



**To:** Chairman Jim Jordan, Subcommittee Chairman Andy Biggs, & Subcommittee Chairwoman Sheila Jackson Lee

**From:** CPAC Foundation's Center for Combating Human Trafficking

**Testimony of Frank Russo, Director, CPAC Center for Combating Human Trafficking**

September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance Hearing:  
*Children are Not for Sale: Examining the Threat of Exploitation of Children in the U.S. and Abroad*

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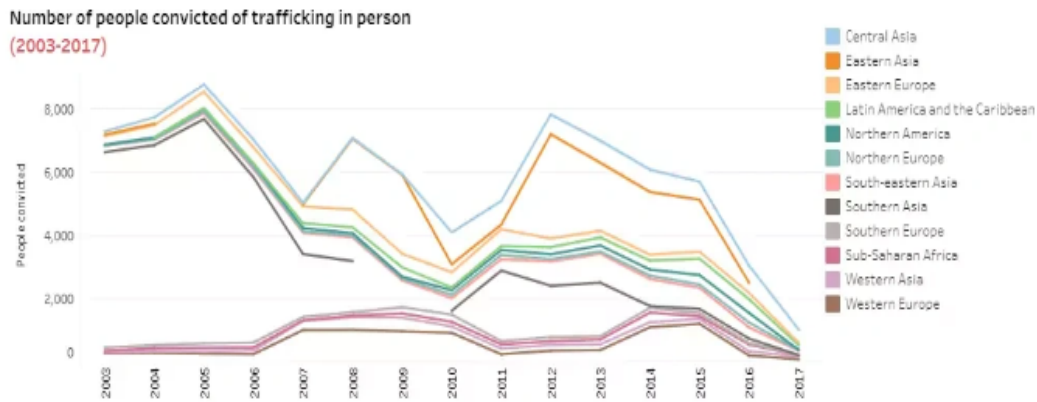
Chairman Jordan, Subcommittee Chairman Biggs, and Ranking Member Jackson Lee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the House Judiciary's Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance on the need to end child exploitation. I'm Frank Russo, the Director of CPAC's new Center for Combating Human Trafficking and, most importantly, a husband and father who knows the importance of protecting the most vulnerable in our society.

The Conservative Political Action Coalition ("CPAC") has long recognized the need to improve efforts to combat the scourge of human trafficking that is facing communities, urban and rural, across this country. Policymakers must do more to draft and pass legislation that addresses this growing threat to our country. Thus, CPAC was excited to announce the creation of our new Center for Combating Human Trafficking at our premier screening of the feature film "Sound of Freedom" in Washington, D.C. earlier this year. The new initiative will leverage the existing resources of our organization to establish a national campaign focused on advancing policies that (1) support victims in reintegrating into society and removing collateral consequences resulting from their abuse; (2) strengthen accountability for traffickers; and (3) improve cross-collaboration between domestic and international entities dedicated to ending human trafficking. With our national footprint, a growing grass roots activist network, our subject-matter expertise, and decades-long track record of

supporting policy solutions, we are ideally positioned to lead the effort to root out trafficking in the United States.

As you'll hear throughout the day, human trafficking and child exploitation are the fastest growing illicit industries both here at home and abroad. The State Department estimates that annually, *17,500 individuals* are trafficked into the United States, with Mexico being the largest seller, and the United States, the largest buyer. We also know that nearly *72% of trafficking victims* are immigrants *49% of which are undocumented*, meaning cartels are taking advantage of lax border enforcement to enrich themselves in this horrific trade and practice. This trafficking of children often involves multiple layers of abuse, with some victims being used for both sex and labor trafficking across the United States. Coercion is the heart of these crimes as transnational gangs such as MS-13 infiltrate communities and prey on children who are stuck in shelters or the foster care system, according to research conducted by the Center for Immigration Studies. At the same time, the amount of human trafficking convictions not just domestically, but also internationally, are dropping.



UN Office on Drugs and Crime

To confront what has become a *\$150 billion criminal enterprise*, Congress must work in tandem with their Federal, State, local, and international law enforcement partners to protect survivors, prosecute cartels, and provide education to prevent the exploitation of God's children. Thankfully, the success of the recent feature film 'Sound of Freedom' has significantly increased the public's attention on the issue with one poll finding a staggering *80 percent of Americans* know that trafficking is a growing problem in the country. The question remains: what should these policy leaders be doing to bring our children home safe and support victims who survive abuse?

