

# Southern Nevada Human Sex Trafficking Gap Analysis 2023

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## Policy Brief

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**Southern Nevada’s Sex Trafficking Response: Selected Gaps and Policy Recommendations**

GAPS	POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
<b>Lack of Education, Awareness, and Prevention</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase public awareness, prevention, and education in schools and at businesses, tourist destinations, and transportation hubs</li> <li>• Educate visitors on the illegality of prostitution in Clark County, especially as it pertains to the trafficking of minors</li> </ul>
<b>Lack of Funding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase funding to better to prevent sex trafficking and support trafficking victims and survivors</li> <li>• Use fines from buyers and traffickers to pay for victim services and to establish a statewide human trafficking database</li> </ul>
<b>Lack of Adequate Services Available to Victims and Survivors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design services and interventions for victims of sex trafficking in a “wrap around” fashion (comprehensive and seamless)</li> <li>• Provide services and interventions for immediate needs, such as physical and mental care, legal assistance, and housing</li> <li>• Assist with reintegration into society after survivors have exited “the life” through job development and vocational training services.</li> </ul>
<b>Lack of Housing/Shelter Options for Victims and Survivors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase access to specialized housing/shelter for victims of sex trafficking</li> <li>• Provide stable and secure transitional housing for youth survivors of sex trafficking</li> </ul>
<b>Lack of Accountability for Traffickers and Buyers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address demand through policy, advocacy, and prevention work.</li> <li>• Punish individuals who buy sex</li> <li>• Hold businesses criminally responsible for the facilitation of sex trafficking</li> </ul>

## Southern Nevada Human Sex Trafficking Gap Analysis 2023: Policy Brief

The 2000 United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons defines human trafficking in persons as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.” Sex trafficking is a form of human trafficking in which control is exerted over another person for the purpose of commercial sex.

Researchers at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) Grant Sawyer Center for Justice Studies and School of Social Work have released a report identifying gaps in Southern Nevada’s sex trafficking response. To identify the gaps, the UNR research team conducted focus groups and individual interviews with a diverse set of stakeholders throughout Southern Nevada. These include, amongst others, representatives from business and industry, service providers, law enforcement personnel, court personnel, and sex trafficking survivors. The study, *Southern Nevada Human Sex Trafficking Gap Analysis 2023*, finds that more robust measures than those currently in place are necessary for the prevention of sex trafficking and for assistance to victims who have been trafficked.<sup>1</sup>

This policy brief serves as a companion piece to UNR’s extensive study. It is intended to synthesize the findings of the report by highlighting five gaps that recurred as emerging themes across the spectrum of stakeholders. These are accompanied by policy recommendations that policymakers, administrative officials, and other interested parties may wish to take under advisement.



### Gap: Lack of Education, Awareness, and Prevention

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#### Challenges for Southern Nevada

Representatives from business and industry stressed the importance of education in the prevention of sex trafficking and the requirement that their employees take at least one training session in human trafficking. However, Nevada currently does not mandate training for certain entities, and the trainings are not standardized. One representative from the hotel/casino industry noted that some trainings are led by and facilitated by survivors, while others are led and facilitated by experts with a trauma-centered approach. Furthermore, some trainings differ internally, such as broad awareness of red flags for all employees but department-specific training for frontline areas (e.g., housekeeping or the front desk).

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<sup>1</sup> Tahliah Ling, Veronica B. Dahir, Eugenia L. Weiss, Karla Dominguez, Annalisa Enrile, and Malibu R. Moore. 2023. “Southern Nevada Human Sex Trafficking Gap Analysis 2023.” University of Nevada, Reno.

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that increased awareness about sex trafficking is a major priority. Participants observed a lack of education in the community as a whole, particularly the absence of a community-wide understanding of signs of sex trafficking. In addition, visitors to the region are not subjects of awareness campaigns and thus may not recognize trafficking in action.

