

CENTRAL OHIO HUMAN TRAFFICKING TASK FORCE OHIO ORGANIZED CRIME COMMISSION



**Proponent Testimony Submitted the House Criminal Justice Committee
House Bill 461 (Fedor/Galonski)
Submitted by: Columbus Police Detective Aaron Dennis
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Chair Manning, Vice Chair Rezabek, Ranking Member Celebrezze, and distinguished members of the House Criminal Justice Committee, I thank you for this opportunity to testify in favor of House Bill 461.

My name is Aaron Dennis and I have been a police officer with the City of Columbus, OH Division of Police since 1999. In 2008 I took a detective position with the Vice Unit where I started to learn and educate myself on the crime of Human/Sex Trafficking. Since then I have worked numerous state and federal sex trafficking investigations resulting in multiple victim rescues and pimp/trafficker convictions. In 2011 the Ohio Attorney General's Office (Organized Crime Investigations Commission) created the Central Ohio Human Trafficking Task Force. I have been assigned to this task force since its inception; which has allowed me to be on the front lines combatting this crime. Being on the front lines has afforded me the opportunity to interview hundreds of trafficking victims and gain valuable insight regarding their vulnerabilities. My testimony on this issue today is a combination of my personal and professional experiences while working human trafficking investigations for a decade. The views/opinions expressed are solely mine and should not be construed as an official statement from employer.

Victim vulnerabilities

The majority of victims I have encountered while working these cases come from backgrounds that are less than desirable. Many are in and out of foster care and child protective services while enduring years of abuse and neglect. These negative influences often start at a very young age and can lead to depression, substance abuse and psychological/social disorders. This background creates vulnerabilities in victims making them susceptible to becoming a sex trafficking victim. Right now pimps and traffickers are out on the streets and lurking in social media platforms

looking for these vulnerable victims to recruit into sexual exploitation. Once a potential victim is identified; they are groomed for exploitation through a mixture of feigned love, manipulation, introduction of illegal substances and intimidation. After a victim is sexually exploited for the financial gain of the trafficker; additional layers of physical and psychological issues are added to an already unstable personal history.

Brain development science tells us the human brain is not fully developed until a person reaches their mid-twenties. In a young person's brain the emotional and decision making parts are still very much a work in progress. This explains why children and teenagers at times make bad/impulsive decisions that often times expose them to dangerous situations. This is also why our society has placed limits on what the "age of responsibility" should be. Currently an individual must be 18 years of age to; provide consent for themselves (under certain circumstances), enter into contracts, vote, serve on a jury, serve in the military and gamble (to name a few).

Minor victims of human/sex trafficking not only have this lack of brain development; but also years of neglect, trauma and sexual exploitation. When these issues are combined it can permanently damage and alter a young person's brain. Specifically, the portions of the brain responsible for decision making and evaluating consequences. When the young/teenage brain is not properly developed it leads to issues in adulthood such as; lack of impulse control, unemployment, arrest, drug abuse and permanent mental disorders. All of which are not conducive to leading a productive healthy life. This is why it is extremely important that we do everything we can to identify, rescue and protect this vulnerable age group.

House Bill 461 has provisions that can assist with trying to link these vulnerable minor victims to social services. H.B. 461 will allow the court to appoint a guardian ad litem if any minor is a victim of sex trafficking or charged with any prostitution offenses. H.B. 461 will allow the guardian ad litem to petition the court requesting a prostitution charge be held in abeyance. This will allow the guardian ad litem and the court to make recommendations that are in the best interest of the minor child. These recommendations can/will include trauma-based counseling, education services or any other program that can assist with getting the minor victim on a positive path.

Missing/Runaways in Ohio

According to the Ohio Attorney General's Office (Missing Children Annual Report) there are between 18,000-20,000 missing/runaway reports filed annually by Ohio Law Enforcement. Typically over fifty percent of these reports filed are for children between the ages of 13-17 years old. This is significant because missing/runaway children are the first target of

pimps/traffickers when looking for victims to recruit and exploit. Being away from home significantly increases the chances a child may be lured in by a traffickers recruiting scheme. During my time investigating sex trafficking cases involving minor victims; approximately ninety-percent (90%) were aged 16 and 17 years old. In my professional opinion, this age group is purposely being targeted by pimps/traffickers due to gaps and lack of protections in the current Ohio Trafficking in Persons statute, R.C. § 2905.32.

Issues with the current Trafficking in Persons statute, R.C. § 2905.32

The problematic gap that exists in the current Ohio Trafficking in Persons statute centers around the elements required to prove a criminal case. The current statute requires force, fraud and coercion be proven in trafficking cases involving minor victims 16 and 17 years old. These requirements are often very difficult to prove for the following reasons:

1. Majority of minor victims identified in sex trafficking investigations have endured years of abuse, neglect, manipulation and exploitation. Due to this, minor victims often lack the ability to properly articulate what happened to them.
2. Lack of brain development (as previously discussed).
3. Limited life experience, limited knowledge about the dangers of prostitution.
4. Majority of minor victims do not realize they were exploited until after rescue and through intense trauma-based therapy.
4. Believe the pimp/trafficker is their caretaker, lover and protector.

Because of these and many other factors, minor victims fall into exploitative situations willfully and easily. Proving force, fraud and coercion becomes an extremely difficult hurdle to clear when those elements are not clearly exhibited, or do not exist in the first place.

Targeting 16 and 17 year old victims, over time has proven to be an effective strategy for pimps and traffickers. This age group has the same vulnerabilities, but not the same legal protections as their younger counterparts. Since these cases are more difficult to prosecute, there is less risk of arrest and prosecution to the pimps and traffickers. House Bill 461 would change Ohio's current Trafficking in Persons statute and not require that force, fraud or coercion be proven in cases involving all minors. In my opinion 16 and 17 year olds victims are just as susceptible and at-risk and should be fully protected under the law.

In closing, I want to again thank Chairman Manning and other members of the House Criminal Justice Committee for allowing me time to speak and provide my support for House Bill 461 (Protect Trafficked Minors). I appreciate your time and urge your support for this important bill.

I would also like to thank State Representatives Teresa Fedor and Tavia Galonski for sponsoring this bill. Your dedication to the issue of Human Trafficking over the years has led to the passage of legislation that provides Ohio law enforcement with more tools to combat this horrible crime. I would be happy to answer any questions from the committee at this time.