people they are trying to help?

UNDERSTANDING HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND SONOMA COUNTY'S RESPONSE

Verity describes human trafficking as the exploitation of people through force, fraud, or coercion for commercial sex or forced labor. California law similarly recognizes both labor and sex trafficking and makes clear that trafficking does not require transporting a person across a border.

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) occurs when someone under age 18 is sexually exploited in exchange for something of value, which may include money, food, clothing, transportation, housing, protection, or other needs.[8] This distinction matters. Panelists strongly rejected language that implies children are voluntarily participating in prostitution. A child cannot consent to commercial sexual exploitation, and California law recognizes a commercially sexually exploited minor as a trafficking victim regardless of whether force, fraud, or coercion can be shown.[2]

Grooming refers to a pattern of manipulation in which someone builds trust or a relationship in order to gain increasing influence, access, or control over another person for the purpose of exploitation. It may involve attention, affection, promises, gifts, secrecy, isolation, pressure, or the gradual testing of boundaries.[8]

Sonoma County's response is multidisciplinary. The Human Trafficking Task Force brings together public agencies and community organizations to coordinate education, enforcement, prevention, and survivor services. The District Attorney's Office prosecutes trafficking and related crimes. Family, Youth, and Children's Services and the Redwood Children's Center work with children and youth who enter the child-welfare or forensic-interview systems. Verity provides prevention, intervention, advocacy, healing, and crisis services. Redemption House provides survivor-led outreach,

mentoring, support groups, education, and connection to resources. This infrastructure matters because no single agency can address trafficking from prevention through recovery.

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT: HOW TRAFFICKING OPERATES LOCALLY

Panelists described trafficking in Sonoma County as both present and easy to overlook. Deputy District Attorney Christina Stevens discussed investigations involving illicit massage businesses where women may face long hours, excessive fees, surveillance, restrictions on movement, threats, and financial control. She also described exploitation occurring at hotels, private homes, bars, casinos, online advertisements, and other settings. Sonoma County does not have one highly visible area where commercial sexual exploitation is concentrated, which can make trafficking harder for the public to recognize.

California's 2025 Hotline data reflect this broader reality. Reported sex-trafficking venues included illicit massage or spa businesses, residences, streets, hotels and motels, and online advertising. Labor-trafficking reports included domestic work, restaurants, agriculture, construction, hospitality, and other workplaces.[5] The diversity of these settings reinforces a central message from the hearing: trafficking does not have one appearance.

Another common misconception is that trafficking typically begins with kidnapping or overt violence. Stevens described manipulation as a powerful means of control. A trafficker may present as a romantic partner, promise security or opportunity, foster emotional dependence, control access to drugs or money, monitor communications, or gradually introduce threats and violence. Diaz-McQuaid similarly explained that relationship-based grooming can make exploitation difficult to recognize, including for the person experiencing it.

That reality helps explain behaviors outsiders may misunderstand. A survivor may return to an exploiter, protect the person exploiting them, fear law enforcement, or not describe themselves as trafficked. Those responses do not necessarily indicate freedom from coercion. They may reflect fear, survival, dependency, manipulation, trauma, or a lack of realistic alternatives.

California law has increasingly recognized this complexity. Penal Code § 236.23 provides an affirmative defense to certain criminal charges when a person establishes that an offense resulted directly from coercion experienced as a trafficking victim.[3] The significance is broader than the statute itself: behavior that initially appears criminal may require a deeper examination of what happened before it.

VULNERABILITY IS NOT THE CAUSE: HOW TRAFFICKERS EXPLOIT UNMET NEEDS

The panel repeatedly returned to vulnerability, but this concept requires careful framing: Trafficking is caused by traffickers, not by poverty, homelessness, trauma, immigration status, substance use, foster-care involvement, or any other characteristic of the person being exploited. These conditions can instead create needs or power imbalances that traffickers recognize and exploit.[6]

Diaz-McQuaid identified circumstances that can heighten vulnerability, including substance use, mental health challenges, involvement in foster care, previous trauma, and limited family support. She was equally clear that there is no single trafficking profile and that these circumstances do not need to be present for someone to become a victim.