Although the data is not wholly reliable, there is evidence to suggest that many victims initially are trafficked as youth. Yet, the school system's prevention efforts were perceived by participants as insufficient. Teachers and principals may not be trained at all, and there does not appear to be a consensus curriculum or set of materials that would alert children to "red flags."

### **Policy Recommendation**

To reduce demand in Southern Nevada, awareness, prevention, and education of the entire public is key, including: K-12 schools, airports, grocery stores, bus stations, malls, hotels, casinos, restaurants, all businesses; educate tourists on what is legal in Clark County and what is not, specifically educate buyers respect to prostitution and sex with minors. Las Vegas is already working with a U.K. Anti-Human Trafficking Company, "It's a Penalty" Campaign for the 2024 Super Bowl, development of such educational materials could begin with this marketing campaign.



### **Gap: Lack of Funding**

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#### **Challenges for Southern Nevada**

Lack of resources and services available to victims of sex trafficking is a major concern, and participants attributed it largely to insufficient funding. One example in which dedicated funding could be of benefit is specialized foster care, with training for parents and schools. This could help ensure that those who interact with the child/youth survivors are prepared, thus increasing survivors' chance of recovery.

Service providers noted that underfunding interferes with the number of youth trafficking victims they are able to serve through diminished staffing capacity. They are also unable to expand their existing services or create new services. Barriers to funding include the 25 percent match requirement that is common to most federal grants and that many organizations are unable to meet.

For survivors, there are challenges monthly expenses associated with independent living (aside from housing issues alone, which are discussed subsequently). These may include groceries and energy bills but also clothing and transportation, as well as legal costs (e.g., custody issues). While certain governmental programs are available for assistance, survivors tend to rely on a patchwork of support organizations that rely on small-dollar donations. As such, the help they can provide may be inadequate for survivors' needs.

## Policy Recommendation

Increased funding needs to be provided and secured to better Nevada's ability to fight against sex trafficking and support such trafficking victims and survivors. Fines from buyers and traffickers could be used to pay for victim services; funding could also be used to support a state-wide human trafficking database.



## Gap: Lack of Adequate Services Available to Victims and Survivors

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### Challenges for Southern Nevada

Service provision is not adequate to meet the needs of sex trafficking victims and survivors in Southern Nevada. Many locations are understaffed and thus lack the capacity to address the volume of intake, a problem that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Service providers rely on volunteers, who may be untrained, to fill in the gaps.

Transportation is a related challenge. While service providers can provide some transportation, victims and survivors often depend on public transportation to access services. This can leave them vulnerable and exposed to traffickers while en route or undermine efforts to make their appointments, given Southern Nevada's limited public transportation infrastructure.

A recurring theme common to service providers and victims/survivors is that services often are accessed in multiple locations and across a multiplicity of agencies. This patchwork can impose an undue burden.

Survivors shared that accessing resources was not easy and that there were many barriers, which included their not falling into a particular category for which resources are available (e.g., not being old enough to qualify for services, not having children, or not being homeless). One survivor indicated an overall lack of awareness about available services amongst people who are trafficked, specifically citing stigma, as a barrier. Generally, survivors reported that they were mostly unaware of the resources available to them in their community, and one pointed out that victims of sex trafficking often do not know that they are *victims*, which is a barrier in and of itself.

## Policy Recommendation

Services and interventions available to victims of sex trafficking should be designed such that they are "wrap around," meaning comprehensive services, and seamless. Wrap around services should encompass immediate needs such as physical and mental care (e.g., therapeutic interventions, substance abuse treatment), legal (e.g., victim advocacy in court and vacatur, i.e., setting aside a court order), and housing (e.g., shelters/safe facilities). Wrap around services should also encompass assistance with reintegration into society after survivors have exited "the life." This could be accomplished through job development and vocational training services.



## Gap: Lack of Housing/Shelter Options for Victims and Survivors

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### Challenges for Southern Nevada

The most in-demand service reported by victims and survivors was housing. The survivors expressed a desire for safe housing, and their not wanting “to be sent” to certain shelters. Some expressed a preference for same-gender housing (e.g., only women).

