

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

Written Hearing Testimony

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“Protecting Victims of Human Trafficking and Online Exploitation”  
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Chairman Biggs, Ranking Member McBath, and members of the Committee:

It is an immense honor to testify before you today on protecting victims of human trafficking and online exploitation. My name is Sheri Lopez, and I am a human trafficking survivor and the founder of the nonprofit Pearl at the Mailbox, named in honor of a brave woman named Pearl who paid attention to what was happening around her and helped me get free from the horrors of being trafficked.

I grew up in a two-parent professional home; my parents were busy and tired when they came home from work, as with most parents. I am the middle of three girls. I just turned 15 and was trying to find my place in my little world. I was an insecure and shy teen. I was heartbroken that at the start of high school, most of my friends I worked hard to make in middle school would attend another high school based on school boundary lines.

I was a well-behaved child. I share this to shatter the preconceived notion that all children trafficked come from broken homes, are troubled, or are runaways; I was none of these. Any child can be groomed and trafficked. In fact, the innocence of growing up in a stable household can unintentionally leave children more vulnerable to predators because they are trusting and less aware.

I got involved with the drama department in high school, and that is where I met “Carl” (not his real name). He befriended me, and we began what I thought was a real relationship.

I was quickly introduced to “Carl’s” father and invited to weekend parties, which, in the beginning were none threatening. Initially, I lied to my parents to attend these parties by telling them I was at a friend's home that my parents knew well.

Over three months, “Carl” would ask questions about my home life, whether I felt my parents’ paid attention to me, and topics that were important to me. At the time, I did not know that all I shared with “Carl” in confidence was being shared with his father, who would attempt to alienate from my parents by encouraging me to see them problem and himself a good guy. He was successful in creating a wall between me and my parents and eroding truth between us.

In the beginning, the parties were uneventful, and I felt safe. However, that changed as three-month of perceived kindness and grooming. I was no longer able to decline the party invitations. I was now expected to attend the parties the entire weekend, in which I was drugged and repeatedly raped.

Once I realized I was being raped, I pushed back and did not want to attend the parties anymore. However, I was coerced to continue because I was told that my rapes were video recorded and they would be shown to my parents if I didn’t comply. They told me that my parents would lose their jobs, and my family would become homeless because of me.

To show me they were serious, my parent’s cars were egged, their car tires slashed, and “Carl” would climb over our fence, let my dog lose repeatedly, and gained access to my work schedule so that I could not tell them I had to work and could not attend the parties.

By the end of my freshman year in high school, I was being sold (trafficked) on the weekends and during the summer by Carl’s father, with my parents unaware because they believed I was at my friend’s house.

This began my 7-year journey of being sex trafficked; from the age of 15 to 18. I didn’t know then that this is the typical age targeted by traffickers, and my scenario was all too common. I lived at home while being trafficked, and no one knew. I wasn’t kidnapped, but my teen years were silently stolen. I was a child with a brain and body but was still developing who was living in a nightmare.

During the next 7 years I was trafficked by four traffickers, one whom was a woman, and eventually was rescued by a woman named Pearl whom I met at the mailbox at the last location I was held. By this point I could no longer move freely and had to earn this privilege from th trafficker to get the mail unattended.

As a victim of human trafficking, I never “walked the streets”; I was always sold behind closed doors, such as hotels and homes. I was dressed nicely, and my appearance was impeccable. This was done so as not to draw attention to myself and to fit in with the environment I would be in. I was also flown across the country many times, and no one ever suspected I was being trafficked. I dressed like a young business professional.

Upon rescue, it took me close to 25 years to process what happened to me: the abuse, the darkness I was subjected to, the loss of freedom I faced, why my parents never suspected anything, why I could not tell anyone what was happening, the beginning of what would be 12 operations to fix my damaged internal organs, and the reality that another human being preyed upon me for money. There were a lot of “why’s”. Why did this happen? Why did I not see I was being manipulated? Why did I not fight harder to get away? The self-blame that a trafficker instills in their victim is very difficult to reverse.

I got to the point where I was angry that a human being felt they had the right to sell another human being for money and profit; I had to speak up.

Grooming and human trafficking are horrific crimes that must be addressed, not just talked about. Innocent children and adults are being preyed upon every day in person and online.

I do not rely on statistics because, sadly, I would be considered a statistic, and I do not want to be seen that way.

I have chosen to share how I was groomed to hopefully prevent it from happening to another person. In 2024, I got involved in the Arizona legislative process to address gaps that I saw were not adequately protecting children and survivors.

With the assistance and guidance of Representative Matt Gress (Arizona), we successfully updated and made Arizona’s outdated vacatur law relevant. The bill was signed into law and went into effect in October 2024. The vacatur law allows human trafficking survivors who were charged with prostitution and other nonviolent charges in Arizona the ability to petition the jurisdiction where the charges occurred, meet with a judge, and hopefully get the charge(s) vacated or set aside so that the survivor can move forward in life without charges preventing them from getting housing and employment.