Juana Marquez described how these dynamics can affect youth within the child-welfare system. A young person who has already experienced trauma may face additional risk after running from a placement, becoming unhoused, losing stable adult support, or seeking belonging elsewhere. An exploiter may offer what initially appears to be affection, protection, money, housing, or connection.

For commercially sexually exploited youth, what looks from the outside like a choice may therefore reflect survival or a lack of meaningful alternatives. Diaz-McQuaid described working with young people who could receive significant amounts of money for sexual images or activity while service providers were asking them to stop without necessarily being able to replace the resources that exploitation was providing. Her approach focuses on relationship-building, self-worth, skills, safe ways to earn money, and helping youth imagine a future beyond immediate survival.

This framing changes the policy question. Rather than asking only, "Why didn't someone leave?", a survivor-centered response asks, "What did the trafficker exploit, and what would make safety a realistic option?"

PREVENTION BEGINS WITH KNOWLEDGE, TRUST, AND AUTONOMY

Panelists described prevention as more than teaching a list of warning signs. Prevention also means giving children and young people language for bodily autonomy, healthy relationships, boundaries, online safety, consent, and help-seeking before exploitation occurs.

Janice Blalock emphasized the role of parents, caregivers, teachers, peers, and other trusted adults in noticing changes and asking questions. Diaz-McQuaid stressed the importance of beginning age-appropriate conversations about body autonomy and boundaries early and creating relationships in which children know they can bring difficult or frightening experiences to a trusted adult. Both favored ongoing dialogue over one-time safety talks.

Significant prevention work is already happening locally. Verity reports that its prevention programs reached 1,421 elementary-age students, 3,270 middle and high school students, and 13 Sonoma County schools, as well as 9,775 community members through prevention and outreach messaging. The organization also conducted 178 group sessions at Los Guilicos Juvenile Hall. These numbers demonstrate both the scale of existing work and the opportunity to build on it.

Blalock also pointed to *See the Signs Sonoma County* as a practical local prevention and support resource. The campaign, developed by a coalition of local agencies working to combat human trafficking and exploitation, helps youth, caregivers, and community members recognize signs of sexual exploitation and begin conversations about online requests, image sharing, grooming, and other concerning behavior. Its confidential support line allows people to call 24/7 or text during business hours while remaining in control of what they choose to share and what steps they want to take.[8]

California already requires human-trafficking prevention education in grades seven through twelve.[1] The hearing nevertheless raised an important distinction between fulfilling an instructional requirement and providing education that young people can actually use. Panelists questioned whether brief or passive presentations allow students to recognize grooming in their own lives.

They encouraged age-appropriate, interactive education that includes realistic scenarios, trusted adults, information about where to seek help, and survivor-informed perspectives when appropriate.

The goal is not to frighten young people. It is to give them language for safety, boundaries, manipulation, and consent, and to ensure they know that someone will listen when they ask for help.

FROM IDENTIFICATION TO RECOVERY: A SURVIVOR-CENTERED SYSTEM

Recognizing trafficking is only the beginning. Leaving exploitation does not immediately resolve the conditions created by it, and recovery rarely follows a simple or linear path. Panelists described survivor support as work that depends on trust, time, consistency, practical resources, and respect for survivor autonomy.

Diaz-McQuaid highlighted the particular value of lived-experience professionals. Survivors who distrust institutions or do not yet identify what is happening to them as trafficking may connect differently with someone who understands those experiences firsthand. A 2023 *NorthBay biz* profile of Diaz-McQuaid and Redemption House co-founder Elizabeth Quiroz similarly describes how their own connection through shared lived experience became part of their healing and later informed a model of survivor mentoring, support groups, community education, and street outreach.[4]

The panel also emphasized meeting people where they are. Redemption House's outreach model provides information and connection without requiring a person to accept services immediately. Its current programs include free confidential trafficking-survivor support groups and street outreach, with the goal of making support available when someone is ready to use it.