Meaningful and effective policy to combat human trafficking requires an approach that considers the needs of victims while also creating swift and effective penalties for

criminal offenders. If we are to reverse the unsettling speed in which children are caught in the horrors of labor, sex, and financial trafficking, we must expose and replace the misguided policies that fail to provide victims a safe pathway back to society while proportionally punishing their traffickers. For example, Congress has the opportunity to provide pathways to ensure survivors are provided mental health and substance abuse treatment in lieu of harsh prison sentences. By ensuring open resources to children who are often coerced into committing other criminal offenses as a part of their trafficking, lawmakers can ensure we do not exacerbate the cycle of crime for survivors. Existing legislation such as the bipartisan Trafficking Survivors Relief Act and Sara's Law provide avenues for young victims of trafficking to be placed in services that allow for meaningful second chances.

Thankfully, this Committee and its counterpart in the Senate have continued to ensure that the existing resources available for rescued children are prioritized in each budget. Programs like the Debbie Smith Act and Project Safe Childhood provide funding and training to assist Federal, State, and local law enforcement and victim advocates in identifying those children caught in a cycle of abuse, rescue these survivors, and hold their traffickers accountable. For example, since its launch in January 2011, Project Safe Childhoods has helped Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) task forces identify and save *more than 3,500 children* depicted in child pornography alongside the help of multijurisdictional partners including the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and the Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network. The work does not stop when a child is rescued, however, as the perpetrators must be held to account for their crimes against humanity.

Ending the scourge of child trafficking requires Congress and its partners in the Executive branch to take immediate steps to increase proportional punishment for traffickers, enforce our immigration laws to root out gangs in our community, and hold technology providers accountable for hosting child sexual abuse material on their platforms. As we noted earlier, coercion is an integral theme in child trafficking cases, where offenders work to exploit victims by threatening harm or engaging in psychological manipulation to keep these individuals dependent on their abusers. Policymakers at the Federal, State, and local level should counteract these practices by providing enhanced criminal penalties for offenders who engage in these behaviors, regardless of whether they are tied to a criminal organization or operating independently.

Accountability does not begin or end when an offender traffics within our borders, as we must do more to keep these criminals out of our country and off the very devices our children use on a daily basis. Familiar DNA testing at the U.S.-Mexico border in the prior administration revealed that around *30 percent* of minors brought across the

border were actually related to those they were traveling with. Yet, the Biden administration jettisoned these DNA tests, allowing cartels even greater comfort to recycle these children across the border to move more adults into the country illegally. Most concerning, the Department of Homeland Security is unable to track what happens to these exploited children once their cycle of transition across the border ends. This leaves those children to be shifted to other forms of abuse, such as sex trafficking or labor exploitation. Criminal traffickers know they can exploit our open border to trap kids in a cycle of violence. But the abuse does not end there – traffickers and their enablers have turned to the internet and tech platforms to expand the net needed to capture and exploit victims.

Criminal traffickers have exploited the explosion of social media and digital platforms amongst children of all ages to manipulate victims and connect with other offenders. The data bares this out as in 2019, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, received roughly *16.9 million tips* about sexual abuse material. Two years later, that number had *surged to 29.4 million*. As we've mentioned before, this problem is not unique to the United States, as our partners in Canada found in their assessment of reports to their tip line that children under 12 years old were *depicted in 78%* of the images and videos assessed by their team, and *63% of those children* were under 8 years of age. Congress must do more to not only hold these offenders accountable but require technology platforms to take online child sexual exploitation seriously. Legislation should address this exponential growth in child sexual abuse material by removing blanket civil immunity for technology companies that refuse to remove these abhorrent images from their sites. Further, policymakers can work to convene stakeholders from across Federal, State, and local government, law enforcement, and victims' advocates to meet with these technology companies to find collaborative solutions that removes all child abuse material from the internet.

CPAC stands ready to work with our partners in Congress to bring an end to all forms of child trafficking. We are grateful that Tim Ballard's story in *Sound of Freedom* has reignited a conversation in America on the importance of protecting the most important asset our Country has, it's children. It's now on all of us in the space to deliver real results that will protect victims, break the cycle of abuse, hold offenders accountable, and make our country safe again. Thank you, Chairman Jordan, Chairman Biggs, and Ranking Member for Jackson Lee, for sending a clear message today: God's children are not for sale.