

**Testimony
of
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Written Testimony
for Hearing
before the House Judiciary Subcommittee on
Crime and Federal Government Surveillance

“Children are Not For Sale: Examining the Threat of
Exploitation of Children in the U.S. and Abroad”

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My Journey as A Trafficking Survivor

I was raised in a small, rural, conservative and religious town called Navasota in Texas. My family first generation from Mexico, we grew up poor in a small home where there was domestic violence and child abuse.

Because there was no money for child care, we would stay next door at our aunts house where there were teenagers who began sexually abusing me by the age of four.

Child protective services and police were called into the home several times but nothing was ever done because our parents taught us to lie and we were interviewed in front of them.

As I got older the abuse at home got worse and I was also being bullied at school because boys would call me gay if I was too feminine.

At the age of fifteen I began dating a guy in a nearby town and it wasn't long until my father found the messages between us and physically assaulted me. This was my first interaction with law enforcement because I called them. When they arrived, instead of being viewed as a victim, I was viewed as a perpetrator. Because I was gay, the police failed to protect me. I was asked to pack a bag and leave.

When I arrived back home the next day, my parents asked, "How are we going to fix you?" They moved me four hours away, with an older cousin, to attend a new school in a new city where I knew no one.

When I went home for the summer, my parents kicked me out permanently because I would not go to conversion therapy. My parents didn't care to report me as missing. Instead I was just labeled as a runaway.

Homeless and desperate, I didn't know where to go or who to turn to so I went online. That is how I met Jason Gandy, my trafficker.

Jason empathized with me and promised me a life of security, love, and care. Out of desperation, I went to stay with him. And it wasn't long until the grooming began.

Jason took me in, but he had a proposal. He told me that one day I would want to live a life of my own and he thought it would be a great idea for me to work for him in his massage business.

I expressed concern that I did not know how to give a professional massage. But Jason told me that my inexperience should be the least of my worries. He told me that if anyone found out that I was sixteen years old and providing massages without a license, I would be sent to prison. I was terrified.

When the first massage happened I entered a makeshift room. There was a naked adult man on the massage table. The door shut and was locked behind me. I knew that I was in trouble. I tried to resist but was told to comply. I was raped and abused.

This was one of many massages. Even though I was not always locked in a room or tied down, I knew that I could not leave or say no. As time went on, I began to plot how I could escape.

Life After My Escape

I survived for seven years not knowing that what happened to me was sex trafficking. My trafficker told me to never share any information with law enforcement. He told me that I would be in trouble. That I would be arrested.

I carried all of my abuse with me and blamed myself. I didn't know whom to reach out to for help. I tried to cope with my PTSD, anxiety and depression by using drugs and alcohol. I was arrested three times. I dropped out of college after my first semester.

In 2014, a friend told me that Jason Gandy had been arrested. I contacted the national Human Trafficking Hotline; they connected me with the Department of Homeland Security and the federal prosecutors working on the case.

This was the first time I put a name to what happened to me.

Years later, I am still learning how to remove the blame from myself.

In 2018, I testified against Jason Gandy, along with three other male survivors. Based on our testimony in the federal case, Jason Gandy was sentenced to 30 years in prison with no chance of parole.

I now serve as an expert, advising the National Center on Missing and Exploited Children and serving as a Member of the Board of Directors of the Human Trafficking Legal Center. In the years since my escape, I have reflected on the trafficking I experienced as a child. And I have some recommendations to share.

Recommendations:

- Policymakers and law enforcement must understand how homophobia, gender bias, and racism play a role in human trafficking.
 - Homophobia played a major role in my invisibility and vulnerability. It silenced me and so I wasn't able to fully expose what was happening to me. I was homeless because I was gay. Many children face rejection from their families because they are gay. This was the reason why I was homeless. And that is what made me vulnerable to Jason Gandy.
 - Gender Bias – the sense that men and boys cannot be victims – was the reason I passed through many systems and was never offered the proper resources or help. People assumed I was okay and could take care of myself. Or they believed I was a perpetrator, or just a rebellious kid. Or they did not believe that boys could be trafficked.
 - Racism was the most obvious factor. I couldn't hide the color of my skin. Many times people looked the other way. They did not care about what I was going through because I was Latino. My trafficker also targeted me because I was Latino. He knew

that Latino males who were gay would not be accepted by their parents. He knew that these children and teenagers would be looking for support. I know this because all the other survivors Jason Gandy trafficked were Latino and gay.

- The U.S. government should strengthen and add resources for the LGBTQ community and male survivors.

After I was kicked out of my home there were no resources for LGBTQ individuals. I didn't know of a safe place for myself. I was terrified of telling anyone what I was dealing with. I feared that people would reject me, like my parents had done. I feared that I would be arrested and be punished. Currently in certain states, LGBTQ resources and education are banned for minors. This will continue to perpetuate the issue. The lack of resources for LGBTQ youth will cause more vulnerability and more trafficking of these young people.