Long-term recovery also depends on material stability. Panelists identified housing, trauma-informed mental health support, legal advocacy, transportation, substance-use treatment, education, employment opportunities, and flexible assistance as important parts of recovery.

Sonoma County also benefits from substantial collaboration. The Human Trafficking Task Force connects law enforcement, prosecution, child welfare, survivor-service organizations, and other partners. Panelists described recent investigations in which law enforcement, code enforcement, Verity, and other partners used multiple tools to address suspected exploitation while connecting people encountered during operations to support.

The Family Justice Center Sonoma County provides another example of this coordinated approach. Designed as a central access point for survivors, the Center brings multiple partner agencies and service providers into one setting so individuals can be connected to appropriate support without having to navigate each system independently. Several Human Trafficking Task Force partners, including the District Attorney's Office, Verity, and the Redwood Children's Center, maintain a presence at the Center, which also hosts the Task Force's monthly meetings. This model can help reduce fragmentation and, where possible, limit the number of times survivors must repeat traumatic experiences while seeking help.

That same system can nevertheless be difficult for survivors to navigate. Stevens explained that criminal proceedings can take a long time and may leave survivors uncertain about what comes next while they are simultaneously healing from trauma and managing fears about retaliation. Frequent

communication, realistic expectations, and consistent victim-advocate involvement can make that process less opaque and help survivors understand what is happening, what will be asked of them, and where support is available.

A public participant with lived experience raised another concern: repeatedly recounting traumatic experiences to multiple professionals can itself cause harm. When systems require survivors to revisit the same traumatic events again and again, some may disengage from services or the justice process altogether.

A survivor-centered system must therefore hold exploiters accountable and consider how the path to accountability affects the person who was harmed. Reducing avoidable retraumatization does not mean weakening investigations or prosecution. It means designing coordination, communication, and information-sharing so survivors do not carry unnecessary system burdens on top of the harm they have already experienced.

Implications, Considerations, And Next Steps

Taken together, the panel testimony, local service data, and statewide context point to several key implications:

- **Trafficking is difficult to measure and easy to miss.** Service counts and Hotline reports demonstrate need, but they represent people and situations that reached formal systems. They should not be treated as complete measures of prevalence.
- **The cause of trafficking is exploitation by traffickers, not survivor vulnerability.** Housing instability, economic insecurity, prior trauma, child-welfare involvement, discrimination, and isolation may create openings that traffickers exploit. Effective prevention must address both offender behavior and the conditions that make exploitation easier.
- **Public stereotypes can prevent recognition.** Grooming, manipulation, financial control, emotional dependence, and coercion may be more important than kidnapping or visible restraint. Public education and professional training should reflect the forms of trafficking encountered locally.
- **Prevention infrastructure already exists and should be strengthened.** Sonoma County has school-based education, community outreach, a multidisciplinary Task Force, survivor-led organizations, and crisis and advocacy services. Sustained investment can increase their reach and consistency.
- **Recovery requires more than removal from exploitation.** Housing, income, counseling, trusted relationships, cultural responsiveness, legal advocacy, and long-term support help make safety sustainable.
- **How systems interact with survivors matters.** Coordination should reduce unnecessary retelling, clarify what survivors can expect, and ensure that accountability processes do not create avoidable barriers to healing or continued engagement.

