

United States House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance

Written Hearing Testimony

Anne Basham

CEO, Ascend Consulting

Founder & Chair, Interparliamentary Taskforce on Human Trafficking

“Children are not for sale:

Examining the threat of exploitation of children in the U.S. and abroad”

September 13, 2023

Chairman Jordan, Chairman Biggs, Ranking Member Nadler, Ranking Member Jackson Lee and members of the Committee:

It is an honor to testify before you today on child exploitation both here in the United States and internationally. My name is Anne Basham, and I am the CEO of Ascend Consulting, a human rights advocacy firm. I am also the founder and chair of the Interparliamentary Taskforce on Human Trafficking which is a consortium of Members of Parliament and Congress, government leaders, and lived-experience experts from around the world with the shared mission of combating human trafficking by educating lawmakers and collaborating on policy solutions.

Today, we have an opportunity to address not only one of the most important human rights issues but one of the most critical global security issues facing our world: the exploitation of children for profit by human traffickers, human smugglers, and advanced criminal networks. Child exploitation is big business, and unlike other human rights abuses it is a transnational organized crime that funds and exacerbates global unrest. Human trafficking is the second largest criminal enterprise in the world – only surpassed by drug trafficking.

The average age sex trafficking victims are targeted is just 11-14 years old, and more than 1 in 4 people who are trafficked in the world are children.¹ Child exploitation is not just a humanitarian

¹ <https://rems.ed.gov/docs/Human%20Trafficking%20101%20for%20School%20Administrators%20and%20Staff.pdf>

issue, it is a global security issue with \$150 billion in profits for traffickers annually. China, Russia, North Korea, the Taliban, and terrorist groups such as ISIS all use child exploitation not only to execute, but to fund their operations. For example, the Taliban, ISIS and Boko Haram use the sexual exploitation of children as a key component of their funding apparatus because unlike other lucrative commodities like drugs and weapons, a child can be sold repeatedly.²

Here in North America, child exploitation funds organized criminal networks like MS-13, one of the most notorious gangs operating in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. These three countries account for 87% of unaccompanied minors apprehended at the southern border. Specifically, 47% of unaccompanied children apprehended in the United States come from Guatemala, and 40% come from Honduras and El Salvador combined.³ A U.S. Treasury investigation found that “money generated by local MS-13 cliques” engaged in sex trafficking, drug trafficking, murder-for-hire, extortion, and money laundering was “consolidated and funneled to the group’s leadership in” Central America⁴. The reality is that children are a primary component of this illicit financial network.⁵

Many of the Latin American children sent across the border alone or with smugglers have been taken by organized criminals in the cartels.⁶ What frequently follows is child sexual exploitation or labor exploitation. The majority of these children have not been kidnapped but groomed by traffickers who use emotional manipulation to lure children or their caretakers into a trusting relationship, and later coerce them into performing exploitative acts against their will.

Many children and parents who arrive in the United States are from remote regions of Central America which are often impoverished and isolated because of language barriers. Guatemala alone has 24 different dialects⁷, which means it is difficult to speak with parents regarding the incredible risks their children face if they send their children to the US in search of a better life.

² <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/sep/16/how-sex-trafficking-funds-the-taliban-and-terroris/>

³ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/uac-program-fact-sheet.pdf>

⁴ <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/l10026>

⁵ <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/j110026>

⁶ <https://nypost.com/2021/04/17/how-bidens-border-policy-will-increase-child-sex-trafficking-to-us/>

⁷ <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/language-data-for-guatemala#:~:text=There%20are%2025%20languages%20spoken,Indigenous%20languages%20%2D%20Gar%C3%ADfuna%20and%20Xinca.>

Coyotes often trick or coerce mothers into paying children's hefty smuggling fees, and the mothers do so because they believe a better life awaits their children in the U.S. Unfortunately, that's often untrue.