Affordable housing is a key concern, in particular, for victims and survivors of sex trafficking. Victims and survivors may be able to afford housing only in those locations that could leave them at risk, such as lower cost options in which drug use is public and widespread. For a victim of sex trafficking who may be in recovery, this leaves them vulnerable to relapse and potential reentry into sex work. Similarly, some affordable complexes have high concentrations of sex offenders, a risk to victims and survivors independent of other factors, but particularly salient for those with children who cannot be in proximity to a certain classification of offenders. This may leave victims and survivors no choice between housing and custody of their children.

There is a lack of secure and affordable housing options. While there are transitional housing programs, many, if not most, take the form of sober living facilities. One survivor indicated that a pathway to housing that is situated in the development of independent living skills would be beneficial. Shelters are an interim solution, with survivors observing that shelters are often unsafe for them because that is the first place that their abusers or traffickers go to look for them. If shelters are the only housing provided, there is a preference for gender-specific shelters or domestic violence shelters.

Of particular note, members of law enforcement, court personnel, and service providers stressed the exigency of stable and secure transitional housing for youth victims and survivors of sex trafficking.

### Policy Recommendation

Increased access to specialized housing/shelter for victims of sex trafficking needs to be available.



## Gap: Lack of Accountability for Traffickers and Buyers

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### Challenges for Southern Nevada

Law enforcement and court personnel concurred that the demand side of sex trafficking must be addressed and that accountability is a key priority. Assembly Bill (AB) 440, which was enacted during the 2019 (80<sup>th</sup>) Legislative Session, was designed to stiffen penalties. However, a conflicting piece of legislation undermined its capacity for enforcement and deterrence; the legislation does not appear to be operating as intended. One member of law enforcement described it thusly, and it is worth quoting in full:

AB 440 also fell under some of the other bills when it came to misdemeanor crimes; if a law enforcement officer came across someone that committed a misdemeanor crime, the first step is citation, buyers fell under that misdemeanor citation. Most of the time it is their first offense, and we cannot take them to jail; in that AB bill, the second offense is a gross misdemeanor, the problem is that another bill went through that was intended for the female victim. Well, these solicitation charges are staying with them, and we want to be able to seal their records. Law Enforcement is good with that, but now buyers are also sealing their records [and so] we cannot arrest them for a second higher penalty because it looks like they never had a first penalty. We are totally fine with [only] giving [the victim] a ticket; we have our service providers so she will get any resources or help right there on scene. The buyers we want to take to jail right away.

Buyers may suffer from a lack of awareness problem, much like the community as a whole. Buying sex is illegal in Clark County, but given its legality in certain parts of the state, a knowledge gap is possible. This is particularly true for visitors. In addition, statutes are not always enforced equally, so buyers may see a low-risk opportunity to engage in commercial sex with limited fear of prosecution.

With respect to prosecution of the buyers and traffickers, one of the biggest challenges noted by Nevada law enforcement and court personnel is that they have to have a victim to prosecute. Many victims are reluctant to testify. Some do not see themselves as victims, and from the perspective of at least one member of law enforcement, re-traumatization of the victim is a risk. While it is possible to obtain a material witness hold, or holding the victim until they can testify, it effectively places the trafficked person in detention. Depending on the length of the hold, this can breed resentment that translates into an unwillingness to testify. The combination of these factors leads many cases either to go unprosecuted or to unsuccessful prosecutions.

### **Policy Recommendation**

Demand needs to be addressed in policy, advocacy, and prevention work. For instance, buyers should begin to be punished for buying sex, and businesses (e.g., massage parlors) should be held criminally responsible for the facilitation of sex trafficking.







## About the Guinn Center

The Guinn Center is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, nonpartisan, independent policy center that seeks to advance evidence-based policy solutions for Nevada through research, public engagement, and partnerships.

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