Policy And Programmatic Recommendations

To strengthen prevention, survivor support, and institutional response to human trafficking in Sonoma County, the Commission on the Status of Women recommends the following actions:

1. **Strengthen meaningful, age-appropriate trafficking prevention education.** Build on California's existing school requirements and Sonoma County's current prevention infrastructure by supporting interactive education about bodily autonomy, boundaries, healthy relationships, digital grooming, exploitation, and where to seek help. Expand awareness and use of existing local prevention tools, including *See the Signs Sonoma County*, so students, families, educators, and other trusted adults know how to recognize concerns and where to turn for confidential support. Include qualified prevention organizations and lived-experience experts so education is relatable and actionable rather than compliance-based.

2. **Make lived-experience expertise a core part of prevention, training, and survivor services.** Expand compensated roles for survivor leaders and peer professionals in outreach, youth engagement, case management, professional training, and program design. Support recurring survivor-informed training for law enforcement, child welfare, educators, healthcare professionals, and others likely to encounter trafficking.

3. **Strengthen the continuum from immediate safety to long-term stability.** Sustain and expand access to emergency and transitional housing, trauma-informed counseling, transportation, legal advocacy, substance-use treatment, education, employment and skills development, and flexible material assistance. Prioritize resources that give survivors realistic alternatives to returning to unsafe environments or exploitative relationships.

4. **Reduce avoidable retraumatization across public systems.** Develop multidisciplinary practices that minimize unnecessary repetition of traumatic accounts while preserving legal and evidentiary requirements. Provide survivors with clear expectations, consistent advocate support, and coordinated referrals so they do not have to navigate complex systems alone.

5. **Sustain Sonoma County's coordinated response while pairing accountability with survivor support.** Continue investing in the Human Trafficking Task Force and collaboration among prosecution, law enforcement, child welfare, schools, code enforcement, survivor-service organizations, and lived-experience professionals. Maintain adequate staffing and stable funding so partnerships can respond consistently, preserve expertise, and connect people encountered during enforcement with immediate advocacy and services.

CONCLUSION

Human trafficking can remain hidden precisely because it does not always look the way people expect. It can begin with affection, opportunity, money, shelter, protection, employment, or belonging before becoming a means of control. Survivors may not immediately recognize what is happening to them, and reaching safety may require far more than simply walking away.

The hearing also made clear that Sonoma County has much to build upon. Public agencies, the Human Trafficking Task Force, survivor-serving nonprofits, educators, advocates, law enforcement, lived-experience leaders, and community members are already doing difficult and deeply consequential work. Verity's impact data alone reflect thousands of prevention contacts, crisis calls, advocacy services, and therapeutic supports delivered within a single year.

The work ahead is therefore not to replace what exists, but to strengthen it. Sonoma County can deepen prevention, expand survivor-led practice, address housing and other recovery needs, reduce unnecessary retraumatization, and sustain the partnerships that make coordinated response possible.

At every stage, the central principle should remain clear: responsibility for trafficking belongs with those who exploit. Survivors deserve systems that recognize their dignity, respect their autonomy, and make safety and long-term recovery possible.

IF SOMEONE NEEDS HELP

- **Verity** provides confidential crisis support and survivor services. Its 24/7 Crisis and Support Line is **(707) 545-7273**. https://www.ourverity.org.
- **Redemption House of the Bay Area** provides survivor-led outreach and confidential human-trafficking support groups. For information and support, call **(707) 697-2099** or visit https://redemptionhouseofthebayarea.org.
- **See the Signs Sonoma County** provides confidential support for people experiencing or concerned about sexual exploitation. Call 24/7 or text during business hours at **(707) 581-HOPE (4673).** Individuals may share as much or as little as they choose and remain in control of decisions about next steps. Visit https://signsofexploitation.org.
- **Family Justice Center Sonoma County** provides a single point of access to services for survivors of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, child abuse, elder abuse, and related family violence. The Center can be reached at **(707) 565-8255** or you can visit https://fjcsc.org.
- **National Human Trafficking Hotline: 1-888-373-7888**, text **233733**, or use the Hotline's online chat. If someone is in immediate danger, call **911**. https://humantraffickinghotline.org.

SOURCES

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