We need more public awareness around male sex abuse and trafficking. Most males do not feel comfortable coming forward until they are in their 50's-70's. This issue is heavily stigmatized and I do not believe the data around male sex trafficking is accurate. I receive messages from men in their 50's to 70's, thanking me for having the courage to speak out because they didn't have the courage to do so. There is also not enough resources for men who have been sexually abused. Currently there is only one safe home within the United States that serves adult male survivors of human trafficking located in Denton, Tx.

- End conversion therapy in all 50 US states

Conversion therapy is not the answer to "fixing" a child. Currently conversion therapy is only banned in less than half of the country. If I had chosen to go to conversion therapy I don't know where I would be today. I don't know what would have happened to me.

- Stop using language that stigmatizes young people

I recently sat in a meeting with NCMEC. Suddenly, for the first time in my life, I identified as a homeless and missing youth. But I didn't understand why I didn't identify with those categories at the time. I learned that the reason why I was never considered missing is because I was labeled a runaway. No one was looking for me. No one saw the signs. No one cared enough to look into my situation. I was dismissed as a runaway – not as a missing child -- because I was male, gay, and Latino. The label, runaway, stigmatizes children. This is a gap. There is only one difference between a missing and runaway child: the difference is that the term. Runaway is a term associated with children who are marginalized and children who are poor.

- Improve Homeless shelters/ programs

When I was enrolled in the homeless youth program, I was never questioned about abuse. No one ever looked into my situation. I believe that if someone had looked into my situation and looked into who I was living with, then they would have quickly realized that I was being abused and was homeless. I wish they would've have explained to me what resources were available. I probably would not have said yes to any resources in the moment but I would have come back in a time of need and this could have prevented me from meeting my trafficker.

- Train law enforcement to identify male victims of trafficking

In 2022 I conducted a case study with the prosecutors from my case and was told that initially when they caught my trafficker in London with a 15-year-old, unrelated, teenaged boy, they thought that they had uncovered a child sexual abuse material case. Even with all of the signs of human trafficking present, they offered Jason Gandy a plea. He did not take the plea. But if

he had, he would have received a slap on the wrist. Jason Gandy trafficked children – if the government had not eventually figured this out, I and two others would never have come forward. Two years later, I heard about his arrest. The prosecutor said that I was the reason they realized this was a human trafficking case. When I asked the question, “Why did no one recognize that this was a human trafficking case from the beginning? Is it because we were male?” Their response was that law enforcement were not trained to identify male victims of sex trafficking. They did not know it could happen to males.

- Train child welfare agencies to identify signs of abuse and neglect.

Child protective services came into our home as kids. Even though we had bruises on our bodies, nothing ever happened. This was partly because our parents taught us to lie. And every time CPS would show up, we were questioned in front of our parents. The proper protocols were not enforced.

- Train staff working with in the education system

All of the red flags and signs were present while I was in high school. I was in and out of school constantly. I was absent for long periods of time and I had switched to three different high schools in one year. My counselor knew I was having a hard life outside of school but never questioned me, never asked what was happening. She also never reported the abuse.

- Improve victims compensation and restitution

The federal court ordered restitution – compensation in a criminal case -- to me. But the court did not order restitution for any other survivors in the case. Restitution is mandatory. Even after the order – and after the government had forfeited Jason Gandy’s assets – I did not receive any money for restitution. The federal Treasury kept the money. It took me two years and a team of pro bono attorneys to finally receive the pitiful amount of restitution ordered by the court. This is unacceptable.

- Survivors need pro bono attorneys

As a child sex trafficking survivor, I needed a lawyer. All survivors need counsel to navigate the complicated legal process. With pro bono counsel in my corner, I was able to file a civil suit against my trafficker in federal court under the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act. I won. Survivors need lawyers. With pro bono counsel, we can fight for justice.

Conclusion:

Human trafficking is a systemic issue. Marginalized and underserved communities are impacted disproportionately . We have systems in place that are supposed to protect and serve these communities. But these systems at times cause more harm, and do not equally protect children. I do not understand how we have one of the most vulnerable populations, children, homeless with no safe space to go to and no food to eat. Some kids will find a way to survive. Traffickers prey on desperation. Abusers take advantage of vulnerability. If we want to help end human trafficking we have to start with prevention. We need better systems that protect every person in need of protection and support. We must understand that human trafficking is not a gender based issue but a human issue. We have to identify red flags for all

children and adults, no matter their gender, race, and sexuality. And we have to remove biases from this work and see humans as human.

The current politics around the LGBTQ community are hateful and horrific. After hearing my story, I hope you can see how certain legislation and hatred can perpetuate the issue of human trafficking. Harm to LGBTQ young people creates more vulnerabilities in already-vulnerable communities.