This is why I have been an active member of the Trafficking Survivors Relief Act coalition in the past Congress. I know how a person who is being trafficked can commit crimes to survive. Our bodies are designed for self-preservation, and when a trafficked person sees no way out of a situation and knows the extreme consequences they will face and that someone they love or care about can be hurt or killed if they do not do what they are told to do, it is an automatic response for survival. Most trafficking survivors were also children when their grooming started. I was over 18 when I escaped, but I was only 15 when it started.

I am thankful to Chairman Biggs and others here today for passing this legislation through the Judiciary Committee in the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress and for reintroducing it this year. The Trafficking Survivors Relief Act (TSRA), led by Rep. Fry, Rep. Lieu, and Rep. Wagner accomplishes at the federal level what so many states like Arizona have accomplished at the state level – it provides vacatur and expungement of criminal records for survivors of trafficking to be able to reclaim their lives and not be branded for the rest of their life by the

worst thing that ever happened to them. Survivors like me have been unable to hold careers, pursue their dreams, and fully recover because of unjust federal convictions despite the fact they are simultaneously considered victims of trafficking. There is a significant gap with economic and societal impacts that can be fixed with the TSRA.

Additionally, the lack of prevention education in schools is not acceptable. With our modern epidemic of child trafficking and online exploitation through apps on the phones of most children, every school in America should have mandatory prevention education for students. We had the school-based DARE program in the 1980's to address the drug trafficking crisis. Predators go where the children are: school, sports, and online, yet most schools lack prevention education. Some of the objections I have heard to widespread prevention are:

- Myth: It should be considered "sex education." Truth: It is grooming and predator education.
- Myth: It would scare the children. Truth: Being a victim of exploitation and trafficking is scarier than learning about it.
- Myth: Teachers have too much on their plates to teach anything else. Truth: This can be incorporated into the curriculum like any other school standard.
- Myth: The tablets/computer used in schools have adequate firewalls. Truth: Many children have been asked for inappropriate images via these devices. Traffickers are in criminal operation are always looking to adapt.

I have worked with many survivors of human trafficking, and here are some avenues that led to their trafficking:

- Inline games
- Dating apps
- A job, i.e., strip clubs, bars, or an employer at the mall
- Boyfriend, partner, spouse
- Neighbor
- Modeling

No one truly knows how many children and adults are being trafficked in America, let alone around the world. My focus is to prevent child grooming and exploitation in America through prevention education and awareness.

This is why I encourage you to support the Human *Trafficking and Exploitation Prevention Training Act* introduced by Rep. Buchana and Rep. Wasserman-Schultz which could create a grant program within the Office of Trafficking in Person at the Department of Health and

Human Services to provide training for students, teachers, and other school personnel on the warning signs of human trafficking. Education truly is the key to stopping human trafficking before it starts or in its earliest stages. Suppose parents, guardians, educators, lawmakers, and those who care about the well-being of America's children are willing to have the uncomfortable conversation about grooming and trafficking and are willing to accept that this is happening in America. We would have a better chance of preventing this lifelong trauma from happening to someone else.

Finally, I was part of a work-study team with Arizona Senator Shawna Bolick and Representative Selina Bliss in 2024 known as Prop 313. The Arizona voters overwhelmingly passed the bill which sentences adults who are charged with buying or selling a minor under the age of 15 to life in prison without parole.

However, the age range of 15 to 17 remains unprotected in Arizona, and many states. I continue to try and get laws in place to hold the buyers and sellers accountable, as they are for victims under 15. Sadly, I keep running into brick walls, as some legislators believe that there should be fewer people in prison. I think that any person who commits a sex crime against a child or a person who buys or sells a trafficked person should be sentenced to time behind bars.

Arizona's current law: Sex abuse of children under 15 is a class 2 felony. Sex abuse of children between 15-17 is a class 6 felony and often pled down to a misdemeanor.

I attempted to get the Arizona Sex Offender Registry updated this year. The goal was to have adults who were charged with a sex crime against a minor remain not only on the Arizona Sex Offender Registry for life but also to have lifetime supervised probation once released from prison.

**My goals:**

- Hold buyers accountable with mandatory prison time and the inability to plead to a misdemeanor.
- Provide criminal relief for human trafficking survivors who can prove they were trafficked at the time of their crime.
- Enhanced, real-time age verification on all online platforms, apps, and games.
- Determine ways to protect minors from AI

- Grooming prevention education required in all schools at a minimum of 1 hour twice a year.
- Updated sex offender registry that requires sex offenders to check in with their probation officer 4 times a year to track where they reside.

Thank you again, Chairman Biggs, Ranking Member McBath, 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.