Last year I spoke to the Guatemalan Congress on the intersection between human trafficking and transnational crime. I met with President Alejandro Giammattei and Guatemala's Secretary Against Sexual Violence, Sandy Recinos, who is a colleague and member of the international human trafficking taskforce I lead. In February 2022, Secretary Recinos and President Giammattei were supportive of a Guatemala law which increased prison sentences for human smugglers from 2-5 years to 10-30 years. Guatemalan leadership, does not want their children smuggled from home, nor do they want their children to face the unspeakable violence and trafficking exploitation that often awaits them on the journey to, and after arrival in, the U.S.⁸

Yet from March through May of this year, more than 33,000 unaccompanied children crossed the U.S. border.⁹ The physical and sexual violence, human degradation, hunger, and thirst that these children often experience en route to the United States is appalling. Sadly, this is just a prelude to the violence that many experience once they are in the U.S., when promises of a better life are shattered and many are sold repeatedly for sex or as slave laborers. This is why President Obama told the people of Latin America in 2014, "Don't send your children unaccompanied...they might not make it."¹⁰ If more Central American parents knew the truth of what their children would experience, many would think again before relinquishing them into the hands of violent criminals.

The *New York Times* recently documented the labor exploitation of children as young as 13 working throughout the night in meat-processing plants.¹¹ The Department of Homeland Security's investigative arm, Homeland Security Investigations, has prosecuted sex trafficking

⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/quatemalan-congress-approves-tougher-sentence-human-traffickers-30-years-2022-02-02/>

⁹ <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/national-media-release/cbp-releases-may-2023-monthly-operational-update>

¹⁰ <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/obama-warns-central-americans-send-children-borders/story?id=24320063>

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/17/business/child-labor-packers-sanitation.html>

cases involving children as young as 14 who were funneled along a "human pipeline" from Mexico to New York City.

Because of scenarios like this, many unaccompanied children eventually enter the U.S. foster care system. For children who have been raped, beaten, exploited, or starved on the long journey to the U.S., this can be a frightening but welcome transition: they are free from the coyotes and hope to experience a version of the "American life" they have seen in the media, with clean clothes to wear, regular meals to eat, and beds to find rest. But the U.S. foster care system is no sure haven for many of these children, and too often exposes them to further exploitation.

Certainly, many U.S. families who open their homes to foster children do so with integrity and self-sacrifice. My own parents were exemplary foster parents to several children. I applaud those who give vulnerable children loving homes. But we know that the U.S. foster care system is already overburdened and the number of children in the system often outpaces the number of available families to provide a safe home.¹² In fact, just a few days ago it was reported that human trafficking rings have been targeting children in temporary foster care settings specifically in Texas,¹³ and Child Protective Services has paid \$30M to off-duty police officers to watch children who are housed unsupervised in hotels and churches because there is no family for them within the foster care system.¹⁴ The ripple effect impacts non-border states throughout the country. For example, last month it was reported that in South Carolina upwards of six children at a time are sharing a mattress in an office at the Department of Social Services because the state cannot find families to house them.¹⁵

Meanwhile, U.S.-born children in foster care are already the most vulnerable citizens to human trafficking: According to the National Foster Care Institute, 60% of child trafficking victims are current or former foster youth.¹⁶ Increased burdens on the foster care system put already

¹² <https://www.kxii.com/video/2022/06/01/children-experiencing-foster-care-outpacing-available-local-homes/>

¹³ <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/2023/09/07/texas-foster-kids-trafficked-for-sex-as-rings-target-those-lacking-placement-judges-say/>

¹⁴ <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2023/06/29/cps-forks-over-millions-to-station-off-duty-cops-at-hotels-churches-housing-foster-kids/>

¹⁵ https://www.postandcourier.com/health/scs-mental-health-care-crisis-lands-foster-kids-on-air-mattresses-in-offices/article_a5735bde-387f-11ee-9a64-5f28db090e66.html

¹⁶ <https://nfyi.org/mission/>

vulnerable children more firmly in the crosshairs of online sexual exploitation and the abuse of children (OSEAC) which has become one of the fastest growing threats against children globally.

Child trafficking at the southern border is real. At the same time, in our modern world, human trafficking is a borderless crime, and increasingly so with the growing scope of the digital criminal world. Since this is a hearing about the risk of child exploitation both domestically and internationally, it is important to note that in 2021, 21 million reports of online child sexual abuse were received by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), and its Cyber Tipline received over 29 million reports of which 93.5% were resolved to locations outside the U.S.¹⁷

The Finnish human rights group Protect Children recently published the largest survey ever on the thoughts and behaviors of people who consume child sexual abuse material (CSAM) online.¹⁸ It found that 42% of respondents said that after viewing CSAM through online platforms they sought direct contact with children, and 58% reported fearing that viewing CSAM might lead them to sexually abuse children in person.¹⁹ There is a rapid rise in OSEAC globally, and legislative efforts to prevent this crime are critical.

The most prevalent form of online sexual abuse is the advertisement of children through websites and social media. According to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), “Such advertisements for sexual services are now central to the human trafficking business model... They propose transactions with minors that are exploitative, illegal, and tantamount to rape.”²⁰ A study by Thorn concluded that 75% of sex trafficking victims are advertised online.²¹

Europol also stated, “The online advertisement of sexual services is an increasing phenomenon relating to trafficking human beings for sexual exploitation, with children being advertised as

¹⁷ <https://www.missingkids.org/home>

¹⁸ <https://tsjournal.org/index.php/jots/article/view/29>

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/mar/01/online-sexual-abuse-viewers-contacting-children-directly-study>

²⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12726-Fighting-child-sexual-abuse-detection-removal-and-reporting-of-%20illegal-content-online/F3329914_en

²¹ <https://www.thorn.org/child-trafficking-statistics/>

adults.” The Federal Criminal Police Office in Germany has reported a 10% increase in human trafficking in 2021 compared to 2020, and the abuse of children in trafficking cases increased even more significantly by 23% compared to 2020.²² The average age of victims was fifteen, and the crimes under this umbrella include the creation of CSAM as well as offline human trafficking. According to Emilio Puccio, secretary-general of the European Parliament Intergroup on Children’s Rights, “The European Union alone accounts for more than 70% of all Child Sexual Abuse material hosted in the world. In the European Union alone we went from 23,000 reports of child sexual abuse online in 2010 to 725,000 reports in 2019. And these figures are considered likely to be conservative.”²³

And these are just the children we know about. The greatest gap in the effort to stop child exploitation is undoubtedly the low rate of victim identification itself. Exploiters prey upon innate human desires to be seen and known especially online. Yet more than 99.5% of people exploited by human trafficking are never identified²⁴, and the criminal networks profiting off their suffering want to keep it that way. In January 2023, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)²⁵ reported that “for the first time since [it] has been collecting data, the number of victims detected globally *decreased* by 11 percent compared to 2019.” This means that the number of sex trafficking victims who are identified and noticed is down by 24 percent.²⁶ The UNODC further observed that “most victims identified in cases are ‘self-rescued’”²⁷ which means they had to self-report or escape exploitation on their own. This is why one of the most important and inexpensive policy fixes we can support right now is funding for widespread prevention education in all states so that the children who are being groomed and exploited in-person, and through online interactions, can recognize what is happening and alert a parent or teacher who can intervene.

²² <https://amp.dw.com/en/human-trafficking-on-the-rise-in-germany/a-63375174%20https://brusselsmorning.com/what-is-illegal-offline-should-be-illegal-online/19444/>

²³ <https://brusselsmorning.com/what-is-illegal-offline-should-be-illegal-online/19444/>

²⁴ <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/human-trafficking-fund.html>

²⁵ <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2023/January/global-report-on-trafficking-in-persons-2022.html>

²⁶ Page 18

²⁷ Ibid.

To stop human trafficking, we must prioritize laws and policies to address child exploitation in all forms. Our country is divided on many issues, but on this we can all agree – no child should be exploited online or offline, for sex or labor. No child should be abused. Because we can agree on these goals, I am hopeful that many of the child protection bills pending in Congress will pass with bipartisan support.

Thank you again, Chairman Jordan, Chairman Biggs, Ranking Member Nadler, Ranking Member Jackson Lee and members of the Committee for your time and attention. I am grateful for your focus on this issue and for protecting children. I look forward to answering your questions.